

Landscape with Unwashed Moon

Jocelyn Anna Sears
Lafayette, CA

B.A., Stanford University, 2011

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May 2014

Landscape with Unwashed Moon

For my family

* * *

And, though I didn't know it, for Chris

Table of Contents

Proem.....	1
The Scorpion Bearer.....	2
I.....	3
Summer, Virginia Beach.....	4
A story in which neither of us is the hero.....	5
Dark Lake.....	6
She asks me how you are.....	7
The Zipper.....	8
Days After.....	9
again and still.....	10
To Survive.....	11
Ragged Mountain Reservoir at Night.....	12
We Eat Dinner as Cara Complains About Work and Occupy UC Davis Comes Apart.....	13
on Television.....	13
Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park.....	14
and the sea still there.....	16
II.....	17
Apologia.....	18
To the lover who comes to me in dreams.....	19
On the Confluence of Violence and Light.....	20
For Patrick, Again.....	21
Ubiquitas Oralis.....	22
Love is easier when one of us is dead.....	23
October.....	24
Mr. Magpie.....	25
After my dog brings home the carcass of a deer, the world seems too fragile.....	26
to behold.....	26
We wait for winter to leave.....	27
Poem wearing your face.....	28
All these poems about people who love me.....	29
Dirty Rhapsody.....	30
III.....	31
Accidental.....	32
When you are far away.....	33
Keep.....	34
Mythos.....	35
Signature.....	37
Bedroom.....	39
Swallow.....	40
Walking Alone.....	41
Sculpture Garden at Night.....	42
The Poet's Project.....	43
How long I pretended I wasn't hungry.....	44
Notes:.....	45
Acknowledgements.....	46

Proem

“You’ll always be a hyena...” etc., exclaims the demon who
crowned me once with such nice poppies.
– Arthur Rimbaud

I will tell you what [she] was like. She was like a piano
in a country where everyone has had their hands
cut off.
– Angela Carter

The Scorpion Bearer

And because they said
you could not do it, because the sky
was made of ash, you carried her.

Beneath muzzled stars and
through twin deserts, you carried
the thing you feared
with you talismanic.
The stacked cairn
of her tail, crowned by its venom
bulb. Your trembling
hands, lace fretwork of trust.

Waterborn, she came
to you from sea-basins long
since rock. Capable of living months
without food, eon-hardened
to armor and sting. Unyielding
paramour, sign of the oldest souls.
Light-shunner. She was not
what you wanted.

Like you, solitary. Like
you, her own underworld.
Making her fossorial bed
amid your sandy skin.
Your hands, an unfolding
calyx, bloom with dark fruit.

Endless threat. She was not
what you wanted,
you with your heart
cracked open like an oyster
and eaten. Beneath a certain
light, she glows like
a vengeful star.

Neither of you
is beautiful, but about this
black mechanical you see something
beyond valiance. Shy hunter vibrating
with secret. You become a walking altar

because she has come to you
and to no one else. This predator, this
lantern—blind augur, deathstalker.
See the telson barb poised
perpetual over flesh. Hear a fugue
play like the inevitable chorus.
The sting, the stigmata.
My vulnerable vessel—
you are also the scorpion.

I.

We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is
a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.
– Maggie Nelson

Summer, Virginia Beach

I.

When we came upon the rotting corpse
of the dolphin, it was almost no longer
a dolphin, muscle melted around the ladder
of the ribcage, flipper de-fleshed
to ghost. The tide backed away,
making apologies.

II.

Things the dolphin could have been:

driftwood log expelled from the throat
of the ocean, chokedamp

a seal sleeping like a god--closing
her eyes, waiting for this century to pass

vision of my childhood dog lain down

the silence that took shape between us
after we touched each other

my loneliness in the form of a horse,
his body gone sour

gray balloon ballasted by the fear we rebranded
as dignity

rock in the shape of your liver

the ocean's bloated heart, cast out

III.

I twisted a tooth from what remained
of the jaw, cartilage clinging and
relentless. Minutes, and I tore one tooth
free—then another, for you, afraid to touch.
We walked away with the wind
between us, teeth huddled in my pocket.
I kept them both.

A story in which neither of us is the hero

When I picture you
 walking towards me, you have roses
 instead of hands and I pull off the petals
 like I'm plucking a dead chicken.
 Or I put an entire blossom
 in my mouth and bite it off at the neck, the colors
 tasting darker than I'd imagined, this salt
 and dirty nickels taste of blood. I sweep some
 from my tongue with a fingertip, stretch this hand
 to your chest and paint a circle
 over your shirt, where your heart should be.
 One day you extracted it, slipped it
 on a hanger and left it
 in the back of the closet with your old
 sweaters and the suit you bought
 when your grandfather died. It's too
 small now, smelling faintly
 of grass and the body's brine. It's not
 that I blame you, all these years believing
 in the safety deposit box
 of your chest, the safety of the self, only
 to find others reaching their hands through it
 like the surface of water. A hole in the road
 means strangers stay strangers; the hole
 in your chest casts an odd shadow. You wanted
 to be alone the way stars are alone,
 I tried to gather the stars
 on my tongue like chips
 of salt, taking the sky into
 my mouth, your entire being into
 my mouth *Come to the warm Come*
broken taillight, cold-burning stone
Come to me, my shivering
half-star. Yes I pried myself
 open but you did not come. Of course
 I'm angry. When I picture you
 walking towards me, great buck's antlers
 grow out of your skull and they're
 on fire, like a Christmas tree on fire.
 I picture your whole body turning
 to ash. Love apocalyptic,
 titan, bellringer: even
 when I get so drunk I forget my name
 I never forget your name.

