

WHILE THE DIVE MASTER IS AWAY

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WE GROW TIRED OF ORIGIN STORIES

*As to what fruit the tree of the knowledge of good and evil bore,
Scripture is silent on this subject.*

Our father teaches us to kneel
on the grass, to thread our knees
with a thousand blades of field.

We are motherless and do not know it.



Our father asks us to bear his sins, small
dark stones of the cherry we tuck
beneath our tongues,
never spit out.

Anything we swallow
may become tree.

I learn to fold my soul like a sheet
for safekeeping.



Our father builds a fence.
We encircle, become orchard,
never ask why snakes

crawl on their bellies,
boneless whisper.

Even truth

has a skeleton here.



Did you ever wonder why our father
made earth so easy
and heaven dull as tin?

Like our prayers,
we grow smaller,

learn to become one mouth,
to call anything created

Eden.



Now my tongue loosens,
lifts upward. Earth
is sky's loss.

If there must be a tree, my vote is for mulberry.

I

"Girl is the worst season."
- Rachel McKibbens



LESSONS LEARNED READING 20 BIOGRAPHIES OF JOAN OF ARC

She inspired the bob haircut.

When she was 16, her father dreamed of her running away with some men-of-arms.

The touch of her hands revived a child near death.

He lived a few more hours, was baptized.

When she recalled this, she said the child's face *was black as my cloak*.

Not a single portrait drawn from life survives.

A Jesuit said, *Whenever anyone had dirty thoughts about her, he was immediately struck impotent forever*.

Her saints spoke to her over her right shoulder, accompanied by a great light.

When the voices appeared, she was 13, sitting in her father's garden. The church bells began to ring.

Later, she would grow angry if the warden did not ring them on time.

She was unsure of her last name. She preferred to be called *the Maid* or *the Daughter of God*.

When the voices first left her, she begged to come with them, wept and kissed the ground they had stood upon.

Only after many visits did she call them her saints: Michael, Margaret, Catherine.

In one version of Voltaire's play *The Maid of Orleans*, Joan is seduced by a talking donkey with wings.

Voltaire disavowed this edition.

She said, *Whatever I have done that was good, I have done at the bidding of my voices*.

Her father said to her brothers, *If she becomes a camp follower, I'll ask you to drown her. If you won't, I'll drown her myself*.

At her final trial, her most common answer was *Pass over it*.

Her enemies spoke of a cloud of white butterflies following her in battle.

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God. Deuteronomy 22:5.

In the margins of her trial, the clerk wrote: *O fatal error*.

When captured by the British, she disobeyed her voices and threw herself from the seventh story of the tower.

Her heart and entrails refused to burn, even when oiled.

One strand of her hair, dark as bootblack, lingered in a wax seal. It was lost again in the nineteenth century.

Her brothers later passed an imposter off as her for some easy money.

When her accusers asked her if she was in a state of grace, Joan said: *If I am not, may God put me there; and if I am, may God so keep me.*

No relic of Joan remains.

KINGDOM ANIMALIA

Those last summers we lay by the bank
of the river, sun-flattened, bellies bared
only to the birds. We were perfect.
Heron, hawk, dark-eyed junco:
their names, their spindly legs
splitting the water
didn't interest us. We put down our books,
watched as some boys arrived, clattering,
at the clearing, first an invasion
blue jays, then of bison.
They clambered on the tire swing
with the rotting rope, the one
that swung out over the deep middle,
chilly, Cola dark. Our mothers
had warned us about that swing,
the unlucky child who'd wind up
brained on the rocks. *His poor mother,*
they sighed. We scratched
our mosquito bites, peered
straight into the sun, wondering
if this was the day
there would be blood.

NOTES FOR A MYTHOLOGY

In the myth, the girl must always leave her mother.

The myth does not mention how happy they were together, how the girl would sit in the mother's lap, take her long braid in her narrow hands, say, "If I were a prince, I would climb this ladder and marry you."



In the myth, spring is the first season.



In the story, the girl
must be stolen

if she is to leave, must
go down to the field

alone to pick day lilies,
asters, asphodel

with their long
white backs.

She will never have felt pain until
his fingers close
around her wrist.



The girl must marry
the man her father
has chosen, even
if it is her uncle.

The mother is not aware of this arrangement.



In the myth, spring is the first season to die.



The mother and the girl
are sleeping
in the house

with the mossy roof
where the father
left them long ago.



Hush. Do not wake them.

FAMILY PORTRAIT

What a pretty picture we make:

a bowl of cherries,
counter so white you know blood
doesn't exist here.

There's Uncle H. in his dark glasses, snapping
the photo. Hint of his shadow

falling on Mama's hands, smoothing
my hair back.

I've never held scissors, never twisted
my own birchbark braids.

How happy we must be, all of us smiling
like we're still at the seashore for the day.
Daddy's arm around me.

He's cupping that shell
to my ear.

The carnival
can't be far off.
I'm licking
the salt from my lips.

