

# NOTES ON THE TASTE OF RED

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“Within the *yes* of her she is a lake”  
—Amy Newman

“How little at home we are in the interpreted world”  
—Rainer Maria Rilke

“To disappear into the right words  
and to be their meaning...”  
—Tom Andrews

I.

## NINE SEQUENCES OF GENESIS, AND AFTER

- i. The first question in her mouth, like gristle.  
Mother of myth.
- ii. Paradise is a flat land in the east  
and even the trees are stone,  
  
bone limbs raised from the dirt.  
A place that needs no rain.
- iii. Their eyes were still full of light,  
like white gauze and their bodies  
kept forgetting what they touched.
- iv. How did he name them before he could know?  
God grew bored, watching.
- v. And after, they marveled at how far the earth ran.  
  
They became multitudes. They built cities.
- vi. All those new words to describe hunger.
- vii. Two people climbing toward a honeybee nest.  
A long, stretching ladder, said to have been made of grass.
- viii. When he worries that he will die,  
she makes up stories about the creatures  
that have lived in the ocean for centuries.
- ix. And Eve will be the spider that eats the world—  
low mouth in the dark. A promise: the opposite  
  
of flood is not fire, but quiet in the cave of a beast:  
in the sable sky a woman's face unhinging its jaw.

## MORNING

Palms turned up, slivers of almonds, I come,  
in the wet July heat, to your house, offering nothing—  
not fresh berries, still covered by a red net  
and the promise I did not steal them, did not  
ferry away the gift. At the door you are a song  
pulling back into the same rooms I know  
from all the houses we have lived in. Mother,  
mercy is a bone plucked from the throat  
of a choking man. That again I have failed to love  
the men I call to me like port stretches unsaid,  
the table between us; the air tastes of wet  
and salt. This house betrays its worry, picked  
and thin. But if we are confessing, forgive me,  
I, who am always pilfering—little magpie  
in the rafters—a girl I built of pictures and a box  
of silver earrings from under your bed. Mother,  
the years are hungry men and they come  
with paring knives in their hands. Always  
you swear the spool of me was inside you  
long before I began its slow unraveling.  
Or is it a melody growing faint  
in one direction the way sound is known to do  
when two people pass by each other?  
Mother, one day all the houses here will fall  
into the sea like disciples at the feet  
of their god. There are things neither of us  
will see happen. Like a thief, I am learning to love  
each stolen morning, the color of flesh and berry.

## SELF-PORTRAIT AS THE CITY I AM ALWAYS LEAVING

In every incarnation I am driving away from the ocean,  
on a highway cut through the swallowing green,  
trees slumped forward  
as if the swamp might migrate,  
pick up slow  
and walk itself north.

\*

Home is a weather pattern  
and all our exits are carried with us:  
the map in the glove box:  
a list of all the roads  
that leave here,

the stink of sky and sweet  
algae-blooms, a city  
of stilt roots, creeping  
hand over hand, grey  
in the lifting dawn.

\*

Nothing miraculous about the flutter of traffic,  
so many restaurants closed, sun-washed,  
windows gone.

The Navy has colonized half the beach.  
And boys ride around waving Confederate flags  
from their truck beds, proud of all the nothing:

Sex stores and car dealerships.

\*

Everyone who grew up here  
can tell a story about the time  
they almost drowned or sunburned  
so badly their skin lifted with blisters.

\*

Always another cliché for the ocean and the city, a bright echo  
of my mother's childhood, a current running beneath mine.



How do I find her, that girl from then,  
night swimming in water full of comb jellies  
that wake like green streetlamps?

\*

On the beach I ask her if she believes in past lives—  
all of us circling each other like a dog  
chasing its tail, born endlessly  
to touch and love and hate under new names.

She wonders how many times  
we've met,

how many times she was the daughter  
sneaking out the window in the dark.

\*

Is this the answer to heredity? Every house  
my parents ever shared is here, ten minutes away,

even as the city erases itself under new signs  
and new money. Incongruous place,  
a faux-flamingo sharing the fenced up yard  
of a spitting dog.

Time stacks up in the dirt: the same chain link fence  
from the years when they were kids.

\*

All these versions: layers pressed  
in the air, echoes that move around us  
like waltzing shadows.

\*

So even now there is still that room and the man  
who walks in and will not leave. The fighting  
becoming wallpaper, an aftertaste lost  
in the heat and breeze.

I dream of him like a border sign,  
something to cross back into.

