Blood and Mirrors

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I.
Waves

I was seven when my father told me he came to this country from Cuba on a wave—no shoes, no papers, no parents. I imagined a breaker whisked him away from his family, dropped him off naked and new on sunny Miami Beach.

*

My brother liked to sit on the toilet and watch my father shave. One night I peeked in the crack and saw my father pointing to the scar from his appendectomy, heard him tell my brother it was a gunshot wound from Vietnam. Later, my father boozed while my brother wrapped Band Aids around the stomachs of his GI Joes.

*

I was eight when my father told us about the orphanage—four years he slept with rats before his parents arrived in Chicago. Age seventeen he joined the Unknowns. Street gangs, rats, and a war scar.

*

I read about fishing boats and big waves in Japan. Fathers burning candles with their families at night. I wanted a monsoon to take me out of my skin, let me start over ninety miles away.

*

I believed my real father
was still tumbling in the Gulf—
that the man pounding
his fist on the kitchen table
was a Cuban alien
who had stolen
my real father's identity.

*

I dream of Havana
in the rainy season.
Travel east
to Santiago de Cuba.
Back west
to the tobacco province
of Pinar del Rio.
These routes
are open to students.

*

Somersaulting across a plantation
I bump into my real father.
He is thirteen and rolling
cigars. He is careful
to spill no tobacco.
There is nothing
to start over.
June 1988: A Father’s Leave-Taking

We watch the white curtains
yellow; the slow effacement
of afternoon into evening.

I recognize birdsongs:
brother’s warbling
against mother’s wheezing.

My feet are cold, resisting
the transition
from carpeted staircase
to hardwood landing.

I want to pluck a crystal from the chandelier,
see it burst into a billion bits of ice:
I am done with all things brilliant
and blinding.

Instead I vacuum,
suggest to mother we strip the ivy.

But she is busy yanking brother
from the window.
I concentrate
on wiping away his smudges.

I surrender—
we are out of Windex.
Spinning Outwards

We pick clover on the side lawn of the church; split every third leaf in half. Your shoulders sag and your lower spine collides with rough bark. It reminds you of the weeping willows that rasped against the windows of your mother’s stone estate. You would pray for a sharp rain to soften the cold grey exterior. You want to say the long corridors were maintained, like in a museum, but your speech slips mausoleum.

Watching cars meet and diverge at the intersection, I am aware of my fingers trembling above the skinny thread of a web. It connects me to the bark at your back. In Catholic school I thought myself a spider and spinning outwards dangerous. The passageways solemn with so much weaving gone unnoticed. Back then I was grateful for the small disappointments; an excuse to disentangle from my lace work.

Our mound of four-leaf mutations growing larger, we wonder if we can be more than just mirrors to each other. If anyone can ever recant us from our centers. We imagine a world of webs; wonder if we would want this.
Eroded

Two nights I have waited in bus stations, stared at the same faces. Seven hours until departure, I roam Denver’s puddled downtown half-asleep.

I would like to stop and watch the sun rise from its muddy cradle, but my clothes are soaked and I don’t have a room.

I seek shelter under the twitching neon of a diner—try to rid myself of the eroded feeling that overtook me during an Omaha downpour.

I tuck my legs under a small checkered table. If I stare long enough I can catch the black and white squares floating.

A queen saunters through the door wiping his streaked mascara with one hand, pulling his stockings up with the other as he spreads a tear further up his leg. The click of his heels startles me as he crosses the room trailing a thin stream of mud.

A cloudburst from the West warns me I will never make it past Salt Lake City. I am wishing I had never left Chicago when something wet hits my face. But it is only a leak. A small sadness dripping from the ceiling.
A Bald Promise

Twenty-two years old, Julie ran from Asheville to Laredo, changed her name to Lola. She pressed her swollen cheekbone to the Amtrak window and gazed into the bald eye of her reflection. For twenty hours she rode the waves of her marriage in a Percocet barrel, rose from the anesthetized trip in Texas. Stepping down from the platform, she dug her heels into the dusty ground, crouched to watch a swarm of flies attack the brown core of an apple.