Leaning in,
I hear the ocean roar.

PERSEPHONE GOES TO THE MOVIES

For a long time, I thought love
was flat like that, something

occurring between the popcorn
and the final shootout. I closed

my eyes at the love scene,
sure I was too serious

to be happy. No boy
had ever taken my hand

in his sweating hand.
No boy had taken me

to the field outside of town.
I knew such things happened,

dimly, the way I knew
other people had to die;

other people woke to bright bombs
sowing their back yards.

Even in the shut velvet
of the cinema, I knew

some day I'd wake far
from the white marbles of the stars,

and everything after
would be a kind of mourning.

SATURDAY AFTERNOONS WITH THE VIRGIN MARTYRS

Scent of damp concrete, the washer humming
our backs. Your mother is upstairs and down here,
The Lives of the Saints spreads open on our laps,

the version with the glossy plates of the bodies, burnished
at the instant of death, or the incorruptibles, exhumed
centuries later, still plush with the intentions of life.

St. Agatha,
those two blush cupcakes,
your breasts,
shivering a silver tray,

St. Lucy,
eyes offered:
two olives
on a serving platter,

These are the years before barbiturates,
the stints in rehab or back riding
the white dragon, before boys begin

to follow you at the swimming pool, trying
to pull your top off, all of us pretending
it's a joke. Me fooling myself that some day

I'll be pretty like you, or at least holy,
a dark space for God to fill,
like a missing tooth.

*St. Ursula,
storming heaven
with your 11,000 virgins,
numinous slumber party,*

*St. Margaret,
swallowed by Satan,
bursting untoothed
from the dragon's belly –*

*Ah, virtuosos of death,
Best Friends 4ever,
girls finally making a scene in public,
have mercy on us.*

This is the summer we learn to kiss in the backyard cedar,
all cherry chapstick & venial sins, before
you remember your mother is half witch, will sense it,

before you confess to Father Nguyen about the *inappropriate lessons*,
trade afternoons spooning on your Little Mermaid sheets
for a storm of Hail Marys, Our Fathers,

your own father stumbling down the hall,
slurring as we jump out of bed, reassembling
the mini-shells of our bras, praying

that this time he knocks.

BEFORE THE DIVORCE

Daddy wasn't much of a dutiful man,
but he did love to entertain:
ladies bright corsages spilling
out of our living room, grown-ups
swaying the foxtrot long past midnight.

If I was lucky, I got to fall asleep
on the antique divan, half-known aunts
and uncles sweeping by to stroke
my hair, murmur, *You're growing up so fast,*
someone better put a brick on your head!

I'd wake to cigarettes swimming
in champagne, rouge rings
on saucers. Mama with her hair
unspooled, smelling like crushed
roses, smoke. Cheeks red

from dancing with men not Daddy.
Bending down to scrub
a stubborn circle as I sailed
up the stairs on that dark raft,
Daddy's shoulder.

The boys are going to steal a car. They've done it before, they say, far from the streetlights: jimmying the lock until it opens smooth in their hand, shimmying into the seats. Flooring some stranger's prize possession to 90 down the freeway, daring the gods to pull them over. For us, they would do it in daylight, open the shell of something deluxe. The smell of fresh leather, so smooth, it wouldn't even stick to our thighs. We only have to meet them at the Rollerdrome, ditch our mothers.

Coolness shimmers before me, blue flame at my lips, cigarettes Ce sneaks from her sister's purse. Ce is in. Rolling up her cut-offs as she rounds the corner to walk the six blocks home. Her legs tan, ready. I set off for my house. Already, I am a practical girl, reckoning possible deaths: the crumpled metal, the throats slit, or worse.

My swimsuit dripping on the kitchen floor, I tell my mother, who tells Ce's mother, who forces her to stay behind and babysit. Traps her at home with the dishes and the crying two-year-olds like the girl in the fairy tale. The girl in the tower, brushing the hair that falls past her waist, hair so thick you could sink a hand in up to the wrist.

She's sitting on her bed, no one to snarl her hair yet but herself.

In my dreams, the night is silent, is silk. We plunge into it, just the two of us. We take turns: first her hands on the wheel, then mine. Whatever we want playing on the radio. No need to sing along. No need to explain anything. Windows rolled down, of course.

We drive so fast we don't see the lights revolving behind us, halo of red and blue. There's only her hair blowing in my face, unperfumed, as she guides us on into the darkness.

UPSTAIRS, AT THE PARTY

In the back bathroom, I pass
my hands where Uncle H.'s
have grazed: crown

of my skull. *You almost
have a woman's face now,*
he said. In the crescent

slip of the mirror,
I search for it.