\*

And afternoon comes, the word smelling of rain. Then evening  
and I could be biking through the streets under heat lightning.

The sky packed tight and violent, white cracks of joy  
opening behind the clouds. Here the world is still biblical:

frogs cluttering the ditches and front lawns. Water moccasins  
come out onto the streets—angry coils that block the road home.

And all the light around me is massless. The houses  
and parked cars. The air thick with quiet. And everything,

with its face to the sky, waiting to be touched, to ignite.

VOLTA

Like music slipped from an adjacent room, I am all prayer

when I want to be; unanswerable, I lie in the grass of the sainted now.

In the palm trees above me, beetles hum their way to an end. Where

am I carrying this easy living? So much is ornamental. A prow—

the body above the waterline pushing on to that far, bright shore.

Late afternoon light can clutter the eyes. Some days there is no sense

to what cannot be seen—And foolishly I learned the answers before

the questions. The ants, their small flags of leaves raised in defiance,

feel only a little rhetorical. This immaculate world is always sliding into mystery.

I want to be touched, and not. Fever wanders me like a man in a parable.

Pre-Prometheus. Post-lapsarian. I was named to a subfamily of poppy:

*fumitory*, scrap of earth smoke. I heard the promise when a girl, the tenable

bells ringing in that parlor of lemon groves. I have only to step from under the linen.

In this hour I make good practice of dying—in another time, I have been that woman.

## IN A FIELD OF LINEN AND RED

I undress. Hips blotted the color of dropped wine—  
my mother says it's *my nature wanting*  
*to emerge*. White horse heads of two pumpjacks  
moving inside me for no oil. It is useless  
to call the chest a birdhouse and the arms, oars.  
I am no night ferry pulsing out in dark water; even  
with such greedy hands I cannot drag myself into air.  
Still the body demands to be named: legs like mercury  
thermometers, stomach, the dent a ball leaves  
when something, that doesn't know its coming  
catches it. My teeth thick and singing like piano keys.  
Mother, when you were me did you believe you could stay  
a crane standing in a flat lake or did you already know  
you would grow to be a marble house? And after,  
did you too burn all the furniture on the front lawn  
in the dust, the night ringed by flowers. Did you try  
to burn the house too? Down to its pretty white  
scaffolding. And when that was over, what did you do  
with all that fire left and nothing at all to burn?

**UN-/un/ prefix** I will lie down and become  
horizon, scar of land and mercurial sky. Face  
turned into the sea, fatherless and tasting  
of salt. Under my ear the earth toils on  
in unnoticed factory. Never born are the men  
who would map divisions, who would come  
to fear *burn*, when they had only to learn *fire*.  
I am happiest in the unmade-world.

## PENELOPE'S DAUGHTER

Waiting for the hurricanes to hit the coast, everyone buys vodka and measures the swell, but mother is a small house battened down against the wind. On the porch she tells the story of growing up here: an unlatched door, never indoors, always naked, a shark sliding under her foot far beyond the sandbar. One summer the whole city flooded, the roads unraveling in the rain, and for a day no one could leave except by boat. Every time she tells a little more from her list of small dangers: counting water moccasins in the creeks and backyard pools turned green and rotten. How many times she skipped school on the beach. How once she got picked up by a riptide that carried her for a mile. Sand slipping from her open mouth at the hem of the sea. At the center of a hurricane the world freezes up like a window that refuses to close. For a time everything empties out of the sky and settles, the quick intake of breath before the trees pick up their swing. She tells me to tie myself to the railing.

## IF SILENCE WERE A COUNTRY I COULD SWIM TO

Always a coastal girl.

The water called & I went, left my mother hunting  
teeth in the sand. I let the thread of beach feel small,

longing toward the white fold of horizon,  
the world then was a mass of blue. I drifted out,  
hair spread like a crown, to a place without weather.

There all hunger had fallen into hush & the birds hung  
in the sky as if ornaments. No punctured surface.  
No licking shores. The water stretched, prone

& idle: a thousand bent backs. The sailors  
on the decks of their ships looked daily a little more  
like monks studying the same print of sky.

But there was never any real prayer. The siren's trick  
is forcing all the sound back into you like song.  
When quiet came it stole all direction

& pressed itself flat like sleep. There is nowhere  
to sail & no wind remembers the way.