Thirteen years later, the thud of her husband’s fist on her cheek rouses the dormant swarm. She lifts his shotgun from their paneled wall, shoots him in the leg. Riding an opiate wave, she returns to the discarded core—the buzzing muffled.
New Year's Eve: Three Girls in a Bathroom

I straddle the toilet.
Angela and Lucy work
my hair into a nest
of fixed coils.

Angela swipes
a streak of purple
through her spiky hair.

Lucy is opposed
to costumes.

Cold air snakes
around my neck,
I press my palm
against the duct-taped crack
in the window.

Angela lights two cigarettes,
holds me one.
We ash in the sink.

*

Angela shoves Lucy and me
back into the bathroom.

All coked up, she bursts
into tears. A helium
balloon snags
on the hinged door,
explodes.

I turn on the busted radio,
tune into static
as Lucy locks the door.

Angela wipes her eyes
with her wine-stained tank top.

I wrap my scarf
around her neck,
Lucy lights her smoke.

I have this dream
Josh and me are fishing,
He hands me a minnow—
I hook it.

Our baby screams.

A knock at the door—
Angela unhooks
the latch,
allows Josh to enter.

We tell him we are tired
of our costumes.

He watches Angela wash
her hair in the sink.

I pull pins
out of my coils.

Lucy wipes
a trace of powder
off the edge
of the tub.
Before Her Father's Funeral

The woman paces in the reflection of the living room mirror, tying up her hair. The child fears the ice sheet has swallowed his mother, left him with this projected woman in the long black dress.

She goes to the window and pulls it open, mumbles something glacial. They are waiting for her in cars. She sighs one last fog, turns away.

The sun radiates heat on the hardwood floor under the open window. The child stretches out on his stomach, imagines God is a light that can warm the shivers away. He worries that if the snow outside melts his mother won't make the swim back home.
After the Divorce

Damp wind nudges him towards shore.
Fog lifts a few inches above water;
he recalls the way a woman raised
her skirt above her ankles
before stepping over a puddle.

The musky smell of washed-up fish seeps
into his lungs. He listens for the crunch
as he steps on their skeletons; imagines
their souls swimming up his legs,
lodging themselves between his vertebrae.

He walks down the pier,
crude cold beneath his feet.
A faint figure sits on a boulder
at the end of the long runway.
He allows himself to recognize her.

When he reaches the boulder,
he fingers a crevice, the fractured sternum
of mammoth rock. He heaves
himself up and observes
the horizon. She is gone.

He savors the salt’s sting.
The Drowning

My sister says a bolt of lightning
split her trunk in half
when her husband’s lungs
filled with water
during a July downpour.

She sold the house and furniture,
bought a cabin in Montana.

I visit her in October. She has taught
her daughter to paint in thick oils,
to notice the way sunlight streams
through the gauzy drapes.

At dinner, my sister traces her finger
along the rim of her glass; denies
three times that she misses the East.

It is only after she has put her daughter to sleep
that she speaks openly about the cold:
how the wind seeps through the insulation,
fills her lungs with its howls.
Dilations

The sick man lies in bed, opening and shutting his window-blind eyes. A silver sea surrounds him; its sterling waves carry him back to the soft-skinned memory of a woman:

_In the woods, their fingers wander under each other's shirts, over each other's hot stomachs. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy above their heads; slender rays illuminating their wordless speech. The moment dilates and all their gradual touches blend into one._

His wife nears his bed-side with a glass of water and a handful of pills. He refuses her, hurls the pills across the room.

_Her pinched face softens the moment he lets go, dissolves in the glinting of the waters._

_His last words swallowed in a shower of pink capsules._
House on the Outskirts of Havana
-for my father

Sand rushes into an abandoned house through half-boarded windows in the gusty month of April.

Dunes gather like hooded monks at the foot of the stairs. Small squares of colored glass glint above the door of this house I have imagined for us. A three-legged table and two paint-chipped chairs.

