

VISIONS OF MARY: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2024

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ABSTRACT

BRITTANY OLSON. *Visions of Mary: A Collection of Poems*. (Under the direction of ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT, M.F.A)

Visions of Mary is a collection of poems which document, remember, and imagine scenes in visual art and the Carolina landscape. This collection studies the intersections of womanhood, girlhood, and the natural world through close observations of the environment, as well as Artemisia Gentileschi's baroque paintings. The collection also includes several documentary poems inspired by Salem College and Academy in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Field research on these campuses influenced poems that meditate on boundaries between the living and the non-living, the past and present within nature. These poems focus on feminine bodies within the confines of canvases, the environment, and sociocultural structures across history. The collection includes a multitude of poetic forms like ekphrasis, elegies, epistolary poetry, lyric poetry, and documentary poems. *Visions of Mary* examines themes of both danger and liberation for the feminine through time and nature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection would not have been possible without the generous guidance, patience, and care of my professor and chair of my thesis committee, Allison Hutchcraft. Many thanks to Professor Bryn Chancellor and Dr. Lara Vetter for their support and knowledge serving as members of my thesis committee. I am deeply indebted to the English Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for my teaching assistantship, which funded the education that helped shape this collection. I am grateful to the English faculty whose research, writing, and dedication to myself and my cohort deeply inspires me. Additionally, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Tom and Ellen Ruff whose Ruff Summer Research Scholarship financed my research and writing for the Summer of 2023.

Special thanks to my dear friends and cohort mates Aly Jordan, Angela Nelson, River C., Emma Lynch, Anna Graham, Carlos Serrano, and Alex Simmons, without whom I would I would be lost.

Lastly, I would be remiss in not mentioning my parents, Deirdre and Andrew, my brother Tristan, and my grandparents Margaret, and Gerald, whose belief in me has kept my spirit lifted during this process. I would also like to thank my friends Madison, Sydney, and Mikayla for their love, which encourages me.

An earlier version of “For my Grandmother’s Pin Oak Tree: A Memorial” appeared in the *Sanskrit Literary Arts Magazine*. “Dear Rosalie, whose grave is hollow, like a bassinet,” appeared in an ekphrastic exhibit at the Charlotte Art League, which was made possible by my dear friend and teacher, Chris Arvidson.

DEDICATION

In memory of John Ahern

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	12
VISIONS OF MARY	15
○ Self-portrait with a lock of Mary's loose hair	16
○ Ode to the Mother Owl Who Lives in the Tree Outside of my Bedroom Window	18
○ Formaldehyde	19
○ Southern Hospitality	20
○ Little Girl in a Black Hole	21
○ Bedtime Stories	22
○ Summer Heat with Black Vulture	23
○ Nags Head Smoke	24
○ Dear Red Drum,	25
○ <i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i> : Trout	26
○ Self-portrait as Sibille	28
○ Fable	29
○ Elegy for my Three-Headed Horse	30
○ Dear Freshman Girls at Wrightsville Beach,	31
○ After Hitting the Box Turtle on my way to Target	32
○ Vixen and Her Babies on Oak Island	33
○ Familiars	34
○ Hauling Sawdust for Hot Laundry	35
○ Morning, I Visit My Horse	36
○ Waterbird	37
○ Near the ocean she dreams, I dream, about the bones we find	39
○ Self-portrait as the Gold Bracelet She's Worn for His Beheading	40
○ Dear Rosalie, whose grave is hollow, like a bassinet,	41
○ The Harvest	42
○ Dear Newborns,	43
○ Grave in the Sea Garden	44
○ Doe-Eyed	45
○ <i>Carcharhinus leucas</i> : Bull Shark	46
○ On the Night of the Equinox, I Dream	48
○ Church Ceremony at Salem	49
○ The Second Sun	50
○ High Tea	51

○ From Rose Vase.....	52
○ I ask the name of the yellow flowers	53
○ For my Grandmother’s Pin Oak Tree: A Memorial.....	54
○ It’s December in Old Salem.....	55
○ <i>Named after Emma A. Lehman: Botanist and Professor at Salem College</i>	56
○ The Larvae, Slowly Gorging	58
○ Over the Moravian Graveyard, a Black Walnut Whispers	59
○ <i>Juniperus virginiana</i> : Eastern Red Cedar	61
○ Mother, and the Woods.....	62
○ Two Dead Marys.....	64
NOTES.....	65

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Visions of Mary: A Collection of Poems

In the neighborhood where I grew up, there is an old and abandoned cemetery. An avid wanderer, even as a child, I stumbled across the graves in my late teenage years and have returned to them often. In the graveyard, I introduced myself to the late Mary Wolfeses. Inhabitants of North Carolina in the mid-1800s, the two women both married Samson Wolfe in succession and passed away shortly thereafter. Since acquainting myself with the Marys I have researched their families and histories across the state. In my research, graves became documents, and I explored womanhood and wifedom and the dissolution of self in names: Mary into Mary into Mary. Intrigued by discovering purple flowers growing over the Wolfe family graves wherever I found them in North Carolina, I wrote my favorite poem, “Two Dead Marys,” during my undergraduate program. What was it to feel connected to, entranced by, even obsessed with these women, long dead? To begin to understand, I placed the palms of my hands on the soil of their graveyard and spoke; I stacked beautiful Creekside stones I had collected next to their headstones; I watched the grasses grow tall and tangle into the dried branches of a fallen birch tree at the perimeter of the cemetery. I considered my living body in their graveyard, scratched my forearm fixing the iron fence around their plot, and bled. I meditated on bones, Marys, mothers, and botany. I listened to the spritely squirrels flipping up shriveled leaves with their tails.

My poetry aspirations have only grown since writing about the Marys four years ago. I have “Two Dead Marys” to thank for the earliest whispers of this collection. My living, learning, and education since that poem have propelled my writing in many new and exciting directions. For example, I have deepened my thinking about and exploration of the role of gender in nature.

I wonder about how feminine bodies living, gone, and in-between, experience the natural world. I have witnessed and documented femininity in nature, both thriving and endangered. I have learned how, in this wonderful and perilous way, girlhood, womanhood, and the natural world are interdependent on one another. When I re-visit “Two Dead Marys,” I stay the longest with the lines: “Sometimes, from my bed, / I can hear the Marys / call out words of consolation: / *We made the soil you aged in / so soft and sweet. Do not be afraid. This is a good place / to die. Come home now.*” I notice the seeds of my thesis in the soil I wrote about years ago, the simultaneity of sisterhood and violence in nature.

My creative thesis, *Visions of Mary*, is a culmination of documented, remembered, and imagined moments in nature where I have studied the intersections of womanhood, girlhood, and the natural world. With its eye toward the physical body and its ear to the Carolina landscape, this collection focuses on the bond between the female body and the environment. Embracing poetic forms like ekphrasis, elegies, epistolary poetry, lyric poetry, and documentary poems, *Visions of Mary* examines threads of domination and seeds of liberation of the feminine through time and nature.

In her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood defines ecofeminism as “a position which neither accepts women’s exclusion from reason nor accepts the construction of nature as inferior” (20). Plumwood goes on to state, “[a]rguments for women’s freedom cannot convincingly be based on a similar putdown of the non-human world” (24). As a collection of poems written through an ecofeminist lens during a time of drastic climate change, my thesis gets close to danger. These poems look at generational trauma, violence against women and nature, and trials and triumphs in women’s art and education. Themes of birth and death, ceremony and ritual, and art and femininity emerge from close observations of Southern

landscapes. These landscapes provide a lens through which to see girlhood and womanhood as well as how the natural world allows such experiences to thrive.