## AFTER THE EVICTION LETTER WAS FOUND IN THE SPAM FOLDER

Best part of the holidays was getting to lick the marrow  
from the ham bone. Then you gave up meat. Later,

you drank beer through a straw and buried the cans  
under your bed so they couldn't be found. At night

you climbed the stairs in half-built houses on the oceanfront.  
The boys called it *bacon & eggs*, but they brought back

bottles. Defiance was the best kind of pretty. For proof:  
there's still a DEAD END sign in the backyard—lifted

for you out of the dirt by a boy borrowing a pickup truck.  
Then, the world was made for laughter, and dread,

and getting home late. But everyone's got to do  
the dirty work: scrub the baseboards and the doors,

sod the yard in the August heat. You're growing up,  
child; it's happening over night. And discipline

is knowing what all the signs mean. And discipline  
is setting up an electric bill in your own name. Now,

this house has gotten too big for everyone to fit.  
Move out. And while you do, wonder why buildings

don't look best without furniture anymore. It's time  
you find out what money will buy. Spend a little.

Give your sister her first set of silverware. You'll find  
a free couch out on the road and you'll drag it

with you to Virginia. Good luck and tell your father  
it's time to fold the house down. This is just

like a party: play music, taste wine, invite the movers in.  
And your mother isn't weeping, but there is water

in the street. Best let someone else buy sandbags  
and birthday candles for next year's hurricane.



## SISTER, MY SILENCE STRETCHES OUT TO YOU LIKE A FIELD

### 1. *In Virginia*

Sometimes I think the stars are people walking  
so far in our future we can only see the small light of them.

It is easy to forget they are moving away from themselves  
in all directions, coming to us like an afterlife.

### 2. *I-95, Florida*

You tell me your life is a chain of ugly dawns,  
dog walking job, too tired to speak or sleep.

You tell me it is distance that cleaves you to me,  
that you can feel your city like hands on you.

Sister, Virginia cannot save you,  
but let it try.

Your restlessness is a pinned animal  
and night is always a cruel mother.

You call in the morning to confess the long drive  
you took while our parents slept. All of a sudden  
leaving opens in you like a drawer.

And you rifle through it,  
not knowing where it is telling you to go,  
your hands a dumb compass.

### 3. *1999, Florida*

In some iteration of us—if physics can be believed,  
if there are many—in one  
you drowned when we were children.

In that one, God did not make the phone ring  
and our father did not come to the living room

to answer, did not see your arms  
in the thrash of water, through the window,  
and come running to fish you to the surface,

your breathing small and wet.

In another your hands found the edge.

In one your body already knew  
how to hold what was precious inside itself  
long enough to surface.

But in all of them I am still in the plastic boat  
paddling, my fingers dredging the algae—

the pool unclean for months.

We were warned moccasins and small alligators  
might come to find a home, unseen under the muck.

We promised never to enter the water.

When you fell in, a clumsy step over the edge,  
reaching for me, I was already paddling toward you.  
Then, pushed back by the waves  
you were making in your terror.

I was a tender bruise of fear,  
unable to break the rule,  
to make the body dive in.

#### 4. *Again at the edge of town*

Again on the phone I tell you to stop  
breathing like a flickering moth in air. You tell me  
about the flame.

#### 5. *2001, California*

Forgive us or me, who have not  
understood you...

If we could be again in Berkeley,  
in the house we made in the small patch  
of sunflowers growing out of the sidewalk

next to the street. Knees tucked in.  
Before I learned to mother you  
from watching our mother.

*Medicine.* Split stem of a flower I pressed  
into our cuts. The air above our heads  
thick with bees.

Why was it I thought I could heal?

6. *Another evening opens*

And suddenly I think I understand about endings  
and all the years it takes to reach them.

Sister, sometimes in Virginia, at evening, the moon  
looks too full and round to be real. I think

it must be two dimensional, a sticker left by a child  
on a blue wall in her haste to claim it.

And the sky becomes a room we live in.