This is the house I cannot leave, the table where I sit and wait. The light caught in the stained glass; the words we have not shared. I invite you to listen: two blocks away leaves whirling down a sewer grate.
II.
Thirteen Flaming Stars

Forty years ago my father arrived
In Miami, ninety miles north of Cuba
In a sea-blistered boat with thirteen
Other exiles. His parents were not rich—
Did not flaunt jewel-ringed toes on white
Sands. I dream the opulent hotel

His mother scrubbed floors at is now a hostel
Where I meet my father. I arrive
In a banana boat; its sides white-
Washed by waves. This Cuba
Does not belong to Batista's rich
Friends. Here there are no thirteen
Colonies, no painted stars. My thirteen-
Year-old father leads me to flashy hotel
Windows, and we flick matches at the rich
Customers inside. Castro has not yet arrived—
Has not yet appointed himself the Cuban
Messiah. We stage our own Siberian white
Night: my father burns his father's white
Suits, and we holler Revolution in thirteen
Tongues. In pre-Castro Cuba
I meet my real father in a flaming hostel.
In the US, my real father has not yet arrived—
He is not the one hiding out among the nouveau riche.

My brother is resolute on becoming rich—
Studies investment banking, his white
Male birthright. He has longed for the arrival
Of unrestrained free trade since age thirteen
When he fell in love with the market; lavish hotel
Rooms available in all developing countries but Cuba.

My father promises me we will fly to Cuba;
Promises my brother we will visit his rich
Clients in Mexico City, stay in their plush hotels.
Though this trip is just another of his white
Lies, I cannot help but wonder how the thirteen-
Year-old boy in rags would suffer our arrival.

Smoking a Cuban cigar, wearing his father's white
Suit, my rich father burns holes in the thirteen-year-old arms of his rival in the lobby of our hotel.
Residue

In the next room, mother is weeping.
She caught me under the living room table
mashing the contents of grandfather’s pill box
into paste, licking the chalk
from between my index finger and thumb.

I wake up in the back seat
of grandfather’s yellow car:
mother kisses my flushed cheek
smoothes my sweaty bangs
tells me I am a good girl.

After they pump my stomach
she imitates the sucking sound
of hoses, assures me my belly
is poison-free—nothing but roses
left, dozens. We hit a bump
and the chalky feeling rises
but I hold it down
afraid of thorns.
Misattribution

I.
The summer of my fifth year
I decided romantic love
was my mother receiving
my father’s tongue
into her mouth
in St. Elizabeth’s parking lot.

II.
Later, my father picked a dandelion.
The pollen my mother blew
was a purer form of snow.

III.
An hour earlier, he had slammed her face
against the passenger window.
Saint Teresa in Ecstasy,
her eyes rolled slow
to the back of her head.

IV.
They both skipped Communion—
my father’s hand shook
as he smoothed a strand
of my mother’s loose hair.
Brother’s Keeper  
- for my brother, the ninth

"God, it may be assumed, took murder into account; He did not take surgery into account."
- Milan Kundera The Unbearable Lightness of Being

I.
Cain desires to know  
what in his brother’s head  
pleases God—

does not run  
after he splits  
Abel’s skull.

He does not discover the thorns  
pricking his own grey matter,  
but dove wings, doused  
in the reddest of wines.

He pulls a thread from his loin cloth,  
hunts for a pine needle,  
stitches his brother’s skull.

Holding his head in his lap,  
Cain blesses Abel  
with a kiss on the forehead.

II.
If I have been institutionalized  
it has been for the wrong reasons.

At three I was a murderer.  
Ten years later, a traitor  
to homeland and blood.

Brother, at three I pushed  
you off your high chair  
when no one was looking—  
fourteen hours you wailed  
before mother took you to the hospital—  
they set your legs in fat casts.

By age thirteen, I detested  
your love of dollars—  
the blind pursuit of green.
I stole all your hoarded $1's
and fed them to the dogs
that roamed the neighborhood.
A sixteen-year-old poodle
died of ink poisoning.

God was not pleased.

III.
Abel's eyes open
like a vulture spreading his wings
or a dove betrayed—
his whites webbed in red.

Abel is weak, the dove.
Cain is marked, the thorn.