Dark Lake

I find myself in a rowboat
 dragging the dark lake
 of your eyes for the body
 of a boy. He was a small boy
 and the body is small, the lake
 is deep. Drowning accidents
 are not uncommon, especially
 in winter, especially in the early
 morning, when everyone is asleep
 but the birds wheeling
 over the water, the wind
 like clenched teeth. These trees
 would appeal to you, bunches
 of green needles fuzzing the light
 as it drifts through the branches. At nine,
 you still called them "fur trees." They are
 kind somehow. I've tried to be kind.
 The water laps softly
 at the shore like so many
 bashful tongues; for you,
 it was frozen, tight and thin
 as the skin on warm milk, and you
 were light, but your boots
 felt heavy. You wear that gravity
 still: beyond the quiet
 lake burial of childhood,
 your leaden step. Even your adult body
 subterranean, the earth
 tugging at you, the light
 so far away. I rub sunlight
 into your face with my palms. I cover
 your lake eyes with my fingers. It's
 true: I wanted to save you
 so I could keep you for myself. I'm selfish
 and my hands are clumsy; my muscles
 are so tired now. If I believed in any kind of God
 that could hear us, I'd ask for a bigger boat.
 I'd ask for more daylight, for stronger
 arms, a hundred hooks, a rope to withstand rocks
 and time and loneliness.

Along the rough stern,
 the rope jerks now, and I pull a child's body
 from the water, but it is my own body—
 skin gone pale and sinister, an oblivion-eyed
 fish. Why are her hands tied? Why
 is there a gag over her mouth?
Who is looking for *her*?

She asks me how you are

And I tell her
you're wonderful. I tell her
how happy you are, your girlfriend's glossy hair and that hickey
on her neck like a heart carved into the trunk of a tree. How the stars
are the night sky getting goose bumps every time
she touches you. And meanwhile, I feel like I'm dressed
in a neon chicken suit. I'm holding a sign for
New Rockin' Moroccan Chicken, only
my chicken head is falling off and the sign reads,
This woman will always be alone. I'm glad
you're getting something so right for once. I'm glad
the sun comes up slowly this time of year. I drop
a piece of popcorn and wait for the mice of my mind to pick it up.
They always do and their tails only get glossier.
It's not that my life doesn't exist, simply
that it's imaginary, and I'm thinking about that actor
again. The movie with the geese, where he's rowing a boat,
or the one where he's wearing that green sweater. No,
it's a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, a thick
cable-knit, bits of yarn sliding under each other as the skin
slides into the fold between his eyebrows, that permanent etch
of concern that lets me imagine the skin furrowing
deeper specifically for me. I could trace
the tattoo on your arm with a finger,
with my tongue, trace myriad
invisible tattoos in the shape of my longing.
I know you would wear gray t-shirts and make pancakes
for dinner when the news seems a little too
heartless. Your dog has long fur and the eyes
of a skeptical old man, so I'd address him
as Mr. Walter (though he's usually called Walt)
and inquire as to when he's last been to the barber.
Of course, I don't know your dog's name. I've never
petted him, had him eye me suspiciously
as I threw a ball down the lawn. I've only seen him in that picture
from when you were just starting out, a magazine portrait
where you're standing in a river with Walt
around your shoulders, and you're so young and thin
he looks precariously balanced on your frame. You're holding
his feet—but I don't know this dog, I suppose
it could be *her* feet—and you're looking at the camera
a bit mournfully. She, on the other hand, seems almost afraid, doubtful
this skinny boy can support her weight. She gazes purposefully,
longingly, at the shore, but the shore is off-screen.

The Zipper

I hear that you're taking time off, taking your box
back to Indiana for a while, I suppose you can't keep your sadness
in a carrying case like a cat forever.

Close the white door
to your bedroom, sit on the bed with your shoes off. Feel the nubbed carpet
under your soles as you open the box and let the pain breathe.

Except that the box
is your body, muddled insides
sucked into shape by the shell of skin. What you really need
is a closed door and a dark room where you can take it off.
Not that it's a solution, that it will make you
better. You just can't do it here.

The zipper is hidden
under your left armpit. Use a little bit of bourbon
as lubricant, the way you'd oil your finger
if a ring got too tight. You're a mass of red shadows
molting, muscles like ribbons wrapped loosely around stacks of bone,
trembling as gelatin trembles, it used to be a horse's hoof
and when I knew you

you were a man.

Meanwhile I'm in California, zipped tight
into my own skin suit. I take it off to shower in the dark. Water
and darkness will both take the shape of any container, when I knew you,
you were a man

but I just wanted you human.