GIRL EATS THE WORD *PASTORAL*

The city is an empty mouth she walks through,  
looking for the throat. She finds only streets filling  
with steam and goes home to a room she pretends  
is a garden. The air is heavy with the smell of mulch  
covering the carpet. She would give her heart  
to a snapdragon. She can't abide hunger. So she fills  
the space with lamps, a dozen teetering suns and feeds  
the flowers only rainwater, collected and rationed  
from little jars she keeps hidden around her street. Already  
the morning glories are opening along the walls, paper-  
trumpets. She is happy to have her hands in a utopia.  
Her bathtub, full of algae and white lilies she wishes  
she could paint. In the afternoons she drags a dead bee  
on a popsicle stick across the blossoms to prevent inbreeding  
and so nothing is said to be missing. Outside the city  
is gnawed and dark, the pavement a rush of lava  
that took a summer to harden. She keeps the metal hiss  
of the city from coming in on the breeze; the choke of traffic  
and the hard lines are just other names for illness. Most nights  
she worries about the weight of the dirt piled around the room,  
the structural integrity of the third floor—how many people  
would use the word *infestation*? And about root space.  
When will she capture the things she has freed?  
The wisteria curtaining the window she calls the moon.

**FIELD** /fēld/ *noun* flat and easy as a blanket  
shook out for sex. And the trees do not intrude  
on their spectacle. He draws her as open space.  
He draws his hand as a fence there around  
her. When asked, *why?* he cannot articulate  
the pleasure. Instead he moves on to wonder  
how they would appear in a painting of this  
landscape if it were painted from faraway.  
As shadow, he decides, beneath the many layers  
of green used to imply movement. His hand  
is still the fence. Does she like it? She doesn't  
know yet. *Try it again.* And they do. Above,  
the sky walks by them. And the field takes no  
notice.

## SWAMP SONNET

Swamp has the bad kind of dreams: thick cities / paralysis / what teems alive under its single dark, watery eye. Swamp wonders if they are caused by the flat hunger lurking in its mucky, serpentine throat. Often Swamp feels like a boxing ring, archive of locked jaws and the sudden sucking thrash as one thing succumbs to another. If Swamp could mourn it would be river. Too languid some say, shiftless, happy to sit in its own fetid, hemmed-in music. On grey days Swamp can get lost in introspection all its spindle-limbs sinking into itself. Hours spent reflecting birds as they flit through and away. Somewhere a boat. A crest of tin-colored scales. All these interruptions— Swamp longs to be more cohesive, to be free to pick up and leave, so Swamp asks for a body in the image of the men spotted at its edge. Swamp is pleased with its wet shimmer and the implied sense of self, when, solidly it steps, and water parts. Swamp says nothing of the muddy tangle of sticks and snakes moving it forward. The hundreds of frantic insects humming inside like breath. Two stones to look through, slick with algae. Swamp is full of invitation. All it courts it takes sweetly: a fish, caught there, flaps itself wild in regular time—so much that human heart.

II.

**ORCHARD** /'ôrCHƏrd/ *noun* as in: too fruitful  
to be pleasure or fragrance. As in: what little  
paradise man makes with an eye for order.  
Sweetly, the farmer. And wretchedly, the farmer  
makes the long, syntactic rows through the dirt  
to give the girl what she asks for, that bitten red,  
that unsugared tang of waste. A man makes  
a labyrinth to become a god. Then fills it with  
anything that can run.



## PERSEPHONE REMEMBERS THE FIELD

The earth opened and so I went through the bruised gape, thinking how lovely the unadorned stones, the breathless air like dropped clouds. Then everything without light. I, who could blossom the world, had only crude hands there. He said he wanted to taste the sun that had coated me like lacquer. He pitied my wooded, unquiet heart. So I gave him my roving thoughts of morning, let him feel sky by touching me. I mapped to the edges of his strange country, dreaming of a full moon, lacuna of milk light, and then of it filling with shadow.



## DEMETER AND HER DAUGHTER DRIVE DOWN HIGHWAY 40, SINGING

There are things damned to live only long enough  
to keep something else from dying. White bones lining  
along the highway. I can hear the flowers bloom  
and moan, bright jolts between the rocks. And still  
the desert sleeps easy: it's long, expressionless face  
staring up into that wide sky. Miles of broken-open asphalt  
pass under us. Windows down. The wind's thick fingers  
pluck at the scraps of radio-songs. Our voices gone  
in the churn of gravel under the tires. Tell me  
how endless they made the world, opening  
and opening into light. The sun like a lit bulb hung  
on a cord, the stars painted and not made to fall.

## PERSEPHONE EATS HER OWN NAME

Ears ringing the loss of each decorous syllable

like seed. Amygdalin, from *almond*:

ruinous in the stomach. For so long my name

meant daughter, was spoken like

shackle and song.

Every word is an empty room—how small

you make things. *Pertho-* /to destroy/ became

Perseus holding the parsed head of a gorgon / became

the penumbral next world I stepped into.