Abel lifts a trembling finger
at the moment of recognition—

forgive me, brother.
I was born to crack
your mind open;
drink the wine.
The Segregation of Self

1.
I explore the cellar of the abandoned stadium. 
Tiptoeing through the blackness, a door 
slams shut behind me. I call out your name, 
you reach for my hand through bars. 
We listen for the boot-steps of guards. 
I whisper I want 
you finish to be free.

2.
Eighteen-years-old, I hated getting drunk 
in front of you, who always abstained, 
navigating us through the segregated squares 
of Baltimore, like an unbalanced checkerboard 
of black and white, until someone sold 
me something, your sad muffler 
thumping us all the way home.

3.
I liked walking pre-dawn streets 
with you— crunching cockroaches. 
Amazed this small violence could hurt 
you— a man. The men in your neighborhood 
called you “lady” three times that night. 
I whispered I want 
you finished to be cruel.

4.
Four years later, I am leaving school 
with a suitcase of sledgehammers 
to help you knock down 
Greenmount Avenue Wall. 
We will lay out new streets 
that from a distance 
where the light is pure 
will look like winding strands 
of your long lady’s hair.
A Snow Queen’s Farewell
-for Sean, in New York

I was your Pittsburgh snow queen, faraway
and cruel, in a glacial palace all my own.

I discovered the elixir for the polar numbness
you promised— bottles of toppled red wine

flooded the cellar floor. I even wore your cool words
like an elegant cloak, dismissing one boy after another.

But now I am living with a man more like a dragon
than a boy, whose enormous swishing tail whirlpools

heat, melts my ice sculptures— and the glassy rivers
rushing down your shrinking bust

look nothing like tears.
Our Affair
- After Guernica

Your tongue — a woman
hanging from a flaming window.

My knees buckle — a horse pierced
by a stake, twisting its head back.

A bird tears a vowel from its gut—
your hand clamps down on my mouth.

A light bulb explodes—
our limbs elongate and swell.

Mine is the severed arm gripping
the handle of your broken spear.
Sunday in the Park

Across the park, maroon maids and men in black surround the white bride, the fat queen bee, guard her from flying frisbees, a football. I overhear the groom ask two kids, chocolate smeared across their lips, to move their branch-burning game. While the photographer, ruffles spilling down his shirt, struggles with his polished tripod, two slim maids grab either corner of the train, pull it taut: spin the bride.

The groom tosses fist-sized jewels — rubies, emeralds sapphires — into the center of the train. They bounce before landing in the open mouths of two voluptuous maids. The men whistle, the women swallow.

Using a branch, I sketch these wedding-day hallucinations in mud as the messy-mouthed boys ignite the weeping tree at my back — its roots bonding my feet to soggy ground.
Eve’s Disturbance

I was born
of a wound.
I ate the apple
to become my own creation.
For ages I have failed
at transcending my body.

I have locked myself in a cabin
to annihilate my sex
with a pearl-handled razor.

Adam sharpens his sledgehammer
while I prepare the bath.

I want to tear out a rib,
lay it as his bloody feet,
return to dust.

The window shatters—
I nurse the shards,
clutch them to my breast
as he enters me.
“On the Fortieth Anniversary of the Revolution, the Year of my Birth”
-after *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*

Diego, I am burning
in an evergreen bush, my wings
broken so I cannot fly
to New York or save myself.

I fall asleep with pins in my leg,
awake coiled in an umbilical cord.

Out the window I see
my father diving off a balcony.

I imagine you strung high in the air,
painting your mural. Then imagine
you falling as my spine shatters.

Thirty-three years after her death
I dreamt of reuniting with my sister.
She was laughing, waiting for me.

I could not cross the threshold.
Warhol Does Venus

He chops her off at the shoulders
parts her scandalized lips.
She transcends the pale dawn
of the Renaissance, rising
into an electric blue landscape.

Neon green swirls
through her hair; snakes
yanking sideways,
from the roots. Pink ribbons
adorn her headache.
Through reproduction
he deflowers her—
a Medusa for the masses.