In my poem “Eastern Red Cedar,” I write, “The tree outside my window leans in the direction of my girlhood. Red bark / falls like ash onto my lawn. Scale leaves / erupt like teeth and my mother / knocks on my door.” This poem opens by grounding readers in the speaker’s bedroom and directing their attention towards both the tree leaning outside the window, and the mother outside the speaker’s door. The mother is bringing the speaker seeds from the cedar, and telling her daughter that the berrying signifies that the tree is female. In this poem, readers are immersed in the botanical and the mythological through the tree. Moreover, readers attune to the speaker and mother’s adoration for each other, especially for the female tree leaning over their yard. This piece, like many others in *Visions of Mary*, offers readers the opportunity to slow down and consider what is natural: pill-sized tree berries, a mother’s reaching hands, the human urge to assign stories to the world around them, the danger that is inherent in what is natural and beautiful.

Visions of Mary also aims to deconstruct the master-model relationship between humans and nature using the ecofeminist lens provided by Plumwood (23). To view experiences of girlhood and womanhood in nature, particularly in the South, means acknowledging Western societal biases against class, race, species, and gender while attending to poems about the natural world (Plumwood 7). As a white woman poet, I have returned to Plumwood’s words many times throughout my research process. Her work begets a mindfulness that has been crucial to my research process for this thesis collection. *Visions of Mary* has called for ample exploration of the natural environment of the Carolinas and the history of violence in Southern nature. My witnessing and research have helped me to express ineffable ideas of girlhood and womanhood

in an accessible way. In my poem “The Second Sun,” for example, I document a moment of profound violence where a group of young boys had used fishing wire to hang an aquatic turtle from a pine tree. The turtle’s back feet were nearly touching the water, and she was bleeding from her neck. This image evokes, for many readers, a distressing remembrance of the history of violence against Black people in the Southern United States. Scenes of violence in nature played out again and again in my research and field studies. Where the red-eared slider turtle was hung I was struck by a cruelty that is often reserved for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, especially women in these underrepresented groups, and the environment.

The Academy of American Poets defines the pastoral tradition as, “a lineage of creative works that idealize rural life and landscape” (*Pastoral*). In her 2019 Bread Loaf Environmental Writers’ lecture on pastoral poetry, Jennifer Chang describes the Latin phrase, *locus amoenus*, or, ‘pleasant place,’ which is indicative of the pastoral tradition. Chang states, “[i]n the pastoral, we are often urged to associate the country with paradise, but one person’s paradise is another person’s hell” (9:00-9:07). In an analysis of Rick Barot’s anti-pastoral poem, “On Gardens,” Chang states that the speaker of Barot’s poem “resist[s] holding ruthless reign over nature. [The speaker] has refused to craft a monoculture. Refused to disguise disorder and pain” (18:50-18:59). Chang’s analysis of “On Gardens” confronts the dangers of the pastoral tradition. *Visions of Mary* moves from the pastoral as it witnesses the wonders of nature without turning away from dangers imposed upon both the environment and the bodies within it.

Across North Carolina, I witnessed the antagonization of a doe and her twin fawns, a black widow beginning to consume her mate, a king tide, a raspberry bloom, and a vixen and her fox kits eating a neighbor’s cat food. This witnessing helped deepen my understanding of my own experience living in a feminine body and how femininity flourishes within the natural

world. Femininity has been culturally and historically associated with gentleness, beauty, and an abundance of empathy. Throughout the creation of this collection, I saw femininity reflected in both violence and gentleness, both aggression and empathy. I began, also, to study artwork which depicted violence and femininity: namely, Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings.

Artemisia Gentileschi, a painter born in Rome in 1593, resists male domination through her baroque paintings. Gentileschi, one of the most prolific female painters of all time, painted through sexist discrimination and sexual violence throughout her lifetime. Her artwork reflects her rebellion against male violence towards women in the seventeenth century, and throughout history. In her 1993 book *Artemisia Gentileschi*, Mary Garrard writes, "when [Gentileschi's paintings are] re-examined and reinterpreted by a female artistic intelligence, the old themes can be made to yield their dormant night-sides, to offer fresh meanings, and so to renew their ancient power over us" (10). During my own studies of Gentileschi and her paintings, I noticed my thoughts returning to the similarities between canvases and graveyards. Again and again, I found contained spaces in-between the living and the nonliving; and myself, to be an observer of these spaces and the figures within them.

As I began to think of the canvas as both space and place, I was simultaneously writing in the field. In addition to Mary Garrard's *Artemisia Gentileschi*, I read *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of Artistic Identity* and wrote ekphrastic poetry in parks and gardens. I noticed how, in her work, Gentileschi gets us close to the body, its flesh and blood. Through violent scenes like *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1612-1613), viewers of this painting grapple with the physicality of life and death as it is reflected in artwork. A similar experience applies to visiting graveyards. In these contained places where living humans come to see the non-living, we are forced to reckon with our physical bodies. Ekphrastic poems in

Visions of Mary consider these bodies, as well as the boundaries of a canvas, similar to how a lyric poem like “Two Dead Marys” explores the contained, yet natural space of a graveyard.

My research for this thesis has taken me into the greater Charlotte area to places like Freedom Park, Cane Creek Park, and the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens. I considered how these spaces are cultivated to look and feel like nature but are built and primarily maintained by humans. In the constructed space of a poem, I have learned about and navigated the complexities of human, particularly writerly responsibility. A quote from Susan Briante’s “The New Political: A Lesson Plan,” has lingered with me. Briante states, “[t]o get anywhere with our minds requires that we actively investigate our own circumstances and ideologies, our own part in a web of power and capital, our relationship to history and language.” Grappling with these cultivated spaces, both natural and creative, within my collection has offered me the opportunity to consider my responsibility to effectively create poems which encapsulate history, language, and the natural world.

Jelica Tošić in “Ecocriticism: Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment” writes, “[d]eep ecology emphasizes the role of the individual who is invited to behave as a citizen of the World and Earth and to take responsibility for it” (45). Tošić defines deep ecology as: “originating from the endeavor to promote life as [...] biocentric and stresses the fact that [humans are] only one part in a huge and complex life net” (45). With this definition in mind, I began to examine my writing from less of an anthropocentric lens, and more of a biocentric one. A poem I have revisited many times in *Visions of Mary* is “I ask the name of the yellow flowers.” In this poem, the speaker grapples with the history and naming of local flora. The speaker is told at a young age that the flower is called “Confederate Jasmine.” Later they learn about binomial nomenclature and refer to the flower as Carolina Jessamine, then Gelsemium

sempervirens. The binomial name of the yellow flower becomes a means for the speaker to decenter the anthropocentric narrative they have learned to associate with the plant and lean towards biocentrism as they study the plant's natural behavior in its native environment.

Prioritizing the authentic documentation of how I witnessed femininity in nature is of the utmost importance to me. I routinely returned to C.D. Wright's "Stripe for Stripe," which opens her collection of documentary poems *One Big Self*. A quote housed within "Stripe by Stripe" effectively describes my goal as a white woman poet writing through an ecofeminist lens; Wright states: "[n]ot to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize. What I wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time." Wright's words guide me as I document my experiences as a white, cisgender feminine person who is witnessing the natural. My poetry became inherently more biocentric as it opened up to a multiplicity of voices, histories, and experiences, and moved away from centering the "self." Studying docupoetry heavily inspired *Visions of Mary* to lean into this multiplicity.