DIAGNOSIS: VIRAL FEVER, MONSOON SEASON

Lucknow, India

sky unshuttered sheets of rain flung
higher whole world trees streets under
the melted meddled city stout crows rising
skyward sky mottled crow-colored
cloud-dark vishnu's dark body spread
over city blue-black of god nights these days

below sky dark darkening we run
wet of clothes wet of stolen rivers wet
of streets rising walls sinking roof
sloping lower and lower
the collapse of the god's roof
the mass of heave of
god's wetness pouring in pouring
through the roof seeping

and over the tired waters the kites
dancing on their jibbing strings
coins of suns
shadows of hulls of boats of

when the god comes you at last become
quiet

II

What my mother should have taught me:

Listen, daughter.

Ascension is not the answer

you come

from a long line

of women

like stars

their roots

still bleeding earth



TAKEN

in my first porno / the woman's body is white / like salt crystal
she crouches / deer in a clearing / when she kneels
he bends behind her / mouth parting / she calls
/ no one's name

recall the bulls / hanging in my uncle's / butcher shop
in bavaria / encased / in the linen of frost
all winter / the men smoking / thick cigars in the street
/ casting them

to the ground / when i walk outside / unhook
my collar's false fur / open / my mouth
writing zeroes / in steam / where there was once
/ only air

COURTSHIP WITH LASSO & HONEY

Each morning Mother reminds me

to make my bed of dogwood blossoms

and pray to Father, kindling the skies,

unseen. Ours is not

a kind world, but she hides this

behind the sail of her skirts.

I have been a good daughter, dun bird

singing my own name back

to the pines. In these lightyears,

I am blinded

by the bees' gold, ignorant

of honey's blaze. My name

a tassel in his throat. His lasso

waiting in his fist.

Father, granting permission to Death

to take me away.

Girls

are meant to leave anyway,

Father says.

You didn't want to stay

with your mother forever, did you?

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

You see, I was never a smooth talking man.

Unlike my brothers, I had no need
of violence.

I learned patience as one learns
to stalk a buck.



I could tell you that when I saw her,
my heart fanned open like a jukebox.

Her wrists, so fragile & blue.

No, she said later, they're just slender.



No one wants to see death in love:

A short film – black & white, 20 minutes.

Norwegian. No humor.



She looked at me. I understood for the first time,
what it means to not want
to frighten a woman.

To let her return to the field, happy
as she was before I arrived.

DIAGNOSIS: ORIGIN STORY

Counting backwards from twenty,
my white paper whisper of a gown
snapping open around me, I realize
I'm no good at counting backward,

even when sober. The neurologist says
he's sorry, his ring is going to be cold
against my skin, but it'll warm up.
When I ask where he's from,

he says, *Guess. You're the one
who's always going places.* I see
a blue minaret sunk to sand,
me lifting my skirt to walk

on hot marble through the labyrinth
whose name, *bhulbhulaiya* means
forgetting. I'm twenty-three, just realizing
I'm a body, patchwork and pleading.

I guess wrong. He laughs. Whispers
his full name in my ear, crack of consonants.
By the time I write this poem, I've forgotten it,
along with the story of how he met his wife.

He assures me, *There's nothing wrong
with your brain,* wheels me out
of the machine, his ring
chill light on my back.

PRAYER TO DEMETER

Mother, in the kitchen
you are sharpening
your best knife. Once

I took shape inside
you: your shadow,
your smaller half.



Now I am shaken
like coins
into his hands.

Already you are devising
how cold it will be
in the field:

the beets, the corn
crowned by frost,
then blackened.



Mother, I am sleeping
among the dark roots.
I never thought I would love

another pair of hands
as I love yours.

HEAVEN OVER THE SWAMP

In the film, little Maria Goretti
is a real knockout, Brook Shields-beautiful, sleek braids
muscling down her back. Her white neck sweaty

with only Tuscan light, the glaze
of afternoon. She's on the stoop, mending
her neighbor's shirt in this malarial swamp, this haze

called home. No farmer bending
in the field wears dust on his clothes. Even
the landlord's son threshing beans – abandoning

his task to march her into the kitchen,
a look almost like sympathy on his face,
as she cries, "*I won't, it's a sin!*"

– even he is Italian & glorious, all overweening grace,
cheekbones flat like promise. His name,
Alessandro Serenelli, a dagger tracing

its serenade on our tongues. Because we're tame
Americans entranced by those vowels,
their smooth domes, throats opening to claim

them, or because we're twelve, the howl
of our bodies tugging at our hands,
we hide our eyes as he takes the awl

or the knife, unbuttons his pants,
the camera cutting to Maria's fingers, twisting
the hem of her skirt. To us, it's pure romance.

It's a sin, God does not want it! she's insisting,
and though she winds up *the pretty little dead girl*,
at least she gets to be a saint: the priest's eyes misting

over the hospital bed, her hands unfurled
as she says, *I forgive him. I want him with me in paradise.*
Above it all, Christ on his bronze cross, curled

in pain. The two of us learning at what price
absolution, at what cost
holiness enters a girl.

SOME FEEL RAPTURE AT THE ROOTS

i

Despite the metaphors, a girl
is not a flower. He lifted me

with his arms.