How many times did you speak my name into air?

Of course he came. I was only rumor until touched.

A crack in your voice the first time you

named me to the field. I was winter long before the earth learned

to wither and want.

Easy to imagine how the three of us would love,

would become *phone-*, become slaughter.

## DEMETER MAKES HER DAUGHTER THE STAR OF A HOLLYWOOD FILM

*After Tom Andrews*

*The sun: an atom bomb, an unfurling dahlia. In this scene he returns to the place where he left her.*

*So much stops working in the desert.*

*Behind her a cloud of steam rises to cloak the front of their car. She sits under it as beneath a wave.*

Male Actor:

Bonnie, you'll see, we'll get out of this.

You shouldn't think it's a nightmare.

You should be grateful to be together again.

Persephone:

[Her silence floods him like water over a street in a hurricane, like a field of purple flowers in wind, like the sudden familiarity he felt years ago watching his twin code in a hospital, before being resuscitated.]

*He agrees that the day is a bad one for talking.*

*They stand in full view of the sun and kiss like two people kissing.*

—

## PERSEPHONE LETS HER MOTHER HIDE HER IN NEVADA, IN AUGUST

Mother is chewing gravel in the driveway and smiling back at the lit windows of our high desert house. Wildfires grow out of the dust and the sunset dries like honey on the horizon. Hunkered by the gate, she draws a border in the earth. A *no trespassing* sign bolted to the fence. A mother's mouth is full of caution like bees scratching for words. What else can she do? From the doorway I listen to her tuning the juniper for berries, a low hymn that snarls as cars drive past on a highway heading for the rough grey basin of the Pacific. Standing here I am a gallery of winter not yet come. In these last hours of August she holds still, while above us, night opens its blue hands. Love, in the end, is a shucking spell. I go inside and hide my face. The taste of daughters is the taste of metal, which is also the taste of blood: a stake in the ground and a rope that holds her here, pacing a half-halo through the last of this parching light.

HADES PLAYS THE SLOT MACHINES IN RENO, WAITING FOR SEPTEMBER

“But hiss for hiss return’d”

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

For the long moment of eclipse, the sun  
is a white ring of bone around dark marrow

or the mouth of a tunnel. The men tunneling  
through sky still taste dirt,  
wipe it from their eyes. It is true, I do not mind  
the long quiet, fallow throne. *Enter here or there.*

Soft shimmer of casino. With no windows the day  
becomes an arbitrary measuring. Cool grey bed.

In our long nights you list off facts about the beasts  
that populate the earth: flutter of bats leaping  
into evening. All at once they stream out  
like one minute of thunder.

And in the raw abdomen of a gator a boy was found,  
near whole, still holding himself as if in sleep. I dream:

fingers to skin, you drawing  
a snake’s tined-tongue, licking the air—

*taste which way the small creature ran.* You accuse me  
of my own slack-eyed brumation, tell me I couldn’t

possibly have seen a girl in white  
courting a field of poppies and thought  
*love.* Only nature. Darwinian. Still, you come,  
smelling of light, legs forked around me. I do not mind  
that when you speak my name, you speak  
my whole unearthly kingdom and mean us both.

LET ME TELL YOU THE COLOR OF FORGETTING

Tonight I walk the rim of this frozen lake for hours,  
rime dressing the specters of grass & house & dock.

In this hem of woods it is the indifference I cannot stand  
to notice. Echoes of trees like cut paper.

It should be that easy: the sky looking out of the flat water  
& up at itself. It is that easy. My thumb erasing the moon,  
that ghost ship.

\*

Our two vast countries,  
unmoored.

Our dumb touching. I try to gather you like salt

from the shore lip. And for months we share nothing  
but the pewter shine of stars on the water. This lake,  
a heavy shield set down in the dirt.

\*

Is a circle as infinite as a line that is always extending?

The rigid thrust of trees.  
This forest I find myself in—  
accident or orchard?

In the rows & rows, we could be any.



A glance of shadow becomes two people running  
or the moon shifting it's weight in the sky.

\*

That word, love  
takes only a flutter of tongue.

\*

& ghostly, my breath wanders into the hallways  
between trees & the snow keeps coming down  
like light.

If you are there, breathe me in like smoke  
or the smell of storm. Like a rush of fog across a grey lake,  
like night fleeing dawn,

that red wound, that ship,  
a hundred years lost & still burning  
come suddenly home.