I wanted you, and our skin came off with our clothes.
The fogged shower, our bodies the rawness of meat,
you pulled the skin off your face like an undertaker
pulling back a sheet, a half-smile expecting the inhale,
but I didn't hesitate, my hands all over your cheeks,

Is it dry in Indiana? The air sharp
against your exposed organs, muscles meeting it like a board of pins?

I know you'll never forgive me for not being afraid of you.

Days After

It isn't ignition that I want.
I can leave the matches
in their boxes, can leave
twitch, fuck, and reckless in the hard bed
where they sleep as carefully
as children. This ball of desire
in my chest doesn't *shiver*
like the cock—it sickens.
I would simply like to barter the vacancy of words
against the fullness of this silence.

To Survive

Don't stare at the ocean too long, or build your house of ropes and fog.
 Don't dwell on the movie theater, on when he has to kill the dog—most of us
 don't want to kill the best part of ourselves—how you cried like real life.
 Don't feed the fish that live in the mirror, their metal and ice-cold fins.
 Don't store your hopes in the wind's basket, or fill your heart with rabbits, which
 don't remain still inside us, or at all.

If you have to kill something

don't look it in the eye. When night comes, bind your mind with darkness.
 If the sound of the stars grinding their teeth gets to you, stuff your ears with cotton, but
 don't take from the sheep's soft sides: glean the bushes' catchings. Hold your own hand.
 If you do cry, stop your tongue from lapping the salt water as it reaches your lip.
 Don't fall in love with fictional characters,

or do—at least they can never leave you.

If your heart hurts from being without shoes, bury it inside the trunk of a tree. Hearts,
 like trees, bear the ringed scars of growth: water's remaining hieroglyphs. Trees
 can stand for centuries; hearts, less. What about the bark of your skin, what
 about the cracked armor of night, what is worth the risk? At least the foxes know,
 by instinct, that what they do is right. If you have to kill something, look it in the eye.

Ragged Mountain Reservoir at Night

They need no fences. The smell is enough
 to ward off curious hikers, teens throbbing
 to trespass,
 most wildlife.

Chemicals threaded through soil, grease
 and gasoline—
 beneath it all a rotting churns

into silence. Not the empty throat
 of a mortuary hallway:
 the after hush,
 both casket and cargo motionless.

Only the odor walks. To the dead
 no more evil can be done

 we tell ourselves
 in a darkness streaked
 with motor oil.

Above felled trees,
 hulking flanks
 of machinery carve
 their yellow silhouettes.

Backhoe loader. Chain-flail delimeter.

One machine: a claw like the mouth
 on a creature with no face.

No penance in song or songlessness—
 the water
 molders treebody into flesh.

 Even the night sky
 holds its breath. Not a word
 from the broken bells of the stars.

We Eat Dinner as Cara Complains About Work and Occupy UC Davis Comes Apart
on Television

He suggests she kill her boss's dog
as payback. A joke, but there's a shred of steak
in his teeth, and on television, a police officer
performs the grand opera of his power
before a captive audience
of student protesters. Canister shining,
face fenced-in, and you kill the dog
to hurt someone other than the dog.

*If your boss had a kid I'd say
kill the kid.* Taco-muffled, his voice
facetious, extreme, cartoon
of something horrifying: Kent State
rendered with raccoons instead of people.
Onscreen, a toy soldier, his gaze
a furnace, his body so colossal
over the seated protesters he almost
cannot see them. They are only an idea.

At the onset of burning, eyes instinctively
close. Why are there so few things
we can love? The cabinets of our hearts are full.

for Lt. John Pike, University of California, Davis Police

Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park
New York City, USA, 1962—Diane Arbus

He stands alone mouth slightly open, (dark envelope) gaping as if in rigor mortis,
 eyes yawning hungry

In his right hand
 he holds a toy grenade—children's book vision of apocalypse.

But it is his left hand
 that worries us, formed tight around nothing, talons
 clutching at an absence.

As if here a second grenade has just undergone
 its own tiny, self-contained explosion.

Paralyzed, the hand waits
 for the grenade to return
 and it does.

Plastic particles reappear—
 revert to something egg-like and dangerous.

And the boy hurtles away from barely-escaped destruction,
 the boy backs up, runs backward through the park,
 one leg behind the other,
 behind the other.

He reaches the open front door
 of his house, which sucks him
 inside and closes with a bang.
 His cramped hands flinch
 open, like fireworks, and roughly
 lay the grenades on the floor.

His feet pound glass shards into a tumbler,
 and splintered words fly back into his father's mouth.

Moving backward up the stairs,
 he tears off his clothes and falls into the full bathtub,
 where he swallows a harsh cry.

His mother's rough hands pull soap from his body
 as she tells him she loves him
 backward,
 the skin around her left eye
 an appliqué of blue and purple, a map
 of the world.

Tears skitter up her cheeks and
 into her eyes as the faucet's silver gullet
 draws the bathwater into itself.

Dirt strains itself from the water, settles back onto the boy's skin, while blood
 flows up

his arm, into the sharp of his elbow: a lost dog
running home.