Reading and practicing docupoetry, in fact, has been one of the most remarkable learning experiences I have had while writing my thesis. After reading docupoet Solmaz Sharif's collection *Look*, I watched her interview with the Asian American Writers' Workshop, where she describes poetry as a form of meaning-making that aims to collapse the distance between the self and the subject. In Sharif's titular poem, "Look" she writes, "[i]t matters what you call a thing." For Sharif, human language and the configuration of this language into art becomes a way to subvert dominant and corrupt forces within the confines of poetry. Breaking down normalized expectations and etymology of words acts as a resistance against the weaponization of language. Considering Sharif's words while I wrote *Visions of Mary* has been invaluable to me as I have

developed a personal writing aesthetic for this collection. I focused in on what specifically was collapsing and thereby closing the distance between myself and my poems: girlhood, womanhood, education, danger, family, labor, worship, and more.

Considering the distance between myself and the subjects of *Visions of Mary* caused me to grapple with what I knew about education and history. Several of the documentary poems in this collection focus on Salem College in Winston-Salem. Founded in 1772, Salem College is the oldest educational institution for girls and women in the United States (Salem). My poems inspired by Salem College begin to confront the notoriously overlooked history of women's education in the United States and focus on these experiences of womanhood through the scope of nature in North Carolina. A number of my lyric poems are inspired by the town of Old Salem and the Moravian graveyard just steps away from the school's fine arts building. In Old Salem, American beautyberry grows, black walnut trees and pink snow camellia petals are pressed between cobblestones. The garden around the library is thick with lantana, even in October. Echoes of "Salem" and all its meanings for women rebound off old-timey buildings, and the students of Salem Academy have taken to witch tattoos, veils, and red apples for snacks. The students flip through textbooks in grassy fields under the shelter of eastern red cedar trees. To witness these students as important subjects for poetry in and of themselves led me to return to poems written by, for, and about my younger female self—and, to see this writing and living as necessary and worthy of poetry.

Before consulting the campus at Salem, I utilized the school magazine, *The Salemite*, to understand how these young women were writing about their experiences as students at Salem. Moreover, I became highly interested in a photo titled "Salem Study Parlor" (1904), and this led me to the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. I used the "North

Carolina Women's History Timeline" which helped me order the poems for my documentary project, and considering the order for a smaller section of my thesis has, in turn, helped me conceptualize the collection's structure as a whole. Contemplating the progression of women's education through time challenged me to grapple with ideas of non-linearity. I not only encountered several of my own setbacks, but I broadened my education about the history of women's education in the South. The history of enslavement, segregation, and violence against Black and Indigenous peoples in the Southern education systems cannot be studied or documented as linearly progressive. Attempting to order these poems about Salem College led me to consider not only the non-linearity of history, but of the natural and the poetic as well.

Ordering *Visions of Mary* proved to be a paradoxical process which aimed to cohesively organize the many themes refracting throughout my collection. In her book of poems, *Nightingale*, Paisley Rekdal writes, "lyric time is not progressive but fragmentary and recursive" (51). In *Visions of Mary*, lyric time fragments and recurs with constant returns to major themes. Transitions between girlhood and womanhood, domestic and natural spaces, danger and tranquility, and more create tensions within the collection. Thinking about how Rekdal's words apply to the daunting task of ordering poems both internally and as a larger collection has led me to divide *Visions of Mary* with distinct opening and closing poems. The collection opens with "Self-Portrait with a lock of Mary's loose hair," an ekphrastic poem after Gentileschi's *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy*. This poem guides readers into the collection through close observation of the painting on the canvas, and how it reflects the complexities of womanhood. I write: "I cannot tell you how many mothers ago Mary and I met but / I recognized her as my closest mother was in nail-sharp labor, I emerged / yellow as her dress, and the first time I felt light through my pinched eyelids / I remembered her. For every daughter is born feeling the

whereabouts of / the next mother.” *Visions of Mary* closes with “Two Dead Marys,” the oldest poem in the collection exploring themes of life and death, and feminine bodies in nature.

Moreover, I chose to use fragments of Artemisia Gentileschi’s 1625 painting *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* (1622-1625) to mark significant movements in the collection, and to return to literal visions of Mary. Diane Seuss’s *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* was a particular inspiration for using details from the painting. Inspired by the structural artistry of contemporary poets’ collections like Rekdal’s as well as others by Leila Chatti, Emily Skaja, Solmaz Sharif, and Layli Long Soldier, this thesis depicts elements of the feminine past, present, and future through its recurring themes.

As Rekdal does, I also include several myths in my collection as a means to bring readers close to the female experience and body. Stories of Artemis and Daphne helped me explore motherhood, violence against women, and women’s bodies in nature. An ekphrastic poem after Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* includes Artemis’s significance to the painter. In *Artemisia Gentileschi*, Mary Garrard writes,

Diana, or Artemis, ancient goddess of the hunt, the moon, of animals, forerunner and prototype of the Virgin Mary, whose own virginity was the sign of her independence from masculine domination. Her indirect namesake, Artemisia, would hardly have been unaware of the legend of Artemis, and I think it not unlikely that she added the images as a kind of signature, revealing her proud identity with a strong and independent female mythological figure, and her formidable self-confidence as well (327).

In my poem, “Self-portrait as the gold bracelet she’s worn for his beheading,” I write, “The tiny huntress painted / onto every oval bead—Artemis / turns her gaze down Judith’s wrist / to his moon-face eclipsing / under the silhouettes of her daughters.” In this violent painting, Gentileschi

brings us close to the feminine, the natural, and the mythological in many ways as *Visions of Mary* also aims to do.

Visions of Mary culminates into a collection which explores dangers both natural and manmade. It looks closely at place as setting and as a space for bodies to exist and observe. This project took me across the Carolinas and deep within myself. In Asheville and the Blue Ridge Mountains, I visited the Western North Carolina Nature Center where I learned that the endangered red wolf population is seven females and one male pup stronger. I was inspired to write about black vultures and learned that “vulture” is derived from the Latin word “vulturus,” meaning “tearer.” At the Wilmington Airlie Gardens, I witnessed coastal biodiversity to a degree that was difficult to convey in a single poem, so I wrote several. In the gardens, I also found a small cemetery and a “mystery grave” isolated from the rest of the graveyard—only accompanied by a much smaller, unnamed headstone pressed to its right side. These and many other experiences encouraged me to write *Visions of Mary*, with hope that readers will turn towards their natural environments, and therefore towards their histories, themselves, and others, too.

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“your voice coming
through to Mary

like a snake through black water—”

—Leila Chatti, “God’s Will” *Deluge*

“And even if I didn’t believe
the child would rise again, I would believe the artist
had seen such fear paint a girl’s face”

—Paisley Rekdal, “Four Marys” *Nightingale*

“Hail
Mary who mattered to me, gone or asleep
among fruits, spilled

in ash, in dust, I did not

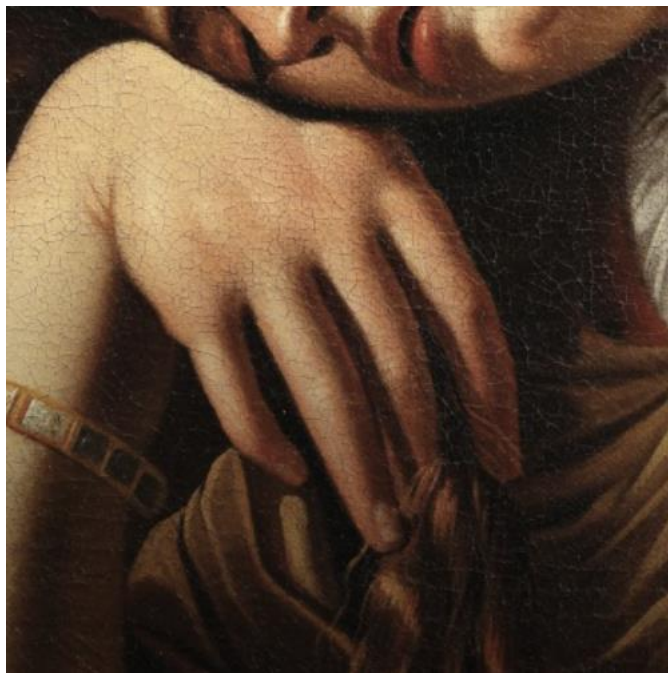
leave you”