**SLIP** /slɪp/ *verb* these late hours, the dreams cannot help themselves. They come like fever into the body. They come to burn it all easily away—In this metaphor you are sickness.

III.

YOU ASKED FOR THE GIRL WHOSE SKY IS ONLY EVER A BLUR OF KEROSENE  
BEFORE THE FLASH

Fire is the usual metaphor—a bore. Arsonists  
make the giddiest men. From far away the city  
looks honey-tongued in flame. All of it  
slipping to ash, the grey settles the red  
down to silence. Eventually the mouth remembers  
it is good for other things. And everything  
has that look when it is leveled. And the smoke  
stands up like men in suits, funereal men,

thinking of rain. Damn the things that are that easy.  
It is nothing like that: no little witch singing in the pyre,  
no can of gasoline tipped down the back, no cigarette  
put out on skin. Let the city seethe itself  
to ground. We know what could not burn  
in that burning bush. How awful it must've been.

## IN A BAR CALLED APOCALYPSE

I've got a boy on a chain. And everything is red, as you might expect: walls, what is reflected in the mirrors, pool tables, money, music, our cheeks, my lips. Get a load of us, sitting here, squawking. We don't mind to leave the doors and windows wide. And outside its not even night or daybreak. What do you call a sky that looks like nothing? And nobody drinks because all the booze went to ash. The foods gone too and with it, all that hunger I carried around for so long like spare change. I get all misty-eyed when I think about biting into a grape: plump green. For that moment when its perfect shape gives. Here that's the kind of thing on the tongue like currency. All the same songs play, top 50 from the years each of us were born. And the boy on the barstool next to me—we don't fuck, if that is what you're thinking. What's the point? That kind of prayer only works when the world is spinning and the sun comes up.

TO THE HENCHMAN WHO LOVES ME

Welcome to the country of U-turns.

You'll like this wide basin. Sitting,

propped against a wall of sky,  
the world still looks infinite: orchard

of night and house and horse and field.

Rows and rows of cornstalk girls, murmuring

together in their dry and gauzy skirts  
down the miles of untrafficked road.

Don't fret. The body gets easier

to take where you will, to fold

like paper into featherless crane.

Don't fret the next sad shore.

You must've fallen through

some fracture in midnight,

out of the punctured face  
of that severe little moon,

who lives to make shadows

of the field—everything seen

in relief. Here, a bowl of fresh plums.

Watch the spider make a nest of the field.

Yes, the house doesn't open  
and the town is stock,

but the horses are all pleasant to ride.

Take no notice of the mist hemming

your ankles. Cold is old memory—  
it will leave you soon.

There's no chance you'll wake  
to find yourself drowned in this place

that only ever smells of a lake,  
damp and endless. Oh yes,

I was the one who called you here.  
I'm glad you finally came.

Meet my half-sisters: their silhouettes  
are clots on the telephone lines.

The red lights flashing on the radio  
tower make fine substitutes for stars.

I named their constellations Needle  
and Dive. No, I am not interested

in that one bright Delphic eye hovering  
like a lid. Of course, we should leave

this sweet song. Of course,  
you mean to shuck me free.

How clever to fall with a ladder  
still fixed to that white door.

You see, I'd worry about the horses  
here alone. And what if there is snow?

Of course, I want to go with you.  
Sir, your fear is unbecoming.

Such small dangers  
I sing.



**SPIDER** /'spɪdər/ *noun* 1. Let her imagine it—  
fat as night, hanging from the moon on a strand  
of fishing line. That white egg sac, just now  
teeming. 2. There again, black speck on the wall  
in the garden. Little fright, so easily hidden.  
Already someone has warned her. First note  
of death set in the ear. It doesn't take long  
to count her fears. 3. Is the body the hook or  
bait?

## THE AVERAGE WEIGHT OF THE UTERUS

At my morning appointment the gynecologist uses my phone  
to take a photo of my cervix so I can see it: pink, hot, foreign.

I imagine the diagrams on the wall are maps of islands  
I might one day visit. I don't ask her to test for deficiency.

Instead I call my mother, who talks about menopause. While  
she lists all the reasons men leave their wives for younger women,

I remember how, in their twenties before the Jetties were built,  
she and my father would slip into the Atlantic at night  
and swim through streams of phosphorescence,

watching each others' bodies push through the faint green.  
At seventeen my mother dreamed of dopey pink elephants  
floating around her head like dirigibles, not smiling.