Under a seething twist of hair,
her shoulder, queer and naked,
seems bashful. But her eyes,
lined in blue, are Virgins
fucking the sky.
III.
Outside Leaves Keep Falling

I squint away the clumsy heart-like shapes
of the brick-colored splotches
staining mother’s hardwood floor.
Father wrenched
his full burgundy glass
from mother’s grip
& split his own cheek
wide open, spilled blood-
wine everywhere.
I was raking leaves
when he ran out screaming
Nuthouse, fucking nut-house
mother yelling
Quiet you crazy drunk.
Soon, I was raking
past mud, past stone.
Outside leaves keep falling
& my shoulders are sore
from gathering armfuls of branches.
Mother has hidden the rake.
Fiercely Blooming

In his daughter’s mind, the alcoholic father is an endangered member of the species. She likens his life span to the fierce twelve-hour bloom of certain wild hybrids. At the time of her birth, he is through with the flamboyant show her mother went knobby-kneed for. She consults scientific texts for an explanation of the slumped shape he has assumed. He has planted himself in dangerous soil, full of toxins that accelerated his brilliant burgeoning, depleted his serotonin supply. She lives in perpetual fear of his extinction.

His flaccid body refuses to die—he stalks through the garden, contaminates the healthy soil. She desires to cut her own flimsy stalk at the base—suffers diagnosis and treatment.

By age eighteen she is familiar with the mysterious workings of neurotransmitters, poisons. She no longer fears extinction—hers or her father’s.

So why is this big girl stomping around his house, ripping the pages out of her diagnostic manual, igniting her scientific texts?

She is warning her father her heart is ready to explode, to spill its spoiled fruit all over his walls.
Night Light

My father flings one arm back to switch off the hallway bulb and misses; stumbles into his bedroom.

The television on mute, his son lies curled in his wife’s arms; their cloudless faces glowing deeply in the blue light.

He kicks his shoes off, clanks his heavy watch on the night stand. Steals a pillow from the closet, sleeps on the throw rug by the foot of the bed.

*

Earlier, my father slapped my half-brother across his grinning face for eating with his fucking mouth open— for getting goddamn sauce on his chin.

He left the table, drove to a bar off the interstate and drank alone among strangers in a rubber booth; cracked his fat knuckles under the splintered table.

My father cannot stand to watch his own children eat— we use our index finger as a wall to fork rice up against, we don’t finish chewing before swallowing.

*

I wake up to go to the bathroom, the light from the hallway yellowing the crack under my door. I peek into my father’s open doorway, spy his lumped shape darkening the floor.

Sleeping in my brother’s room in my second family’s house, I do not know whose dreams I am having; why I wake up fearful for the shoeless boy forced to sleep on the floor for playing in mud.

In the next room, a woman enters my father’s dreams. Her back pressed against tree bark, she laces his tiny shoes. He wipes a tear from her sun-burnt cheeks as his father cracks a whip.
Breaking the Cycle

Fetching a pail of wine for her sick mother,
my grandmother heard a voice boom
that she would marry a beastly man
con un lloro de un oso
with a cry like a bear.

They left Puerto Rico for America with two girls
prettier than the violet’s leaning
against my great-grandmother’s headstone.

My aunt acquired meningitis
soon after they arrived,
her fever swelled for months.
They were sure she would die.

Forty-five years later, my grandparents
still tolerate her mood swings
like a silent prayer of thanks
to a wild-eyed God.

Their eldest daughter, my mother,
went to church every morning
before high school to snuff out the night’s terrors.
She later married a brute.

My grandmother wept
through Mass one morning
when I was five, warned
me hours later I would bear
two beautiful girls to a man
equally passionate for drink.

I pray my girls will pour libations on our graves,
learn to giggle with the gods.
“Christina’s World”
_After Andrew Wyeth’s painting_

Christina leans into the square wooden church wearing her long pink dress. Her slim hands form a vase beneath the solitary statue:
all night in the dark waiting for the lips to bleed or eyes to trickle or loins to fall.
Christina sees pink pale hot incense lazily drifting up the noses of the women at the well who casually disrobe and steal their men to the woods— but Christina’s home is vast and brown and dry without the sweaty rich green safety of the woods. Surrounded by wooden blocks of inescapable mortality Christina reclines on the parched ground for hours 1, 2, 3— of counting— 4, 5, 6 and finds herself drinking from the damp sweet sick green waste of a swamp.
Cupping her flowered hands to her mouth she vomits small black marbles.
As Christina awakes sudden from her swamp she recognizes a small pearl hidden in the moss of the hair damp, sick on her face and reaches one pale arm back in terror. Her elbow breaking in remembrance of nauseous moisture caught in the angled swirl of trance she bows to the horror of brown continuous 1940s Indiana afternoon.
Sweet Poison