I shut
my eyes,

the sun
disappeared.

ii

Some girls
have all the luck:

they become cypress,
become bark.

I became woman.

iii

Did I dream
his dark chariot?

All night
there were wheels in my eyes.

iv

He said, *Follow me,*
I took his hand.

When that day came,
I went dark inside.

It was like being born,
or so I imagine.

iv

At night, the pigeons sigh
my name, *vanitas vanitas.*

In the river, the moon
glistens like milk, the stars

dead white coals
he strings around my neck.

v

When he calls for me
I become snow.

III

*They told me: if you kneel
you will receive
God.*

*I knelt.
He granted me
a sword*



SUMMONING SONG

for Joan of Arc

Brave girl, I never wanted
any part of you – the bound
breasts, sheared-off hair, the heart
that would not shrink to ash,

Undaunted by those angels of desire, white-gloved,
circling their stations like celestial waiters.
Teresa, Catherine, Angela, they had their transverberations,
their fiery betrothals of skin & spear –

You, stern soldier, no dove of mine,
broke your sword on the backs
of two daughters of joy, love-whipping them,
crying out, "Out whores!"

I lack your simplicity, your wish
to be pure as a corner of sky
is pure. No complicity with anything
but blue. Already

I am straying into another world,
sheer with you. When I look up,
I see clouds, not the Lord of Hosts
shrouded in light.

What will you do with me:
a woman, near & soft?
Impossible soldier, the heart
trembles in the fist like a wasp.

Come to me colder, girl who refuses
to be girl, so I may assemble you.
First with my mouth, that wound
where thirst begins.

MY FATHER WAS NOT A MAN OF FIRE

1.

The first time I ran away, the men in the tavern
taught me to ride a horse

2.

No, I did not fear my father

3.

Father told Mother: three times he dreamed I left with the soldiers
Three times I heard the bells of Domrémy ring out before dawn

4.

The men in the tavern taught me God is very close,
and a man's hands, far away

5.

Father told me: if you leave home, you will be an orphan
Father told both my brothers: if she runs away,
drown her in the river

6.

Father taught me never to enter a man's tent
Mother taught me to spin white wool into a man's shirt

7.

Mother taught me to pray: *Our father who art in heaven*

Father told me: if you leave, I'll put you in the well like a stone

8.

I told Mother that my only father was God

9.

My father was not a man of his word, though I did

become an orphan

10.

If I had a hundred fathers and a hundred mothers,

I would still not have listened

11.

My father was not in heaven

I was not afraid

PASTORAL WITH BLOOD & SMOKE

Hunter, let me arrive at you, fishhook
of moon, salt on my hands
like snow for the deer to lick.

Farm girl, you know how sharp a blade must be
to slit a lamb's throat. You've seen the men
riding home from Burgundy with rags

where their hands were, the thieves trussed up
at the neck like poultry. Everyone forgets
that before you were white-iron knight,

you were a barmaid, learned to mount
a horse, shake off a man's touch.
Did you really believe martyrdom

was a glittering field? They say you wept
when you saw your first soldier taken,
men going down into mud, crying out

for their mothers. You cradled
an Englishman's head on your lap, asked
to hear confession from his split lips.

O my sweet chevalier, night
melts in the whites of your eyes.
Can there really be so little violence in you?

UNDRESSING JOAN OF ARC

Where our scars meet, I find you,
winter sleeping beneath
your blackthorn branches.

You were dunes once, dull,
unsailable. Skin unready
for the palming.

Now I wake you
from your salt crypt,
you who grew

so far from your mother,
the only woman's hands
that find you are mine.

Who carved you so, quiet one?
Arrow above the breast, sealed
scar at the thigh.

They taught me the devil lies
in irons at the ministry
of angels, their fiery rakes

wracking him anew,
but who claps
a saint in chains?

Ardent girl, I unarmor you:
harness, helmet, sweet harbor
for your skull –

with all that you once named safety,
we silver the floor.

Real romance is dying before the first wrinkle appears,
the Freudian analyst says to the queer theorist,
smoke pluming dove-grey from her hand.
Everyone loves the virgin who burns

before the first flashbulbs fade. Am I no different?
Glamour girl, I'd ransack theatres
of the flesh to find you: my natural blonde,
my melancholy object of desire,

plucked backwards off your horse
by the industrious English. The audience
adores a fatal flaw and here you are, undone
by your gold doublet, your penchant

for silk. On the screens you come wound
in velvet, vermillion, plush
finery the color of lipstick. They paint you:
cheekbone, angle, *flaunt*.

Never mind you were a five foot peasant girl,
stocky as a Shetland pony, that you had
to use an apple crate to mount your horse,
or so the stories say. What we love

is that moment when you're led
to the fires, Renee Falconetti's hollow jaw
bowing to the flames as the smoke rises,
as you vanish into that white iris,

the screen's eye.