That was the first time she didn't have me. Eight times  
she'll try and it will come too early, an easy shedding.

\*

In tonight's dream I keep a pin-up girl  
in a birdcage the shape of her woman body  
and all day I listen to the brush of her thighs  
together in her wire house.

And I dream of living with a girl  
in a house without bedrooms.  
We stay in the living room.  
We exchange clumsy kisses.

We buy no furniture;  
make no time for food  
and never have a baby together.

\*

I own six pieces of lingerie.  
I try them all on in one night.  
I put on lipstick, but rub it off  
in the bathroom mirror.  
I consider selling my eggs

to pay off loans.  
I pick out names: India, Alia.  
I practice how it feels to be swollen  
with sound  
a heavy moon  
a car fire, burning  
on the shoulder of the highway.

**AND** /(**Θ**)n/ *conjunction* offhandedly, he says something about light and the house shivers in the new look of itself. And he says something about division and a door opens and a dozen windows. And he says something about hunger and an animal lies down on the kitchen counter. And he says something about measure and the sun walks into the window at the top of the stairs and smiling, goads the cat, named moon, curled on the last step. And he says something about loneliness and the radio clicks on playing a mixture of jazz and birdsong. And he says something about regret and two people walk in off the street. And they look like they just met, but they could've known each other for a long time. And one of them kisses the other in the bright hallway. Their hands move like habit over one another. One of them leaves their eyes open.

## THE QUIET INHERIT LITTLE

Let me devour you—  
all around summer  
is catching, the world

a blistering accident.  
Leave the door wide  
to the scratch of beetles,

the clatter of sky before  
rain. Somewhere a car  
breaks against another car

and all of it holy. The body  
wrapped thick around us  
is a sweltering catacomb,

a vestal garden. All gods made  
themselves in houses like this.  
Unspooled heavens, bad

and laughing stars. Little nun,  
I could eat the sea. Your hidden face  
turned aside. I will wander out

into the swollen light  
of the yard, a humming feast  
of insects. Out, past houses

like angry, rotting toads  
until I come to the shore.  
The last thing to touch me

will be the wet hem  
of that heedless, gasping tide.  
I, who the seabird hails

with a mouth full of ruin.  
I, who have come  
to the edge of a flat earth.

Let me be your grizzling  
nativity, a loose tongue  
sliding away in the cordgrass.

## RED ABSTRACTIONS

Are you thinking about first-sex? How there was no  
blood to speak of. And does that really happen to anyone anyway?  
Cruelty has its tongue around you, talking like  
dawn, one long, red shout up from the dark line of hills.  
Easy, like strip poker: your hand, empty of red-red hearts,  
fidgiting the bra  
gone. Surely it's as easy to learn romance: just a matter of  
halogen gas and tungsten filament encased in glass—  
incinerating at a temperature much higher than the standard lamp. But sex is  
just a series of dashes. (Fragment me, fragmenting you.) You  
keep the lights on. You  
leave a bright bruise. You wear white and  
make nice in the smallest room, sew red dashes and  
no words to linen: a sign: NO ANGELS HERE. TOSS UP ANOTHER SHEET!  
Of course it all wants to be a question. And that big *decode me* moment—laughable as  
phone-sex—comes wheeling by with perfect, red enthusiasm.  
Quick, girl, don't blush; you've got a taste for that red-  
red argument. And anyway there's a long history of self-immolation to  
speak of—by fire or otherwise. Who can give up  
the body like that? (All at once or gradually.) Fingers burned away in prayer,  
uncharred tongue still chanting. Better to have little faith. Take Saint V  
viciously licking clean of dust, and cobwebs, and widow-spiders the closet-  
walls, all to prove God had a thing for her. Or the girl used like a  
Xerox-copier for the divine. Better to be a woman reclining in a bed—all those  
years before he comes to you, disguised as light and the you, you thought you were,  
zones out. And anyway, can love really be a continuous verb?           Red field loving you.

## ANSWER KEY

- I. A man builds a house in the desert. A man has a daughter. That is the way of things.

No, a woman has a daughter and names her after the window fear climbed through

or names her after stone.

A man and a woman have an answer and nothing that follows has anything at all

to do with them.

- II. So, I unsettle you.

- III. One answer comes up like a pumpjack. Such a funny horses, grazing for oil.

- IV. The weight of an answer is about 60 grams or 200 under worse circumstances.