He leaps backward
out of the tub, clothes fly onto
his limbs like fervent birds.

He flees: down the stairs
backward, out the front door
backward, out into the
backward world.

He falls face-forward
onto the concrete—slowly, deliberately—where
the open wound of his elbow closes,
skin scraping itself together: blemish-less,
a blank tapestry.

A cry of surprise escapes
the air's clutches and sinks back into his throat,
down his windpipe,
down into the barren caverns of his lungs
where all discontentments
are born, like blind baby sparrows.

In the flowerbed a few feet to his left, flowers
grow back into their buds, which are absorbed
into the stalks, which shrink into the ground until
their seeds swallow them.

Pain disappears into innocence, and the past takes the present
into itself like an infant
returning to the womb, like lost sons that
the war, in her goodness,
has decided to give back.

Fallen trees stand back up, foxes put rabbits together with their teeth,
and wrecking balls build houses.

The earth spins backward and backward
around the sun, faster and faster until, with a pop,
it disappears.

And the sun—like wet fingers on a wick—
is absorbed by the benevolent, anhedonic darkness
before the beginning of time.

and the sea still there

Say *farther*, say *fire*. Picture the horizon folding, an origami crane, into itself and disappearing. Though you see the glow of so many stars, they are candles already snuffed out. Sound runs so much more slowly than light. Say *firecracker*, say *farther from*. Picture each star as a fuse. Picture yourself as a fish in an oil-spill ocean set ablaze, tin-can tabs of scales flickering orange in that hungry light. Picture the night eating itself—mouthfuls of salt and ash gulletted. See the fire go out as all lamps go out, and the sea still there, and you, finned one, your eyes deep planets, you see the galaxy swallow like a clam, then hang its endless pearls—so many wraithed spots of light. Now say *ablution*, say *farther stars*. Singed darling: say *fireproof*.

II.

I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
– Sylvia Plath

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
– June Jordan

Apologia

I'm sorry the maple leaves
 I'm sorry the splintered table
 I'm sorry the window
 I left open, the winter
 it let in

I'm sorry
 both my hands, this supplication
 like a cup, the redwood trees holding
 the sky in place
 I'm sorry cloud-cover
 this time of year

I'm sorry the plum seeded with salt, that sour
 bell opened, I'm sorry
 cleaved to the unpalatable flesh

I'm sorry the matchstick fox running
 through the thirsty hills

I'm sorry tattoos on the underside
 of skin,
 I'm sorry not
 enough, or close to enough

I'm sorry time, and this taste
 like wet metal
 I'm sorry, my love,
 the sap leaking
 from the trees

I'm sorry the deer
 no longer at the hollow
 I'm sorry the roadways painted with ghosts

To the lover who comes to me in dreams

It's always a surprise, your absence, the quiet
fact of it.

Or rather the absence
of your absence—

I wish, when I wake,
to walk among the birch trees, but I live
in the city now and there are no birch trees.
Not even the ghosts

of ghosts here.
Wrapped in the full-body noose of my sheets,
I wake reaching out

for you, fumbling. Body
a jumble from your goneness.

Moon-stagger,
planet torn away. My center of gravity swims
through me, rests for a moment in my left
foot, my right

breast, my right ventricle,
my gallbladder. I must relearn how to walk
from my bed to the window, not to lean
into you—afterimage,

hole. As if the air
weren't already a pitcher filled with longing.
How stupid,

this kind of painflower. You can't
be homesick for a place you've never been
and yet I am homesick

for your body.
But now I can't recall your face.

On the Confluence of Violence and Light

He cuts the branches
off your body with a hacksaw.
He wanted to use a hatchet, but
difficult to aim. Hacksaws and hatchets
remind me of birds, the sound
in the mouth. I wonder if a hatchet
is perhaps a kind of bird, but it is
not. I guess it's just the wing-flash
of silver alighting on the branches
that he's cutting off your body
at the shoulder. Maybe he thinks
there are nymphs inside and he wants
to let them out. Maybe he wants
to crawl inside the opening himself.
There is a womb inside a tree
where the world was made, perhaps
it is your womb, he thinks,
but it is not. Hawfinch, harrier,
goshawk, avocet. Hurlbat, hand
axe, fire axe, adze. He did
love you, he just wanted
something else to happen.

For Patrick, Again

I never quite know where the bruises come from,
spend my days banging into furniture,
other people. Only the one time: my bruised
lips because we are making out
with our teeth, both of us but mostly you.
Later, I lift my shirt to show the purple
splotches—plum tree blooming
on my stomach—and you're proud
of yourself. I'm sure you'd love a tattoo
beside the bellybutton, along the white
inside of my thigh. I think you love each proof
you exist. That I let you touch me. *You still want to kiss me
now?* My lips on your ear are yes. *I sucked off a stranger
in the dark and he wasn't even good-looking.* My fingers on
your soft hip like I'm kneading bread. *I took all of Barcelona
into my body, even the dirty parts, the women
and men I met in bars, I made love to the alleyways,
the shadows and sidewalks, even the night sky
tasted like asphalt.* *And now?* Your irises are just
the bruised portions of your eyes. Each bite
a dare—but you're barely even here.