Nicky Cruz, the born-again gangster,
gets down on his knees
and bellows the Lord’s name
in five rasping tongues.
My stepmother dips
my baby brother’s pacifier
into a zip-locked bag of sugar,
stuffs it in his mouth
to silence his wailing.
Nicky tells the story
of his father, a man possessed
by demons, who named
his four sons after himself.

Both my brothers share
my father’s name.
I want to steal the baby
from the dangerous red-haired woman
digging a frosty pink nail
into my hunched spine—
let her save my father
instead. I squeal
from the pinched pain
as Nicky summons the sinners
to accept the Lord
back into their lives.

Taking my tears for a sign,
she beckons Nicky over.
The congregation turns
its communal head as he places
a sweaty hand on my forehead
and shouts Sweet Jesus,
this young girl is opening
her heart to you today.
My brother spits out
his sugary pacifier.
I kick it down the aisle.
We are openly sobbing now.
Moment of Clarity

Waiting for the drugs to kick in, we climb up the wobbly fire escape. Drop newspapers on the blistering tar before sitting down. Read Pablo Neruda poems aloud:

three old women bathing on the seashore.
The speaker anticipates the descent of seagulls, a moment of clarity before the fall. He has been drinking red wine all afternoon, left the cafe broke.

Across the street, an old woman drops her groceries on her porch steps. She curses in Italian, shoos away the cat circling her thick ankles. I imagine her on the beach, her umbrella collapsing in the wind.

The bathing old women remind the speaker of his mother's swollen ankles, the water trapped inside. A gull swoops down, delirious. We begin our unsteady descent.
Dreaming of Marilyn, Monroe Street

Marilyn is hanging out the window of her thirteenth floor suite, a rose clenched between her teeth, beckoning my husband with a long, manicured finger.

He passes through the lobby, ascends the spiral staircase that I have littered with plastic dolls in my image.

Door number three is slick with steam. He turns the wet knob. Jumping on the bed, Marilyn shrugs off her towel; he reaches for the heart-shaped balloon she is clutching to her breasts. From the doorway I click my red heels together—the signal.

She pulls a pin from out of her hair and pops the balloon, showering him in red ants. He howls himself awake.
Sex After Graceland

In a motel 50 miles north of Memphis, legs dangling over the side of a kidney-shaped pool, a couple watches the sun set.

They have been drinking straight whiskey all day, christening their 'Fat Elvis' shot glasses in their underwear. He walks over to the parking lot, digs through the trunk of their Buick.

Last night making love she pretended they were in the Pink Cadillac. Later, dreamt of the King disrobing her in the Jungle Room, taking her in the Monkey Chair, the Indoor Waterfall running.

She has not shared these pictures with her husband, nor does she plan to.

His shadow meets hers. Carrying a rolled-up newspaper, he sits next to her, unfolds the paper and hands her a flower. Magenta, it blooms from a plastic stick. *I stole it for you yesterday, from the Memorial Garden.* She presses up against him, *Oh, baby,* asks him to help her stand up.

Back in their room, he pulls her dress over her head, unbucks his belt. She takes a swig before lying down— imagines magenta sky. Her husband's eyes: two plastic stars.
IV.
Collision

My father's cheek pulses
as he jerks the rear bumper
into the scabby knees
of a toothless punk.

He kicked the hubcap
as my father rolled
our shiny Chrysler Lebaron
through a third stop sign.

Last week, Bobby showed
me his eraser burns
while Sister Mary Agnes
lectured about the Trinity.

Mother, with her shapely hips,
is Eve. She packs apples
in my lunch. I steal a knife
from the art teacher's desk
and share mine with Jimmy
behind a tree shaking
the chestnuts off its limbs.