—Mary Szybist, “Hail” *Incarnadine*

Self-portrait with a lock of Mary's loose hair

*After Artemisia Gentileschi's
Mary Magdalene as Melancholy*

I cannot tell you how many mothers ago Mary and I met but
I recognized her as my closest mother was in nail-sharp labor, I emerged,
yellow as her dress, and the first time I felt light through my pinched eyelids
I remembered her. For every daughter is born feeling the whereabouts of
the next mother. Our gospels begin at this moment—no, not the conception,
but the entrance of daughter into world. The leaving from mother,
the warm memories entombed with sisters to stay, or not. We don't always
have time to ask. I felt Mary in Stony-Brook hospital fluorescence, and remembered.
The next time I saw Mary I was four. Chewing on a lock of hair, rocking
my body against my preschool desk. The loose hair comforts, is a remnant
of the many we are, the many who will come. We can hold this infinity
to our skin. This is where the frayed memories linger.
With each blade, cutting our locks away, we are resurrected. With each
tear captured in the valleys of our noses and cheeks, repentance.
I last saw Mary when I was six into last Saturday night. I kissed him
goodnight, skipped to the car to call my closest mother. I twirled
a lock of cropped hair between my fingers as the phone rang and rang.



Ode to the Mother Owl Who Lives in the Tree Outside of my Bedroom Window

Once I looked into your eyes and saw
the patterns of your flight and of your weighty wings.

Did you see me? Did you see
what transpired in my mirror?

My sifting through lipsticks and strewn skirts,
a search for what won't litter the floor.

My ears twisted to your song,
and I sunk back into self, reminded of the mice

with their eyes wide enough for panoramic sight—
how they live their own perilous lives

pervaded by little kids with critter catcher kits,
by the whiffs of your steak knife beak.

I've been searching in the tree limbs for your gaze again.
I would tell you, if I could, that I am heavier

than you believe me to be. Still
mortal, the mice and I

under your sharp sight and hum.

Formaldehyde

In North Carolina fifteen years is enough life to choose whether you'll be an organ doner. The children are primed to make their choice with frog dissection. Eighth grade. Fourteen. Fluorescent classrooms, scalpel fingered teens, plastic straws to reinflate flat, gummy frog lungs. I was driving this morning when a pickup hauling a goose neck trailer crossed the double yellow in favor of a sluggish barn cat. It swung back, narrowly, as a trailer can. I also swerved. There are no shoulders in North Carolina. Red, salty dust kicked up into my open windows and we two drivers hurried back to our respective lanes. During the in-between moments, I considered my fifteen-year-old choice. Cute, red-heart license. My organs outside my body. It would be dry ice, for my lungs. The Carolina redness kicked up by helicopter blades carrying pieces of me off to different bodies. My eyes swiveling in someone else's skull. My heart pounding after someone else's almost-accident. The strange smell of formaldehyde lingered for the rest of the drive.

Southern Hospitality

*“The closer I get to you,
the more you make me see”
—written on the back of a dirty produce truck*

In the backwoods plywood fort
made of salvaged and stolen materials,

two girls are playing house.
In the kitchen, the youngest girl

is making mud muffins, blueberried
with pebbles. A dragonfly buzzes in

and lands on the rim of the box-turtle shell bowl.
The older girl, stick gun in-hand, points

at the visitor. The insect frets for a moment,
then lands on the sagging wooden wall again.

The child huffs, aims, the baker shelters
her pastries. There is an exchange

in which the dragonfly might say: *Welcome*.
The girl puts down her finger gun,

goes out her make-shift door
to search for more pebbles.

Little Girl in a Black Hole

Fingers splayed, in a nebula of kitchen floor dust she clings to the fringes
of childhood.

Her milky smile tickled, unbrow dutifully ignored and invisible under play-tossed bangs.

Blue floral dress for a space suit, durable like the skin which darkened. Purpled at
her corner bones

camera-clicked back into that light year before she flew through the whole dark universe.

Returned a king carrion bird, satiated by space.

Empathized with Mr. Golden Sun,
and turned over and over in her own light

She waited later that year at the edge of a pond
for tri-colored koi to make themselves known
under the constellations
of lily pads. She killed the koi
with her salvaged red-eared sliders, their shells
and squishy bellies distended by fish hooks.
She waited as the pond emptied.

Eventually she was taught to tie
the feathery hair up, to leave

the vacant pond's side and walk on
past every broken turtle.

Eventually she pared herself back down
to blue floral dress size,

filled the pond with slate. Waxed the unbrow.
Remembered her hunger—

Remembered her kingliness.

Bedtime Stories

At night when I was young
my older sister told me stories
of the snake-haired woman. *Medusa*
was in the temple

when he caught her—my sister would bite
her tongue. Look sad at our Pegasus
nightlight. Her tongue licked
its own coined laceration, settled

back into a flowing pool
of red-bird feathers. Its lovely wet cradle
of tooth and gum. The snakes
would slither back up her throat.

She told me they whispered
sorry rituals—*the constrictors*
are at my vocal cords! There is something
I need to tell you, sister.

She was in the temple, when he
caught her, she said. Always remember—
I would be the first
to yawn. *Perseus killed Medusa because*

she was the mortal sister.

We would pray. Count snakes. Reach
towards each other's softly lit faces
until I slept.

Summer Heat with Black Vulture

Slouching at the shoulder
of the road, your breast heaving
with anticipation. Each passing
car, another lesson in patience.

Between the asphalt and the
thousand tires, your breakfast
warms itself for you, “vulture,”
“vulturus,” “tearer,” your mercy will

drag the opossum from its
dying place. On the untamed,
trash-ridden roadside your
whispered prayer, gratitude,

wafting between grass and vehicle
through your thin nostrils with
the sharp scent of it all.
The wet body limp with

submission, readies her eyes
for your opening. Your feast,
its divinity, witnessed in circles above,
draws its crowded devouring.

Oh, to be the small bones, divided.
Digested then scattered
like ashes before you, return, empty
to the shoulder again.

Nags Head Smoke

Marlboro cologne clings to his Hanes t-shirt,
stained on its lip from sand-warmed Yoohoo.
That sweaty glass bottle, it rains when he
lifts it to his wrinkled lips.

Later we drive to the Nags Head Raceway,
the head of a freshly lit cigarette crumbles out the window.
The smell means something good is going to happen.
The happy scent is compounded

by gasoline. My favorite. Go karts. He flashes
that old, far away smile. Ruffles my kid hairs.
He is the fastest racer, and still I know
he will let me win. I gulp down these smells

faster than the Pabst Blue Ribbon
he passed me on the beach. In line, he catches me a tree frog
while we wait our turn to ride.

We race
and I do not win.

When we get back to the house
he will go out to the blackening dock
with his lighter. The net will be peeled

from its damp resting place. The traps
resurrected from the water's floor. Between
his index finger and thumb he will offer me
a blue crab.

Fucker, he'll say, if she pinches.