Ubiquitas Oralis

A girl in the hallway sees me topless
 through the open bedroom door, where Michael's gone
 to get a glass of water. I wave. Each of her eyes drops open
 like a speechless mouth. The doorway is an outsized mouth
 swallowing her.

Then there's the lampshade's tall
 creases, line of canine after canine after canine. But where
 is the bottom jaw? Already melted away, like the floor
 itself, that throaty chasm ringed by the baseboards white
 as teeth.

There must be a word for this—mouths
 like photo-negatives layered over everything—
 something psychiatrists murmur while scribbling
dysthymia or *this mind is broken* or *pick up milk*
on way home.

I need a name and then I will not be entirely
 alone. What say you, APA? What say you, DSM I-IV? What
 is Latin for *All things on the verge of being devoured*? I see
 the maw of the slatted chair back, those white-fanged
 window blinds.

And the starry sky: a field seeded
 with teeth. Out of it grows the moon like a peeled apple,
 one side already bitten away. But maybe the moon is itself
 a mouth. At any single moment, waning is invisible.
 Is the moon eating the sky, or is it the other way around?

Love is easier when one of us is dead

You, of course. I look dashing in black
and grief is an emotion I can countenance. Not
you with your firecrackers, you with your elation
like a dare. When you told me you'd jump off a bridge,
I walked a few miles downstream and watched
the current for you to show up. Water twitching
over the rocks like a moth was caught in it. When I said
You're a fuckup I meant *I'm afraid*. I meant *I don't know*
how we got here.

How close we were, for a while,
to normalcy. The taunt of it. So I think I understand
now, what we were doing, with our threats and
our carousels, cardboard boxes inside boxes
inside boxes—not all of them were empty.
Eating pizza in bed, your laugh,
teasing olives off my nipples. *I'm just tired*
of waiting you said, chin on my ribcage.
This is the game where we pretend the key
fits the lock. This is the part where we aren't
enough for each other, where every bucket
in the well of *safe* comes up dry. It turns out
the well was mislabeled.

If a tree falls
in a poem, no one's likely to give a shit.
If a body falls, only the bees take notice.
Come down from that bridge, lover,
let me give you this ladder. I'm sorry mine
are the wrong hands. In the tiger-light
of afternoon, I kiss your face, send you
whichever way is north.

October

summer arrived ill: that fevered humidity, a jaundiced
light -- shuddering quality to the nights, labored cough
of the wind -- everything was something was too

much -- doors swelled on their hinges until
they could not be opened; preparing
for autumn, the trees lost their hair --

still we wait for winter's embalming
white bandages -- may the old body be
gone.

Mr. Magpie

after the British folk rhyme

Seven for a secret I didn't know until after
 you'd left, the apartment scattered
 with black feathers, I suppose I should have
 realized long ago, when things first started
 going missing, my eyeglasses, a pair
 or two of earrings *Six for gold* I brushed it off
 as absent-mindedness, didn't catch your eyes
 stand still when you saw yourself
 in the mirror, magpies the only non-mammals that can recognize
 their own reflections, after you left the mirror was gone
Five for silver You took the color from the walls, all
 but the picture of that well in Ireland and the nude
 of the woman brushing her hair, isolation always
 made you nervous *Four for a boy*
 My feet in the depression where the bookshelf
 used to be, those were my books but you had to have
 everything *Three for a girl* You stole
 the lovemaking too, water sound of flesh
 over cotton, the space of yellow light, left me
 the wine glasses, a box of matches *Two*
for joy Music went with you, magpies can take
 down sparrows in flight, I used to think only
 hawks did that *One—*

After my dog brings home the carcass of a deer, the world seems too fragile
to behold

Black roots enter the ground like veins
somehow separated from a body.
My own veins, so delicate
and fine, so easily pierced
by a nail or the point
of a needle. Blood fills them, thick
dark cough syrup—skin a flimsy
casing around these rough
currents, a wineskin made of gauze.
And these roots cabled over the ground:
so trusting, water strung through
them like a juiced soul. They must be so
unsafe tonight: the wind's bared teeth
and not even a crop of stars to watch
over them. Their bark cracks, an arm-long scab
along the soft crook of a wrist upturned.
I lie down on the roots and cover them
with my own body. I want to be spliced
onto this other living thing. I want to sink
into the quiet embers of the soil
and build my own stars.

We wait for winter to leave

After I find myself leaning
into the smell of his neck—the cold
again, wind-rush of my foolishness
and a line of sallow streetlamps.
I follow Steph's taillights to another
house, a smaller piece of night, the spine
of a hill we stumble-cross on our way
to your door. But: your door erasing
into shadow. In place of a house: single bright
square in a wall bricked black. It hovers
like a strangely angular cloud, floating segment
of time I watch you step into. Your naked
body in yellow light, head bent, hair darkened
with water. And your shoulders curling
slightly forward—how slender they are, the hinge
of a chicken's wing just plucked. Below,
your vertebrae knuckle through skin, all those hands
pressing to get out. All your unstabled
longing. My breath fogs the air, the glass
between us; winter with its blade
at my throat. You are someone I would like
to give every possible happiness. All your disquiet
unlaced towards breath. But here,
cariño, even in this stillness, something
gathers at the crest of your body—pushing.