AUBADE WITH ARMOR AND SWAN

Before dawn enters, I prise
the armor from your shoulders,
praise your scars with my lips,

my mouth a clapped bell against
your clavicle. Do you know
clavicle means *little key*?

Do you know how many men
have tried to unlock you,
dear unknown? Once

when a man undressed me, he said
You're a swan, which I took to mean
I was ugly, an ugliness only he

could undo. This is the myth
of devotion: my servitude,
a lantern in your hands, beseeching,

Burn me, burn. No,
I am silver where you
are moonslice, I am water racing

downhill where you are all flame
& vanquish. I am the bell
pealing forth on the eighth day,

the garden where the saints
arrive to worship.
All that you have bound,

I would loose. Make me shut
my eyes against the light,
cry *hosanna, highest*.

Open your lips,
make morning vanish.

VOICES APPEARED

There was no flame hissing the horizon

No wings beating a trance of feathers

The truth is I never liked the word *angel*



In that place, nothing tethered me

not the eyes

not the body

What came to me –

Call it – light

Call it – voice

Crackling white at the horizon

Call it *lightning* if you wish

Lightening my tongue so it might rise –



I told my accusers the voices came as light

so they would stop asking questions.

I swore they appeared as lavish angels

St Michael in his gleaming breastplate

Catherine and Margaret, their long brown braids

pinned behind their necks

They came to me in white garments

They came and dyed me white



After that I should never have spoken again

DIAGNOSIS: SCRUPULOSITY

The general practitioner sends me to the ear, nose, and throat doctor.

The ear, nose, and throat doctor sends me to the neurologist.

I become practiced at removing everything from the waist up, putting on paper.

The neurologist says I am well, as far as my brain is concerned.

The psychiatrist looks at me over the crown of his purple orchid. *I'm not here to help you solve your emotional problems*, he says.

I wonder if I should drop out of divinity school.

The ear, nose throat doctor says I am not hysterical. *There's something genuinely wrong with you. I just don't know what.*

The psychiatrist says perhaps I should stop dating older men.

The GP prescribes more pills.

For a month, I can barely get out of bed. *Dizziness with unknown etiology.*

They all want to know: *Do you hear voices, see strange lights, things or people that are not actually present?*

Immunodeficiency, suggests the OB-GYN.

I know not to mention the saints who come in a gold flash, their gleaming flesh fresh-painted.

Vitamins, suggests the second psychiatrist. *Maybe when you feel better, you can take up jogging. It's not natural to be so unhappy.*

My friend Mitchell brings me Pad Thai; we lie on the Persian carpet in his room. He asks, *Do you really believe in God like that - like there's someone out there, listening?*

The GP sends me to the enterologist. The enterologist sends me to the tropical disease specialist. The tropical disease says, at last, I can be fixed.

Yes, I tell Mitchell. Yes, I really believe. For a little while longer, it's true.

IV

*"If only we are willing to give the right names to things,
this is no harm that has been done,
but only love...."*

- Zeus to Demeter. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.524



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO MY GARDEN

I don't tell him I liked it better before language, that dull bruise suffusing everything. When we'd never tasted *orange*, never wrapped our tongues around *persimmon*.

How pale the mornings were before we named the sun, alone on her blue plate.

Days when the sky was quiet as cotton, nights when we'd lie out on the wet ground, stars revolving tuneless above us.

Never thinking to ask what on earth the crickets were singing about with their tawny wings.

Now he's proud of himself as a scarlet tanager, running around gluing names on things. *Cowslip, bunchgrass, parsley*.

I don't tell him that the moon has her own reasons for all those disappearing acts.

Now it's all *ha-ha-ha* and *ca-ca-ca* in the pepper trees. Even the parrots have conversations and all of us have ears.

I don't tell him that my favorite word is *refusal*.

Perhaps I ate the apple, I'd become so bored from the roar.

ZEUS IS SUMMONED BY THE DEFENSE

It's true, I had many sons
and even more daughters. She
was one of the quiet ones.
Never asked her mother
for second helpings, never wanted
permission to ride her bicycle
to the end of the block.

Mostly I remember
those big dark eyes she had,
stamped into her face.
How'd she stare back at you
like you'd done something to hurt her,
and on purpose.

DEMETER CONFESSES

I tried all the usual tricks to keep
a daughter safe from harm. With her,
it was easy. She *liked* to link my arm
through her thin arm. *No Mama,*

*she'd say, I don't want to cross the street
by myself. I'm happy right here.*
She'd sit by the window, still
as a shelf, humming show tunes

to plays she'd never seen.
*Why don't you go down to the field
alone this time, I asked. Pick some green
hellebore and some red poppies for me.*

*I'll put them in water for you
when you return.*

LORD OF DARKNESS TESTIFIES

It's not like I hadn't seen pretty girls before,
at least the ones that come down
to death's river. I'd like to say I glimpsed her,
all white, breaking off red berries
by the river, but she was wearing
grey, feet dull with mud.
Her mother hid her well,
called her, *My little pigeon,*
my dove. I know
what kind of man
this makes me. How thin
her arms were.
I didn't want to break her, I'll say that,
only to sweeten
the inevitable descent.
I wrapped her
in a snakeskin dress.
She looked at me
with those yellow eyes
as if I'd murdered her.