Dear Red Drum,

bitten off just below the pelvic fin.
Dear shamed hook which
hauled you into those jaws and
dear blacktip swimming away with
half of my girlhood in his belly.

Much to the captain's disdain
I swing you up, over the hull.
Dear slippery organs raining,
dear soiled white seats.

Dear crewmen jumping away from
the pouring of you, collapsing,
dear hollowing out from pelvis,
dear apology of it all.

Dear gathered remains of you, cupped
in the palms of my hands.
For you there is no cleaning—
no ceremony for your skinning
no sacred feast for your sacrifice

there is only the salt
on my fingers,
the wound of your waste.

Oncorhynchus mykiss: Trout

It is the season of absinth fathers
plowing through 6 a.m. gossamers,
dew drops trickling towards streams.

Their hooks unfastened, they wade
into viridescent pools, past auroras of children
conjured by the river. They ignore hymns of wives

from the banks, cast their rusted hooks.
Skins of worms stretched through,
dance down into the water.

From these boyish incantations, from
bitten knot lures they liberate the trout—

the hungry mouth of the cooler opens
beneath rainbow-handed fathers bewitched by the glittering.

Tunnel of arms begin to embrace the fish
swaddled in the nets. Fathers pull
the hooks out quick, like baby teeth.

In fathers' palms the knowing fish repose.
There are eggs in the redds where fathers
cannot see.

They raise the fish to their lips. They kiss,
and release.



Self-portrait as Sibille

I've braided my cords through the child's paint stained fingers like the locks
of Magdalene's curls, she brushed soft – string for comfort, I've kissed the painter's knuckles
I squeeze each time she cries I hold her child hands tighter I am — we are searching
for the ring. I am reaching for the bone it should rest on, for the truth. Contract. I pull
her little finger in close as she *promises promises promises*.

braided through child's fingers like
curls, comfort, I kissed knuckles
I squeeze her tighter searching
the ring bone for truth
as she *promises promises promises*.

child's
comfort
her
bone
promises.

Fable

In the land of saints and scholars
an unforgiving child lays siblings to sleep.
Her mother's claddagh earrings paint
black holes on the afternoon-colored wall—
cracking where the whole house
has shifted over to make room
for a seventh son. *suigh síos más é do*
thoil é, suigh síos. Sit down if you
please, sit down. The young priest orders:
someone from outside will have to give. So,
while the babe sleeps the child slaughters
her last friend, for the stew.
From the kitchen mother
watches, nods, reaches on her tip-toes
for the pie dish. Her whole body straining
with the pain of it all, her hips
still opened like moth wings.
Daughter, executioner, heaves
blood-speckled axe from body—woolen head rolls
from stump, slaps wet soil. She sighs,
tá fáilte romhat.
You're welcome.

Elegy for my Three-Headed Horse

something lies dead in the paddock
and my horse does not shy but remains standing
guard by her red gate. I approach
the carcass between us—she
kicks at her phantom belly, it's underside
nit-filled, trembles. The dead
lifts its many eyes from the weed pillow
and asks me if I'm ready.
My horse shakes her heads
forelocks unbraiding themselves.
I say, yes—pat the neck in rigor mortis
which still claps like something living.
The body sinks down, down
underneath my horse, her red gate.
She saunters over. Lays down at my side
in the weeds. I braid and re-braid her manes,
gently kiss all six nostrils, I forgive
her and I ask her to please
forgive me. She sinks and sinks
and sinks away.

Dear Freshman Girls at Wrightsville Beach,

when the flag is red
don't get in the water—
it's heavier than you think. And
you don't need to smile like you're supportive
of your friends' dangerous decision. On the seafloor
a grave is opening. This is the perfect place
for your notes-app poetry because
yes, his tattoo reads "I recycle
women." Mind that friend of yours
again. She's about to take a dip
with the man who recycles. Stay on the sand.
He will be studying business, computer science,
the sway of the current. He will be
dancing your friend out to sea.
Listen girl, his friends are really saying "the most important thing
is to control the narrative" and, yes,
that color looks beautiful on you. He's looking
through his aviators, darkening like water
where your friend is treading. He's whistling
through the wind which will push their splashing away.

After Hitting the Box Turtle on my way to Target

Terrapene Carolina rides shotgun in my Honda civic,
sighs woefully about her keratin
scutes that must regrow.

Rambles on about urbanization,
vulnerability, what it's like to work
for the state. She paces across my floorboards

hooked nails fluffing the nylon. I say,
congratulations on being upgraded
to vulnerable and, please don't pee there.

I fret about politeness.
She claws her way up onto the car seat
and bleeds across my pleather.

I picture her in softer redness—
a messy eater, she's strawberry chinned
in the safety of sweet grasses.

We trip over each other's
apologies then stall about
where to go next. *Well, if you drop me*

at Dogwood I could visit my aunt.
She crinkles her neck, beak retreating
into teacup shell.

Never mind, just up here
by the creek will be fine.
I pull over.

We stroll past the bull thistle,
the halved beer bottle, the baby sock,
to the Creekside together,

make our last kindnesses. She bellies
away leaving a warm red trail
in her wake.

Vixen and Her Babies on Oak Island

Red foxes are monogamous, and this vixen tends to the local whelping den.

I've seen her scrounging for the pup's food in the evening hours, not a mile from the afternoon sighs of the ocean. How hungry she seems. Once, I caught her gnawing a pinecone fallen from someone's second-backyard. Today I am watching her and her four kits nosing the neighbor's cat food. They look up at the vixen, like:

You first? She obliges. I imagine their return to the den is agonizing.

Such small bellies only partially satiated. Selfishly, I long to cup a diced chicken breast in my sanded hands and offer it to her, like: *here, I'm sorry. Give them this.* The cat food has been out in the sticky and salted air for days. "Missing: orange tabby" signs with a couch-sprawled cat are posted on every stop sign. The signs flap in the coastal summer wind as the Vixen and her pups trot down to the canal for a bedtime drink.

Familiars

In the barn a baby is born.
Outside the dark field is fraught with gourd.
In the orchard red apples faint from trees,

roll down the swell of hill
to streets below. The apples are pressed flat
beneath the righteous hooves of horses and

mother, unwitting, swaddles a snake in with daughter.
Kneels with a wriggling armful
under the harvest moon and begins

to whisper. Once daughter is old enough for teeth,
she sees mothers' head-high feet dancing on a November breeze.
She wonders up at the canopy—how limb became ledge.

The gourds are hollowed like rattles. Apples ferment
or are pied. Daughter turns towards the barn,
the field hissing beneath her feet. The horses whinny

in her wake. She pauses. Points to a branch which
casts a craggy shadow across the crop
and names it her own.

Hauling Sawdust for Hot Laundry

*For my Grandmother,
Belturbet, Co. Cavan, 1944*

We cleaned our clothes
with the entrails of Church pews.
Barrows full of sawdust
my kid brother and I hauled—
him with his back, me
with my chest—up Mill Hill
for mother.
What sweat we broke
for the sake of soiled laundry.
Brother and I, muddied and
thorned from the bramble path
of the riverbank. Following a trail
of silver coins, left for us, my kid
brother fountained over them.
The sawdust still in tow,
my dense arms lifting
when he let go—the barrow
rolling backwards.
He pinched the coins between
his fingers, his smile
and my body contorted
in the silver's face. We trembled,
the silver rung with the bells
of the Basilica and my kid
brother's laughter.