Poem wearing your face

It comes at night, of course,
when I'd rather be sleeping,
or fucking someone, or dreaming
about fucking someone, but there
it is, hovering over the bed, your face
hanging off it like a bad mask.
You, not even ghost enough
to come to me incubus, come to me
hectoring, fractious, and sick. You
mealy-mouthed hyena, dangling and
partial, you had at least a dozen
hearts, and the one you let me touch
was mid-sized at best. Not trustworthy,
then, this stained-glass sanity, though
I built it so carefully with mantra
and pills—I can see how it looks
from the outside. Writer swallows
oblivion. Writer walks into river,
her pockets filled with rocks.
Did scenarios flash across your eyelids?
Did you pocket my disorder and litter
my name? Or did you hear the blasts
of fireworks exploding through my veins
and fear a life combustible, my art
some kind of arson, can't you handle
a woman who thinks? You put your hand
on my back as if we didn't need words.
It was too easy. It was dimstore
tenderness. And still you leer
over me. Are you conceiving some
reprisal? Are you waiting for a kiss?
I squinch my eyes closed and when
they flash open, your face
is gone, even the poem is
gone, and in your place,
an excised heart drips its dark
on my face. Someone's shriveled
organ strung up like a mobile—I
wanted something like this, but not
this—like a cancerous moon.

All these poems about people who love me

are made up. Some of the sex
is real, but not the love. Not the love
or that dark animal bearing its name, skulking
from line to line before devouring the poem,
the paper, my hand. A ghost now holding
this pen, the rest of my skin so pale
you can't see the suture of phantom
to flesh. How many hands I have lost
trying to write something true and yet
not desperate. Trying to write but it comes out
empty, eaten already by the creature I have tried
to call love all this while though her name
is something else. Black jaw. Spite rider.
My heart, my heart—not love
so much as a fever for it, violent
lunge at scent or shadow. Wolf crouching
in dark, wolf made of dark, pitch and
panting, my wolfish heart.

Dirty Rhapsody

Tell that dusk-licked girl
to put her legs away. Her sleek voice
is a proposal, would sound lovely reading a poem
aloud in bed, but if someone's going to write rhapsodies
about your cock, well, they're going to be my
rhapsodies. Let's go down
to the forest of the hot moon, where every tree
swells to be touched. Feel my voice
at your ear like a waiting mouth. Feel the wind
shiver for it. I want to feel you shiver
under me. You're a river I want to drink
like my whole body is a throat. I'm wearing lace
made of starlight, I'm wearing nothing
but shadows, I'm wearing your body
like it was made with me in mind.
The shallow bowls of your hips, those arrow-fine
wrists, chest like a warm expanse of sand, each nipple
a tight bud waiting. I want the tangle
of our bodies, want a thicket made of moon sap
and vowels, I want to live in the place of the heart
and the throbbing center. Feral dragon, hard angel:
my cunt is a book waiting for you
to open it. Our story has sweat
between its pages.

III.

We did not come to remain whole.
We came to lose our leaves like the trees.
– Robert Bly

The way home is not the way back.
– Colin Wilson

Accidental

for James

On the way down the mountain, your body leaves you. It keeps hurtling
 valleyward, fastened onto 14 lbs of carbon
 and rubber. There's an impact you don't
 feel, the road scraping your flesh
 across itself like butter.
 Your skin opening, gravel biting into it, a seizure dragging you
 into waking. Coming to--
 that is, coming into. The wrecked body
 of the Cannondale lies beside yours, grass
 poking through the twisted spokes. There is grass in your mouth, and gravel.
 Blood
 too, trickling over your lips and curdling
 in the sun. Your left eye glazes everything red.

When the pilot calls later
 to find out if you're dead, he says
 he's never seen that much blood in his helicopter,
 and I picture the cabin filling with it like a fishbowl. They had to airlift you
 out of there, torn Lycra
 and skinless, while I was on the far coast
 in my wholeness.

The MRI, the needles and scalpels,
 the stench of hospital cleanliness,
 the phone calls. Your teammates huddled
 on the curb outside the emergency room, eyes
 white as Dad strode from the car.
 He didn't call me
 for hours,
 until he had a prognosis,
 and I who would break any life
 for your life
 knew nothing.

Heart

of my heart, my body is a dumb
 animal. Your body is a dumb animal.
 How violent, love, in the face of that.