- V. And it comes from Old German:  
*a sworn statement rebutting a charge—*

- VI. Tell me, truthfully:  
Do I have a criminal face?

- VII. A man says her wants an answer for a wife. Says it's a male thing. Dresses her in white for transparency's sake.

Apologizes to me then for my nonlinearity.  
Says he should leave me  
to my womanishness.

- VIII. Call it rage and I won't be able to speak. Call it

sorrow and I'll be too  
heavy for the river.  
I am so much more

refined, waiting patient  
in this sitting parlor  
for a doctor.

IX. I'll have no daughters for my sons to kill.

X. But weren't you the man who wrote a poem  
to ask: What if there are no epiphanies?

Better the question:  
What happens in the field long after?

XI. He said. And he said—

So language was the first lie;  
then came the eyes.

XII. And the sea is just another kind of field,  
or you could call it a counter, anything  
that stretches out.

You can set your wine glass down now.

XIII. Am I making myself plain?  
Let me start over.

XIV. Mozart was the ninth in a series of pregnancies,  
and the only one to make it out alive  
or that was the myth in my house.

So the equation must go: If his mother cried eight times,  
and once more for joy, then who is the owner of his mind?

XV. I kissed him, fat on the mouth. I kissed her  
on the fat of the mouth. And neither of them  
made any more sense the second time.



XVI. I'll give it up easy now. (The pit comes away from the flesh.)  
You say you want to see a bit more wound  
from under the dress?

The kernel is so vast under a microscope.

XVII. I'm going sweet for the color red.  
That's all.

It's a favorite among painters.  
It can add dimension  
to a room full of chairs.

XVIII. I know it's time I start measuring  
on more than the x-axis.

XIX. That flat change just happens, like hopscotch—I'm a girl again!

When I learned time has no plot, but up.  
When I learned I am a series of redundancies.

XX. Dear Sirs, I was raised in a house of epiphany, God  
in every undusted corner.

I learned how I would one day step out of myself.  
And everything still feels like indulgence: sex and rage  
and all the space not yet filled up with quiet.

Eventually it all will leave me  
and I will want it to.

XXI. And Sirs,

the body is a stack of answers. I invite you.  
Come close. Rifle through. See how I am fever  
where I stand. My face in all directions.  
Take what relics you like.

I have been here a long time.

## NOTES ON RED

The orchard was

and the knuckles of a man after boxing, the linen  
cast off the bed, a woman holding him in the red

between her legs. Her mouth moving is the measure  
of triage. And no one dies of red, though it's messy.

A field of bandage. A field of Cardinal's robes  
hung on a line. The perennial blood in my jeans.

A nurse asks you how long since your last and  
you say ten years. And you say it's been a while,

before they wheel you away. No, no one dies of red.  
In another bed I lie, parsed from you, dawn crossing

the window like a gash. It is the tulips on the sill  
in your white room, barely opened, like a nest

of red-headed kraits tasting the air, their necks roving  
over the edge of glass. Of course, they are hungry.

The smell is antiseptic. The smell is mopped green  
linoleum floors where the men unseam you. Briefly

your body fills with light, that voyeur. And the uterus  
slips out through six fine incisions, suddenly reducible.

And the anesthesia takes a long time to leave you.  
For a long time your face stays loose, like curtains

pushed aside. Red flowers in the window. A field  
of dropped apples. My hands in your hair. Then,

bracing you as you stagger up to pee. Red pressed  
to a square of sky and asphalt. I long to lift the gown,

to make some sense of injury. A small line of blood  
on the pad in the bed, darkening to afterthought.

Slick red in the dark. I imagine your body, once  
flooded, returned to night. Its dumb procession

wandering that echoing nave. Cathedral  
they left under the skin.

Fever / Fever / Fever

“Sing the beginning of created things.”  
—Caedmon

No more the white wrappings around the eyes, the accidental  
light obscuring to the edges of the captured frame. Just now  
a bright match, like a flicker of poppy, like a streetlight come on  
far in the distance. The scene is familiar. A woman in white  
shivering in a dark yard is easily mistaken for linen left on the line  
and blowing. Where the wind finds me, there is still the echo of touch,  
but want will pass by this house and the next like an unwelcome guest.  
Just now, the doorway is filling with scraps of dancing girls, red rising  
like petals, like flame. And everything is veiled in old bed sheets—  
I will be gone a long time. I have walked into that burning house.  
They say there is a man who can walk on water and leave no mark.

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