Morning, I Visit My Horse

Stopping mid-pasture, to claw up his shoe
sucked off by the red-clay puddles, mangled nails
ornament the buttercups. I pluck one
as my gelding drums his way closer, lift
the golden light to my bruised chin—with his
gentle teeth, my gelding nips the petals.
We are yellowed, tossing our heads
with laughter at his shoelessness,
our uncombed stringy manes, hay-filled,
my misshaped nail snagged in his forelock.
I cradle his heavy hoof in my hand, use my fingers
to pluck out bluestone, prod softly for spring abscesses.
If he winces, we touch our noses together.
I warn him off the sugary grasses
for fear of spring founder. He swishes his tail
as I tell him about the boy I liked
who called me a slut. He shakes the braid from
his forelock in disbelief. Places his head
on my shoulder while I cry and then
pokes at my sweatshirt pocket.
The crinkling of peppermint wrappers—
a perfect distraction.

Waterbird

At Cane Creek Park, the waterbirds
are shepherding their many young.

The water, slipping against the upper lip
of the lake, sounds like kissing—

but not. This lapping has eroded
the lip in places where tree roots now behave

like stepping stones. Should the small birds
webbed feet (made to swim,)

or the little children's sneakers slide off,
they'll fall into the waiting jowls

of snapping turtles, or copperheads.
The fisherman, safe in his waders,

neglects to untangle his line
from the roots. The mother birds are right

to fret. Each baby is wandering
towards their own trap.



Near the ocean she dreams, I dream, about the bones we find

She tells me in her dream
a deformed figure unbends itself
into something that can crawl
towards her. Owl City's
"Fireflies," plays, while she runs
towards me on hem of the ocean.

The ocean coughs up lumbar bones,
and teeth, and hooks.
She places a shell with our milky way
curled into its belly.
A wave turns in on itself.
In her dream, she says, "for you," to me.

In my dream two dozen vultures
circle us, sinking, our feet covered
in wet sand. In my dream, we hourglass
back towards birth. I can hear
the hissing sounds my spine made
during my own womb departure.

My mother drew lines
on the straps of my back brace
so, I knew how tight to pull it around me.
I panted through most sleeps.
Now, on the beach,
I click my tongue to the crackling

of the vertebrae and I hum
you would not believe your eyes.
I propagate: "stay," "stay," "stay."
It feels like begging, but not.
She and I will keep
the bones we find.

We will stomp and strut and suck our teeth and share sharp objects.

Self-portrait as the Gold Bracelet She's Worn for His Beheading

*After Artemisia Gentileschi's
Judith Slaying Holofernes*

Where Judith's presses
on his temple, her fist plunged into his hair
like soil—the spade sawing through bone—
her gold bracelet jingles sweetly
in his blood-filled ear.

The tiny huntress painted
onto every oval bead—Artemis—
turns her gaze down Judith's wrist
to his moon-face eclipsing
under the silhouettes of her daughters.

When her wet blade breaks the root,
Holofernes is long dead.
The gold bracelet unsticks from her
sweat and his blood and
falls louder than his head into the wicker basket.

Dear Rosalie, whose grave is hollow, like a bassinet,

and has filled with tepid summer rain.

Your stuffed Panda, water laden, still waits
in the cavity of your eternal cradle.

Your devoted Panda counts every penny
left for you, to pass the time.

Your neighbor, Stella Raymond is curved
towards you maternally. And the slouching steel

graveyard gate, too, and the Spanish moss.
The world has gone on worrying over you.

What I mean to say is, the wealth
of your adoration seems entirely

detached from the maturation of your stone.
What I mean to say is, no one knows what to do

when babies die. The Panda bear
has readied itself, for you.

The Harvest

The mouth of the cornucopia yawns open,
curved like the horn of the judas goat.
There are heads held in the embrace of horn and basket.

Abra holds the bleeding harvest on her hip and Judith
wipes the sickle clean with her skirt. They turn their gazes
towards the door where Susanna waits sheepishly.

The odor of overly-ripe fruit clings to her hair.
Every woman knows this scent, few have the means
to scrub the sticky smell of it from their skin. Keep it gone.

The basket drips plentifully, the red coagulating in pools
like dress trains around the womens feet.
There is a coolness about Judith.

She pats Abra's shoulder, nods knowingly
at Susana. With the crop gathered, she knows
the air will clear. October will sigh with relief—

lighter now, like his body in all its headlessness.
The tang of blood finally overpowers the fruit.
There is a feast of breaths, long hungered for.

Come Judith, come Abra, come daughters
as sheep. As witches readied with the stake
as the severance of head from body.

Come sister, come mirror, come canvas
and fruit from roots. From the grave, babied.
Named or not. There's fire enough for all.

Here is the ceremony of crop—
a hundred bare feet skipping
around the moans of the dark wood
the breaking of logs like necks.

Dear Newborns,

here is what I know about birth:
apart from the drip of blood it seems
mostly silent Things will be happening
outside the birthing room A hot
beverage will spill A deer will attempt
to cross the interstate and
an empty room will breathlessly
anticipate the arrival of someone
too small for such
space There will be tearing
of body from self of body
from body and mother will weigh
less but earth still the same
I know 3:42 a.m.
will be recorded from the clock Time
saddled with some written and then
forgotten responsibility of another
person Suddenly real then 3:42 a.m.'s
will silently pass through first nightmares first
slumber parties first late-night kisses Swaddled
under the clock cold Too wet and
too dry There will be hands
holding hopefully
a cry.

Grave in the Sea Garden

“Mystery Grave” with tiny, nameless headstone

in your shadow— woman— who draws swarms of mosquitoes.

The grass hums with blood-filled bugs. This is the price

visitors pay. Bodies squirming or still eternally separated from you.

The cemetery fenced itself from you and now, there is only

buzzing. When lightning craters the garden do you

feel it in your finger bones?

When the ocean swells with storm does it sound like

last breaths?

Doe-Eyed

The creek has thickened
under a prolonged rain and I have been out
searching for the small white tail lifted
to make her run.

Her leaping will expose her pale belly.
Turn down, I'll say, *turn down*.
Her mother must have been beautiful,
leaning down to bite at the maidenhair fern

which dapples the wet forest floor. This is where
the white bones will rest forever. I have seen
the mother's lower jaw unseated. The fern crops up through it, now.
I wonder how to right it.

In the meadow I found
the site of the fawn's last slumber party
hidden among the raspberry bramble and honeysuckle vines,
a patch of tall grass compressed

in the places where four bodies laid.
The deer run took me to the trees.
How I wish she wouldn't come here
there is safety in her bedroom. In the

tangle of thorns and honey. The damp wood
is sparse and the dripping made it harder
to hear her soft steps, but I have finally
caught her eye. A branch snaps from behind me.

Look here, babe—we're being hunted.

Carcharhinus leucas: Bull Shark

She combs the tide—bodily &
boneless, like plastic fingers in a braid.

Biting through the kelp garden,
why not make her sexton

of the fishbone graveyard? Turning heavily
to stir the wet blood silt,

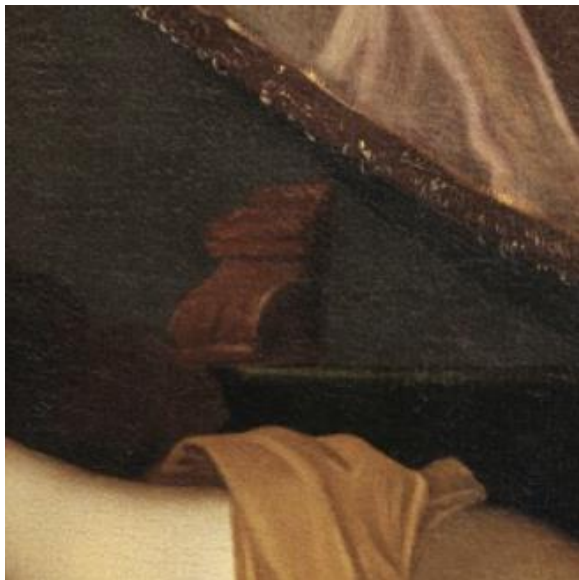
her navel ballooning
filling with the plastic. This hunger. That metal

packed cartilage makes her big enough
to be an eater of any lawless young.