When you are far away

for Katrina

I couldn't reach you, so I made a banner
from a torn-up tablecloth and sewed it
to a bird's tail feathers. Now all the birds
from here to California know that without you
coffee tastes different. How do those people at the fair
write names on grains of rice? I want to write your name
on a thousand specks of dirt and dump them
into a river. Clouds will suck the river
into themselves and when it rains on LA county
the drops will magnify your name. Even the crust
of mud on your car tires will say
I am thinking about you. The dirt-
flecked banner on the bird's back
says it twice. If you move
to Virginia, you can see nearly five hundred
species of birds. I will learn all their names
so I can teach them to you. I will make five hundred
tiny banners spelling their names and find one
of each species, sew the banners
to their tails. I will let the birds
free. I want you to have
your happiness—can it be a Siamese twin
with my happiness? We can keep a record
of every bird we see. Four hundred eighty-nine,
four hundred eighty-eight to go. Eighty-eight
our shared birth year. I want to share
everything with you. I know you have
a home already, but I built you a house
inside my heart with a wrap-around
porch and a wall made of windows. You can bring
that flowered couch--we can drag it into the dusk
and get drunk on the porch. In Virginia
I saw a bear last week. I told her about you.
In Virginia, the autumn trees look like an arsonist's
wet dream, but the birds still rest in them
and their wings are never singed. I learned the language
of ornithology just to say *I love you*
five hundred and one times. It's not really
a secret: one side of each banner has your name
embroidered into it. If the sun
and winds and sleet fade the color, the threads
of your name will remain like the ghost
of a kiss.

Keep

In the mornings, when we are unborn,
 a homeless light noses at the door.
 In bed, your spine ridges
 out of your back like a stack of fists.

The light does not find its way in.

*

So many yellow-wallpapered hours,
 the window's small expense—
 I'm sorry, *expanse* of sky.

Time is a forest made of veils
 and you float through it.

*

What I hoped for
 splayed open, leatherwing bat
 on pins.

I have been a penny
 dropped from a high building.

What does it mean to *deserve*?

*

Soul like a knife in the body.

I don't want to do to you
 what the ocean does to glass.

*

Beauty is somebody else's angel.

In the end I only wanted
 to be someone you would keep.

Mythos

i.

They were wrong about suffering,
the old stories—

slit throat, spitting red jets

upstart lashed to rock, riven and gouged
by beak, talons

princeling king scooping out
his own eyes.

Pain with a cleanliness, a source.

See glory tamed with whip
and flame,
see the foolhead torn roughly
from his pretensions.

God Chaos comes
without reason, without
knuckles at the door.

What a lie, lightning,
to those drowning in a shallow pool.
Only sea birds
peck lazily at their wounds.

We neither debride nor die.

ii.

They were right about suffering—

how there exists a kind of ripping
drives the soul into a bird

how the offspring of crime slides,
damned, into first breath

lion-head trophy—how you, in frenzy away
from self, found the treasured
in a tree and tore it to pieces.

Even shining wise: like a candle
before a windstorm.

Love's body dragged
behind a chariot for twelve days
simply prepares—
how much /can lose
/what is /you
//lost

See the hero of grief
kill the one who holds fast.

iii.

Teeth of vultures
and dogs.

Ultimately, your body fills with stones—

/no sky here
//muzzled /scrape
/trustless

Wring the sound
from every last mourning
bell—

/no honor among
//chaos

I would but I cannot.

Signature

Twilight, sick light. The stars are holes
 bitten in the sky by those trying to get out.
 Body, barricade. This affection like a cut, like
 a wound opening. I've come to experience love
 as a kind of grief. That which,
 in the instant of being wanted,
 is lost. I've come to experience love
 as a gulf, a shaft through which
 things fall.

- - -

Expectations drape the universe
 in nets. Make yourself smaller
 to fit through the holes. File it
 under *things we got used to*.

- - -

Between the hard place and below,
 rocks, a world where anything could happen
 but escape. Your entire being wrapped
 in gravity, feet tugged toward a dark
 swallowing. Come come: oblivion
 is loverless. My mind is a forest drenched
 with night. Perhaps we dressed ourselves
 in ash because we liked burning things down.

- - -

Diana, the virgin, the blemished
 moon. At nightfall the wind's wolves
 circle their bodies for sleep. Lone
 huntress through the forest with filthy
 bare feet. Ice and shadows her skin, so
 they'd tell you. Her tongue is a match striking
 against silence.

- - -

I am diseased. I am at dis-ease.

- - -

So you want me to lie down
 quietly, sleep like my skin
 is a morgue sheet, like I'm
 foregone? Shame, you heartworm,
 you headless demon
 paperdoll. When my heart arrived
 on its plate, he sent it back. Not
 rare enough. Prepare to feel common. Prepare
 to be dragged behind horses by your hair.
 Sell every pearl till your mouth caves in
 on itself. I was baptized by darkness.
 On my worst days, the trees are uncut gallows.

- - -

Come come, you can't end me
 that easily, hydra-hearted.

- - -

Brother Poetry, Brother Daylight,
 Brother Fist-in-the-Throat, Old
 Silencer. You love me
 crescented—the sylphic disappearer.
 Dog-voiced, you left me
 howling at myself. But night is no
 cage; I've lived here so long.
 Lunular blade gleaming white heat.
 My signature writes the landscape
 to ash.