ALL ELSE IS FAITHFUL TO THE SUN

Father informs the jury I am red linen,
not even Mother can make me
silk again. I don't tell them I prefer
bloodroot under my nails,
dirt on my thighs. When they ask
if I resisted, I laugh,
sink my heels into earth.
I do not choose
sunlight. Even gods
must follow the rules.
A girl who has descended
becomes staircase.
A girl who has been opened
remains skyless.
Beneath my ribs, lightning
still. Oleander. At night
I sit by the still water
of the dead, listening.
One who has become thunder
cannot become
girl again.

THE WOMAN TAKEN

John 8:1-11

As children, we wanted to know
 what *taken in adultery* meant,
sensed it was another grown-up trick,
 a place kept hedged away from us.
A spill of light
 at the end of the stairs,
a cedar box, made
 to be hinged open
 only by certain hands.



When I was old enough to know
 taken was a thing
a man could do to a woman,
 I wondered how *they caught them*
in the very act, the woman spilled
 at the feet of *not-her-husband*,
their bodies hulls in amber evening,
 trapped against one another.
The righteous men in their prayer
 shawls at the window,
 looking in.



The Law says neither the man who has *humbled*
his neighbor's wife can be spared,
nor can she.

To shine
another man's wife
to your hand
is prize, is pistol.



Once a man made me kneel nine hours
at the brown of his boots,
asking forgiveness until my mouth
was ash. Like the room, I grew
so white, so still I knew
this was what it meant
to be erased
by the little finger of God.



As a girl, I would picture the woman,
her face dull with desire,
like a cow chewing oats in the field,
the pollen on her skin as she takes off
her dress. The dirt

on the arches of her feet.

How I would never
be so stupid.



For one day, my mother hid
all the knives in the house
until he left.

For eight days after, I slept
in my brother's old room,
refused to enter my bedroom
until she burned sage,
offered frankincense.



I did not ask the man
for mercy
but when he cried
I tried to wipe the tears
from his beard.

Instead, he said
You're a whore,

& I knew
I'd been waiting
my whole life
for those words.



What we're supposed to remember
from the story:
no one
lifting the first stone.

SEX IN THE UNDERWORLD

It was not what you think. He brought me
to the room of red lacquer, promised

*I can teach you everything
your mother lied to you about.*

When he unhooked
my dress, his hands shook.

I hadn't known I could feel pity
like a bone, bright and clean

in my chest. He took my hips
in his fists, whispered,

*I'm sorry. I knew then
I could be queen of all the dead,*

their faces glowing
like Japanese lanterns,
while I looked on,
a pitcher filled with nothing.

ABDUCTION AS ABECEDARIAN

He built a road through thirst, taught me to name it *abundance*
He lay his palm over my lips, taught me to call it *breath*
A man's thumb in my mouth – *copperhead.*
Blue suede boots on the stairs – *diablo*

When he had me kneel, call the grass *everlasting*
I became an instrument in his hands – *frangible, fugitive*
What I could not eat I kept in my pockets – *greed*
His breath, watermark on my neck – *heat*
The weather between us, my little purgatorio *ice*

He built a wall, I called it *my little* *jungle*
I planted a garden, called it *my little* *kamikaze*
Lightning blaze of my days, he alone calls me *lulu*
baby girl, sugar pie, *matryoshka*

To everyone else I say good luck and good *night.*
Anchor me here, city without a sky, *Orlando*
You alone can save me, Black Dove, *Paloma*
with your dark candlestick and your *quicksilver*

He taught me to love the wasp & the *reaver*
He flayed my prayers. Named me *skin.*
All that I am in his hands: light *tallow.*

Poor sallow maid, the songs say.
is my new homeland,
of tears. This is what it means to be
Exalted
Who speaks my name now –
Should I call this my palace, my garden, my

Underground
Veil
wife
exile
you
zoo

DIAGNOSIS: FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE

Once I believed in God so fiercely,
it was a privilege to suffer for Him:
amphitheater of operating room, halo

of doctors peering down,
my body a glass tube hollow
with light. This was how I learned

to be separated, like milk from meat,
like the sheep from the goats.
Parsed out in my white paper bed

where the lights stayed on
all night, while those
in the kingdom of the well

were busy composting
coffee grounds, planting
daffodils, fucking.

My body a fishbone,
my body a stream
of sleepless nights,

adrift in the scent of the lilacs
my neighbors cut for me, carried in,
reciting Hail Marys over my head.

When they wheeled me outside to see
the branches defying February,
winter was a strange, hot ghost.

I couldn't believe the sweat pooling
in my collarbone, as if summer
had never left. As if I hadn't.