In the thick green maze, she
flips up the red-shell headstones.

She remembers the Megalodon.

She has to watch the whole ocean.
She's turning it into one big cemetery.



On the Night of the Equinox, I Dream

of the train sneaking by pastures—
heading straight for the horizon and the sky,
now devoid of color, throws a film over the horses.
Their gray coats thickening, filling with air.
The colicky barn shakes, not from the train, but
the horses in their stalls kicking boredom
from their shavings, dusting my view.
The horses are poking their noses into the twilight
stretching their necks towards the apple trees
just out of reach.
The apple-rot makes them wiggle their lips,
the mold is spreading like hemlock.
The horses do not hear me shouting from
the other side of the lens. Their jaws pop
as they begin to munch. The train is whispering goodbye.
The camera shutter begins to close its eye.
Look how the barn is ballooning into a moon.
It floats away, full of horses, into the night sky.

Church Ceremony at Salem

The natal Sun peeks up at you, says, oh dear, oh dear, oh my dear daughter, here we go:
always freight with girlhood, every woman prays and just as your hands are folding at your chin
you'll be reached through stained glass, where comes the Sun's graceful bow.
See how she paints you so honestly? The Sun takes pride in the smoke ascending
from your lips, your ears. See how you take shape in the sky? See the upward swirl of it all?
The room spins with girlness. Fruit juice dripping. Heels like bells ringing the floor.
Curls carouseling. Cheek-kiss of music. Laughter billowing. Sister takes a sip
from the cup you offer her. Presses wrinkles from her robe with her free hand.
Here's something to take with you: how your Sister, teacher, smiles into her cup. Look—the sun
is up. Where is your pen? The ghosts have trekked 500 miles from Bethlehem, to wake you.
Just spit the smoke into your teacup. Now dump it all over the page. Is it spelling something?
It's not the fire that's crackling. Where is your sister? She can read the smudges on your page.
Who are you thinking about while he's thinking about you? See how the page bows
at its corners but your words stand still? See what's being forged?

The Second Sun

*“the universe is an arrow without end
and it asks only one question: How dare you?”
-Paige Lewis*

On the edge of the lake, past the
strawberries and sag-bellied

swamp snake, there is a pine tree, half-
swimming. Ornamented with fishing line,

glittering lures, and a red eared slider
hung by her rusty throat.

How dare she crave
the crunch of a mealworm when

strawberry heads loll
so lazily nearby? When earthworms

leak from the lake walls? She dangles there.
Heavy back legs kicking phantom

water which blooms beneath her.
A ring of evening light paints the border

of her cursive shell and she becomes
our second sun.

Limbs, limp, stretched out like rays.
The flies have begun their worship.

High Tea

Perched atop the new
white marble counters, I watch
my grandmother drowning biscuits.
In her microcosm I'm reminded,
the plowshare forgets
but the bone-tired harvest
always remembers.

*What need is there now,
to forage stones from
the bowels of the earth?*
A death note to diamond mining.
Suppose there's enough carbon
in the atmosphere? She expresses disbelief
until a gemstone configures.

She used to call me
Sparrowlina!
Sculpting my affinity for that
which can be born into the sky.
She still prays, towering
over me, her floundering songbird.
I skitter around the clippers. I nod.

We swig more chilly English tea.
My mother, a falcon,
begins to hum "Lucy in the Sky
With Diamonds". Once our
matriarch is finally homebound,
my mother and I will hold hands.
We will twitter, push the time, and cry.

I watch
my grandmother

bone-tired,
Remember.

*What need is there
from
the earth?*

She used to call me.

She prays,

I nod.

We swig English tea.
My mother

and I hold hands
and cry.

From Rose Vase

Towards sister, daughter,
milk-bottle grandmother
the roses lean in closer.

Wide-eyed, now, from sweet water,
they rain pink puddles onto our tables.

Through the thick-skinned
glass, memories of annihilation
warp beautifully.

The white water fogs
the nerves of the stems.

The bush in the garden
leafing into the gap
where the rosebuds were cut.

I ask the name of the yellow flowers

vining up her oak trees. She is trying to lead me through
her new garden. The wild yellow distracts me.
“Confederate Jasmine,” she says, waving a hand
at its unplantedness, its alleged invasiveness.
She pulls me towards the pink azaleas.

Later I learned the vine is called Carolina Jessamine.
After I wrote a poem called: “Confederate Jasmine.”
After I storied an invasion, which the red cardinals took part in.
After I imagined the oak tree would die under the yellow weight.
After I read all of this, out into the world.

Gelsemium sempervirens.
The South Carolina state flower. It’s non-invasive.
I said, “Jessamine, Jessamine, Jessamine”
to enjoy it’s feeling in my mouth.
I write and re-write and re-write this poem.

For my Grandmother's Pin Oak Tree: A Memorial

On my way to the funeral
a garden gnome stands
before a field of
Queen Anne's lace, and offers me
three stone pansies.

I pass under the arbor
my late grandfather
painted, cobalt,
to bid farewell to an old friend.

The bluebirds have flown over
to mourn with me—she has held
their wreathed teal babes
in her bosom
for centuries.

The lightning splintered
her bones,
blackened her core and
the cleft of her corpse revealed
innards rotted
long ago.

Now, shrapnel of her
pierces the pads of my bare toes.

I extract one, still pigmented,
leafy parcel
and turn it thrice between my fingertips
to gaze upon the green arteries
that still throb within.

She was alive when she fell.

It's December in Old Salem

Beneath the garland spruce twisted
like loving snakes, the splintering
fence rails enshrined
with merriment, I witness
the excision of a pink Camelia petal
by boot traffic, from limestone.
The still-in-tact pinkness is bruised and wetted
by the jagged limestone peaks, or
pink sticks like memory's moisture to soles
and gets tracked inside the church.
I'm thinking, what a shame
that winter has to come. That some of us
can never get into the sacrality of it all.
That the spruce has to stiffen and die telling us
it's over. That the pink Camelia bush, deflowered
greys and wilts quietly by the atrium.
An angel skips near and halts—crouches down,
with one tiny hand, which remains thankfully unsplintered,
on the fencepost for balance. She tilts her head.
A cheerful family rushes by her,
their pinkened shoes screeching
in the limestone's terrain. With her tiny, worldly finger
she pushes the petal from its dampened grave
scoots it back under the fence, into the grass
with its others. She whispers something
her voice lifting with winter hymns.
She stands, still gazing
at the pink turf, then turns and skips
into the vestibule of the church
where I cannot see her.

Named After Emma A. Lehman: Botanist and Professor at Salem College

Monotropis Lehmaniae

is odorless. Composed like a Psalm recital,

music notes pressed into her pages.

She found it in the woods, brought it back

to her wildling students—its name, her name

spreading like spores. Lehman, as in, tenant, as in

her journal overgrown. The impermanence of the binding,

long forgotten. The words and the plants immortalized,

ovum of Bethania—

her forests in the fall.