Bedroom

When I wake up I don't remember where I am.
In the darkness, the room is an extension
of my body, the overhead lamp that heart
that hangs on a string in my chest
like a stone. Leashed stars, the ember
and dependency of them. I sit up and the bulb swings
in the wind of my movement, chain flying
its half-orbit. I like to be where I know
what is mine. This darkness tastes of the dusk
I keep in my throat, slightly warm
with the day's exhale, and I stand, feeling it wrap
my limbs until it is my limbs. A growing light from the window
stains my hands, and when I open the curtains the world
leaps from me like an animal on fire.

Swallow

I'll leave the lions
to you, the elephants with their tusks white
and chiseled as pieces of soap. Let me
be a swallow.

The tender armor
of feathers. A safety in smallness.
Air in my hollow bones like a second,
stronger skeleton.

And the dark
music box of my throat. My beak as a needle
sewing me to the underside of the sky.
I choose

to belong to myself.
I'm tired of being a child's plaything—
backyard bird hung by the neck
on a piece of string.

Walking Alone

Feel the string of your spine
drawn upward, taut, like a marionette
brought to attention. Their
attention: a honey slithering
over your body, sticky in your folds
and crevices, congealing
the way blood congeals, that clot
like a knot in the artery's
throat. While slaughtering
a pig, you must hang it upside down
so the blood will drain. If the pig is kept
alive through the bloodletting, its meat will be
sweeter.

Meat hanging in the window
of a butcher shop. Meat hanging
from the sky by that string, your spine.
Everywhere women dragging hooks
above them as they pass an intersection,
pass over a bridge. Everywhere ham
honeyed by that gaze, the barks
of hunger. When we regard a pig
as something to be eaten, it ceases
to be a pig. We call it *pork*.
This new name the spirit cannot answer to.

Sculpture Garden at Night

The statues writhe to life
in the last slips of sunset, bodies rebuilt
from their own ashes. A crematorium,
a kiln? Heat-stains fade from the sky
and darkness claims the statues
as a part of itself.

Rodin was cruel
with them, each one a cramped, blackened
infant, though not any crueller
than human birth. He pushed them
out of himself, maybe
he loved them, maybe
he just couldn't hold their suffering
inside his body any longer.

Every dusk they are reborn
into the same twisted
and bronze-heavy bodies, fumbling
at reincarnation.

The sun sets with a beautiful
violence.

The Poet's Project

“ Be less pinwheel Be less dragon fruit
 Be cotton Be morning cloud Be the scent of rain
 but only in summer but only on days
 when the lightning is far away ”

So what if the tulips in the garden
 are on fire they're only imaginary tulips

Of course you're right: we have to be careful
 with matches with fireworks even flashlights
 especially in pitch dark those green spots of pain
 in the eyes Better to turn up the light
 gradually But I'm impatient I've been waiting
 for illumination a long time

And I'm tired of prophets Let's get real writing
 on the wall : grab a pen a hatchet scrawl
 or carve For want of an implement use the hand
 itself each finger's chalk of bone clotted purple ink

Some things are important enough to be vulgar
 So don't tell me the blood is too sticky
 Don't tell me it's salty and you wanted sweet

How long I pretended I wasn't hungry

And this is more
 than I would have been willing to ask for, afraid
 to even look on food, which by its presence
 says, *You hunger*, by nature implies
 the mouth, its wetness, its embarrassing
 need.

Say, *I am entire to myself*.

Mean, *A lack that will not be filled need not
 be mentioned*. Yet here: your small nakedness, bare feet
 like bread broken open.

Yes, that simplicity—yeast,
 water, flour, salt—modest start to the feast
 of your body, this two-torn loaf baked tan
 by the honeyed light.

The intimate hides
 in humble things, bread made to feed
 not impress, curve of the instep already
 nibbled away. Love, I do not want
 the best: I want everything.

Notes:

1 – The Arthur Rimbaud epigraph comes from Donald Revell’s translation of *A Season in Hell*.

1 – The Angela Carter epigraph comes from the story “Black Venus” in her collection *Saints and Strangers*.

3 – The Maggie Nelson epigraph comes from her book-length poem “Bluets.”

17 – The Sylvia Plath epigraph comes from her poem “Lady Lazarus.”

17 – The June Jordan epigraph comes from her poem “Poem About My Rights.”

23 – The title “Love is easier when one of us is dead” comes from the lyrics to “Wait for the Summer” by Yeasayer, from their album *All Hour Cymbals*.

27 – The title “We wait for winter to leave” comes from the lyrics to “Apartment Story” by The National, from their album *Boxer*.

31 – The Robert Bly epigraph comes from his poem “A Home in Dark Grass.”

31 – The Colin Wilson epigraph comes from his book *The Outsider*.

37 – The lines “Come come: oblivion / is loverless” take from the final lines of Dylan Thomas’s poem “It’s not in misery but in oblivion”—“And who shall tell the amorist / Oblivion is so loverless.”

Acknowledgements

This manuscript could never have been completed without

the artistic and emotional generosity of Rita Dove, Greg Orr, Paul Guest, and Lisa Russ Spaar,

challenges and love from Greg Solano, Chelsey Weber-Smith, Celeste Lipkes, and Molly Damm,

and

the faith and exuberance of Michael McGriff.