CORONATION WITH BLACK LIGHTNING

Mother thinks freedom is air teething

your skin, grain opening

its heavy golden heads. The sky split

my scalp once. "Hello,

Father," I said.

Can you hear me, I am

white bee-buzz now, I drift

where lemons & pears sink to rot.

I know freedom

is the opposite of prayer,

I stomp my foot

& the earth opens:

black lightning.

Summer

has no purchase here. I sail

where Mother can't reach me,

my body a boat for the rain.

O my dark ones,

honey

is what our sins become.

V

*While the dive master is away,
do not try to enter the water.*

- sign in Friday Harbor, Washington



BEFORE THE BEGINNING

after Marie Howe

What was I, before I was a virgin

Who knew me, when no one could touch me

I rose out of the water, but only smelled of chlorine

I wanted that touch again and again, though I had no idea

what it meant

Who was I in that silence, before his hands

MARY CALLED MAGDALENE

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven devils had been cast out. - Luke 8:2

i

you think the seven devils means
i was the worst sin
a woman can be unseamed

in the streets shameless
running door to door dark
with eyeshadow in other words

a whore a woman singing
baby i'm worth it taking
every dollar she's owed

a woman owned
by everyone no man's
 lady



would it matter if i told
you i never wore
a red dress that the man

i loved (we'll say love
for lack of a better
breakage) wasn't exactly

available later
i learned not
to hope for even this

from a man

his untouchable
hands
ii

yes before i met him
i was a real fuck-up

bad boundaries said all my therapists
borderline personality maybe

bipolar something
difficult to diagnose

said the psychiatrist who told me
to stop idolizing the men

i dated or dreamed about



yes when i met him
he siphoned the devils out of me

one by one
like seven silk scarves

he was the magician
& i

was his prize show

iii

it's true i loved many men
before him but not

the way you think i loved
the man who wrapped

my steaks in brown paper
the same paper in which

he'd wrap roses & i'd
drop the coins into his hands

i loved any man who looked
at me with a hunger

that couldn't be fixed because
i knew that gnawing vast

beneath the ribs a swallowing
in me as i walked through the crowd

i knew no man
could capture capsize me

between his two hands
i was too wide

a thirst

iv

listen
let's get one thing straight
i am not the woman
taken in adultery

that was probably a rumor
started by peter who never
liked me in the first place

uppity woman *talks*
straight to god *too close*
to the master *&cetera*



at least this way in the movies
i get played by the good actresses

the ones with the long red hair
the alluring altos keening out

i don't know how to love him
kneeling in the desert
all self-pity & lust



true feeling sorry
for myself always was
my sin of choice

v

all this & everyone wants to know
is if the son of god & i
actually fucked



who wants to see the face
of god unfastened
by passion?

even seeing
a man like that
frightens me



who doesn't dream
of being saved
then ruined

(his arms around me)

(i wake in the garden)

(don't touch me)

(don't touch me)

vi

the truth is i never wanted
a *master lord* *kyrie kyrie*

people said didn't marry
because of the madness

because no man would take
a woman like me

loud un-
repentant *a hard bitch*



what i wanted was
a place to kneel
alone

to be naked & unafraid
to touch god & live

to wear a red dress &
be called good

after Marie Howe

yes i am the woman
forced to kneel in the stadium
in kabul then shot
in the head

i am the woman
lifting the stone
whispering
that slut deserves it

i am the girl in the back
of the sunday school room
carving on the desk
i don't fear god

& i am the one
the lord loved best
& used to kiss
on the mouth



i have been
emptied alabaster
in his arms calling
his name & i

have been hollowed
of all want
when he washed me

i knew then
i would follow him
anywhere & never

be satisfied

i lifted the fruit
to my lips

i chose to leave

REPORT FROM THE UNDERWORLD: DATE NIGHT

Even hell is sexy when you add some neon lights.

Beneath the bar, I tug off my heels, order a Coke.

Hades likes scotch, slow jazz. I tell him this proves he's a boring old man.

He always has sex with his eyes open. At first it scares me.

He never says my name. I never say hello.

Mother tells me to find the silver lining.

In our first fight he whispers, *You don't even know how to be a woman.*

I like to wrap my legs around him until he growls like a dog around me.

He doesn't think this is funny.

Early on he says, *You're a little pillow princess.* He will live to regret this.

I can always tell on the phone that Mother's been crying.

Once I yell at him, *Drop dead,* like they say on TV.

Mom & Dad don't talk much lately.

Then again, they never did.

These days I fantasize about killing him in his sleep less often.

Is this something like love, this wanting to be bruised?

The worst part is, he wants me to be happy.