The Larvae, Slowly Gorging

*After Artemesia Gentileschi's first painting,
'Susanna and the Elders'*

Two moths danced in through the open window.
For some time, I listened to the frantic plinks
of their bodies against the studio's lantern.
When their lust for the flame turned to boredom,
they landed on my frame, laid 50 eggs worth
of a promise, and left back out the way they came.

On my face I wear Susanna's metamorphosis,
on my spine, the larvae's requiem begins.
They hunger, I feed. The nymphs travel south,
to the tips of Susanna's fingers, her hands raised
in objection. In their gluttony they devour her, me,
I imagine the painter's expression when she learns

she left the window open, for the night air to harden
my supple colors, hers, Susanna's. The larvae's
shimmying bodies chant *rebirth, rebirth, rebirth!*
In this consecration, I have become the eucharist
Susanna's red cheeks, the wine. The painter,
the unknowing priest.

Over the Moravian Graveyard, a Black Walnut Whispers

When the October wind stirs up the forsythia, the babies in their graves begin with their allergies. Gimmie-gimmie hands squeezing fistfuls of dirt, mouths search for milk of mothers separated from baby by blacktop isles. By my cousin, a hardwood oak, pew-shaven. With my thousand loose eyelashes I look over the babies in my corner of the cemetery. Boys—all of them. I swaddle their still-white stones with my wishes for true Moravian mercies, inscribed as: *planted on earth, blooming in heaven*. With the wind I bow and pray.

From my post I watch the Salem Academy students laughing into the fine arts building backpacks hanging limply from sweated shoulders. They walk the ambulatories between Moravian mother and baby. They are reading their friends' facial expressions, many of them will never read the stone inscriptions. They will art happily, hand-in-hand: "A Community Assembled." Hot-glue watermelon-pink Crayola crayons into collages. Outside the studio, I whisper to my babies about watercolors and blank canvases.

Centuries ago, my cousin, the hardwood, was dropped by a Blue Jay onto her plot. Bone orchard of soon-to-be seats for Moravian worshippers. Whittled into gentle floral patterns where craggy bark once was. I whisper to my baby boys about the irony of it all. My sacred cousin cut down for ceremony. The watercolor bleeding all over the canvas. The Blue Jay swallowing the fruit. The blacktop ambulatories, weeded through. Fencing baby—with seasonal allergies—from mother, "Wife Of" father. He's up at the front.

One October, after the Forsythia died but before my babies did, the single sisters packed their bags in Bethlehem. They gathered a dozen girls like white eggs in a basket. Walked 500 miles to Bethabara. I often wonder which eggs hatched into mothers and which sisters? Who stayed in daughter-yolk forever? And so, the college was assembled—my boys planted later like tomatoes, a garden growing around the girls in their classrooms. Over cobblestone road, the choir songs leaking like sunlight through stained-glass windows.

The Academy students are leaving art-class. The wind chills in the wake of the students, the day darkening at its edges. Distantly there are sounds of chainsaws. I worry over my babies. My cousin beckons me through the atrium of the church. The choir, quieted, like the Jays. An evening rain comes, my red leaves inscribe the blacktop. In my canopy an egg is pushed from its nest. The wind sighs as yolk dribbles over the edges of the small, still-white headstone. *Planted in basket of wind-blown Crayola wrappers, blooming in October evening turning night.*

What was it I was praying for? My sons to be properly mothered? To be baptized by egg-yolk taking letter in headstone inscriptions? Egg-whites spelling *bloom* in October? When the wind pushes

my spine up straighter, I sometimes feel like a woman. When the sunlight filters through my sepia leaves, I sometimes feel like a stained-glass window. The chainsaw nears. The sun slides down the hill. The blacktop has cooled. My babies have stopped grabbing at my roots. The natal earth sips down the yolk, a cherry tomato rocks to sleep in the October wind.

Juniperus virginiana: Eastern Red Cedar

The tree outside my window leans
in the direction of my girlhood. Red bark
falls like ash onto my lawn. Scale leaves

erupt like teeth and my mother
knocks on my door. Her hands cupped as if
in prayer. I anticipate a piece

of chocolate, a small turtle, a robin's egg.
She opens her palms, offers me the
Cedar tree's purple berries, pill-sized, and the words:

Only the female trees berry. We smile
like something secret
has happened. I bring the berries close

to my heart. Years later I learn that the Eastern
Red Cedar is the first to repopulate
after rural fires. That the trees

are commonly found near bodies of water,
that the tree outside my window may be
300 years old. I learn sister words to Cedar—

healing, immortality, dreams, prayer.

Mother, and the Woods

My mother is on a first-name basis with every tree. In our garden, which she planted for her sanity, she leads me by hand, points to a color and defines: shrub, flora, weed.

She christens the Cypress, the Black Walnut, Eastern Red Cedar, Ginkgo, Pin Oak, Bay Laurel. With her bare feet on the edge of the retainer wall, a crown of sun rays and the limbs of some Dogwood or Hickory blown open like wings around her, standing on the border of her garden and the forest—she smiles at me.

Under a quail fractured moon Artemis squats by a pool of water. She is thinking about surrogacy—the judas goat and her cattle, the walnut and her seeds—when the forest begins to crackle with motion around her. Her hounds lift their heads, she nocks an arrow. The trees move out of the moon's way. A stag emerges, his prongs in all directions. He saunters near the pool, Artemis bathing in the light and his gaze. The hounds and trees wail, the stag puffs his chest, the arrow flies. The water purples.

When my mother and I speak of love, we speak of Daphne. Daughter to Artemis, Bay Laureled and moonward bound. I wonder about Apollo—was it love, like he claimed? My mother shakes her head, says she will love me, even as a tree. I imagine her on the retaining wall, hose stretching over that border and me in the forest, drinking up, my laurel leaves rustling with gratitude. How I could watch my mother dancing in her garden, reach a limb over the border, and shade her from the fiery sun.



Two Dead Marys

Samson Wolfe is an unlucky man:
Two of his wives are dead.
Both named Mary, he buried them
together
in the graveyard by my house.

Rocks, sticks, animal bones, and leaves
cover the earth.
Yet, over the Marys' skeletons
nothing has landed.
Only green moss grows,
and wild purple flowers.

I used to think purple
was their favorite color.

At the edge of the graveyard
a birch tree is dying slowly.
Her limbs reach towards the Marys' tombstones.
Inside, there is a feast:
the termites have begun
to hollow her out.
Soon, her body will collapse, sigh
back into the bit of earth from which
she was born.

Sometimes, from my bed,
I can hear the Marys
call out words of consolation:
*We made the soil you aged in
so soft and sweet.
Do not be afraid. This is a good place
to die. Come home now.*

No one hears when the birch tree sinks
further and further under the dirt.
Her rotting roots catch her decayed trunk like a net.
The brittle phalanges of the Marys
reach up through the wooden web—

When I visit them, I ask,
wherever you are going, wait for me.

NOTES

Scenes from Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* (1622-1625) appear on pages 17, 27, 38, 47, 57, and 63. This painting is housed in the Pitti Palace in Florence, Italy. *Mary Magdalece as Melancholy* is believed to have been painted during Gentileschi's time living in Florence after leaving Rome in the wake of a rape trial.

In 1612 Artemisia's father brought suit against the man who raped her. Artemisia was eighteen at the time of the trial. To test her honesty Artemisia was subjected to the torture of the sibille. The poem, "Self-portrait as Sibille" depicts the thumbscrew-like torture she endured in the presence of the rapist. While the rapist was presumed convicted, his exile was not enforced.

Several poems in this collection are inspired by research and visitation to Salem College and Academy in Winston Salem. The doors to the college's Elberson Fine Arts Center open to the view of a Moravian cemetery.