THE SURVEY ASKS *HAVE YOU EVER BEEN A VICTIM OF
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE*

I could write about my grandfather lifting his hand against
my grandmother's cheekbone until it blooms plum
and she cups her cheek on the porch, sitting on a blanket
beside the lumpy oranges. Is it a betrayal to lavish the word
plum and its attendant beauty on the violet of her cheek?
Why is it that the available terms for purple
automatically conjure beauty? When I bruised my arm
aubergine on the hook of a closet door,
for a week men told me things like,
*Oh, you must have a boyfriend, do you want me
to talk to him for you?* I could write that I'm lucky,
though I shouldn't have to say I'm lucky, that no man
has ever hit me, though I once backhanded
a man harder than he deserved one night
in a cafe in Seattle. I could write myself six years old,
watching the small white papers of stars unfolding
in the sky, standing next to my father, who also
never hit me, hearing our neighbor break
the window-glass with his wife's skull. She was screaming
Let me go, I can't breathe. I don't think
anyone called the police.

I could write of the time returning
from the study abroad trip to the concentration camp,
how on the subway platform in Berlin, I saw a couple,
probably strung out, the man pulling the woman
by the partially-bleached hair as she screamed,

a sound I don't want to call animalistic,
more like a human voice that didn't want
to be human anymore. He was kicking her
in the ribs, something that up until then
I had thought only happened in movies.
People, mostly men, stepped in; they were kind
to the woman, they called the police,
and as they arrived to handcuff the man,
she turned to crawl after them, her cries
echoing off the enclosed cement as she screamed
Don't take him, I love him.

It was in German, of course, so you probably
wouldn't find it beautiful.

As I came up out of the subway, it began
to rain, the rain we'd been promised all week,
soaking my tank top, my beige ballet flats.
It was August in Berlin, I was going back to the man
I was desperately in love with, in love
for the second time ever, though already
I suspected he would to stick to his plans,
go to the Congo to save the world, give up
trivialities like human happiness,
at least with me. All I could think of
was telling him the story, how the tourists
took pictures at the concentration camp, how I'd stood
on the platform that afternoon, then walked away.
How he'd wrap me in his arms
like it was summer everywhere.

AFTER THE SEVEN DEVILS

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven devils had been cast out. – Luke 8:2

After they left, I was like a room
with the chairs put up. I stared for a while
at the floors: how scratched they were.

I almost missed the voices then,
that murmur of grass
at the edge of the field.

What was I now:
woman, patch of sky,
crushed blue flower?



I walked home through the streets:
passed children tossing a red ball, welt
of yarn. Small blood-star.

No one pointed at me
or shouted. I was
a name again.

Magdalene. Miriam.
No longer a myriad,
one self. Narrow.



I filled the tub, watched the water
go gray with skin. How strange
to remember we are tendons, fitted

to bone. How long had it been
since I combed my hair,
soaped between my thighs?

I shaved my legs, sat in the water
until it went cold. Thought
of the sawdust on his hair

as he knelt beside me, held out
his hand. All the gears,
grinding within me

gone silent. How many years
sad it been since a man
touched me with anything

but pity? I began
to wonder where
I might find him.

PERSEPHONE AFTER THE DIVORCE

I'll come to you like the rest, laid out
on linen. You'll lift
the coin from my tongue. I'll be
what I was before: silence,
stunned girl. Silver fish,
flashing in your net.



When you first carried me across
the river, I believed that love
lasted forever, that there was an end
to thirst.
Of all the women in our family, I
was the only to leave.



When you sieve me out
of the dark water,
you'll see: no ring on my finger.
I will go unsinging
into your house.
Beneath your hands,
it will be September.

IN THE LAKE WHERE OTIS REDDING DIED,
I GO SKINNY DIPPING FOR THE FIRST TIME

- For G.

There was a first time before this, but I'd been 17
& kept my panties on. I feel silly saying panties
in a poem, but there you have it. It was July
& everything was permitted. The fireworks,

those golden willows trailing their lazy limbs
across the black water, had flickered out.
Everyone had packed up their kids, their coolers
& their strawberry Lime-a-Ritas to go home.

Soon you & I were naked in the park, so white
against the mud, I want to say we gleamed
like lightning bugs. *Turn your back*, I said
as I waded in. It was warm, like the inside

of someone's mouth. Weeds, green & coarse,
grabbed my wrists, my waist. *A girl
could really Ophelia herself in one of these lakes*,
I thought. The water lifted me

like it believed I wouldn't. We don't know
if Otis Redding drowned or died
of hypothermia when his plane went down.
That summer, I'd never heard him plead

to try a little tenderness, never listened to him
lament *I've loved you for too long*.
I was new to the blues. I kept swimming,
even when you said *We shouldn't go any further*.

When the lightning started to strobe

its silver tongue across the sky,
I held my belly up, leaned my head back.
All I could think was if I'd jumped off a bridge

into the brown Chehalis River or the dark throat
of the Skookumchuck that one awful spring,
I wouldn't be here in Wisconsin, trespassing
in Lake Monona. Call it a prayer of gratitude.

I could have stayed there all night, body
slack on the water as the rain came down
in silver needles, but you took my hand,
said, *It's not safe, we should go home.*

I went.