At the moment of impact
I focus on father's bared gums—
I want to sink my teeth
into Bobby's burns.
Reunion
*my father's visit, Denver, 1998*

When the mountain goats approach your rented car in their sickly white coats, we do not feed them.

We understand this halted landscape where human touch is hazardous.

Perhaps we feel justified by their bald patches and splintered horns, their suicidal stumbles onto the road.

You want to quit drinking—buy an avocado farm in the Everglades.

I want a faraway place to keep me from stumbling sick onto the road.

I would plant you trees with roots tougher than alligator scales.

You would hang the fruit so high I would forget it is tender under its rind.
In the Year of the Dead

I am five years into this life.
Grandmother’s apartment oozes
a yellow light. She is burning
candles for the dead. She brings
a photograph to her lips:
the policeman’s eyes are green
and cat-like, his wife lovely.
Hours ago, she received
a call from San Juan—
Jorge was shot at his desk.

Grandmother will lose
another brother that year.

*

They find a suicide note
in his wife’s handwriting.
Icons and flowers overtake
grandmother. She serves
me orange tree’s leaves in tea,
prays the rosary three times a day.

I finger the framed faces
of the dead while she sleeps;
learn to brew leaves
for the morning tea.
The Birth Performance

The night before her second miscarriage, my aunt dreams she is sitting on her porch steps when a little girl hands her a violet. Weeks later, reading outside, she encounters an ad in a woman’s magazine—a special offer on a limited-edition doll. The doll’s blue velvet stirs something unnamed in her, raises the hair on her arms. She becomes aware of her wrists’ pulsation, recognizes the face of the little girl.

The day the package arrives my aunt places the box in front of the football game my uncle watches, leaves the room. She returns with scissors and a knife, works at the box like a surgeon—cutting the tape precisely, taking care not to pierce the cardboard. My uncle turns off his game. She asks him to draw open the curtains as she pulls apart the flaps, splitting the box’s rib cage in half. Unburying the doll from tissue and holding her to the light for my uncle to see—a bead of sweat trickles from my aunt’s lip, glistens.
Woman’s Best Friend

1. Seven-years-old, I was sick of people. A limping alley cat was my best friend until one morning I found her dead on my doorstep. I poked her with a stick.

2. My grandparents housed a stray in their boiler room. I was not allowed to touch it. I slammed the door shut on its tail to hear it screech.

3. My brother and I tortured my stepbrother’s cat with pellet guns. Within weeks it was suicidal. We heard the thud when it jumped off the refrigerator.

4. After the backyard funeral I developed an allergy to cats. Ten years later I adopt a hairless. I am teaching it to shave my legs.
The Holiday Gloom

“I know when love goes// it slips through all insulation,/ forgets your name,/ becomes sky.”
-Stephen Dunn “In the House”

Three hours before you arrive
I lie on my ash-covered floor
while a friend rolls a joint
at my desk. My body glowing
in fluorescent light, I imagine
I am the razor grazing your cheek
as I stray, one last time,
over the sunken lines of your face.

She plugs in the blue Christmas lights;
we talk about the holiday gloom.
Following the slow revolution
of the record player you bought
me one year ago, my head nods
like the clown with the broken neck
I am about to give you.

She leaves the room, my eyes fix
on the wobbly blue ceiling.
Outside it’s snowing.

We don’t kiss when we meet
but hold hands, barely touching.

What I am thinking:
I would like to roll myself into the cigarette
we burned each other’s wrists with
the night before I left. Live
in the white saran-wrapped layer of skin
the hour before it blisters.
Extinguish myself in the snow.
White paper to white flesh to white flakes.

But we speak casually
about the cold.

I do not tell you what is happening
to the tattoo you designed;
afraid you will notice the black ink
my ankle is leaking
on the flurried sidewalk.
I Offer my Doctor Blood Money for a Prescription

I snatch my pink pearl purse from the mirror table. Mother is mopping the bathroom floor, a busted radio plays the *Psycho* soundtrack.

I glimpse a woman with waist-length black hair choking a pigeon below the subway platform. She is the woman bleeding on the bearskin rug in the dream where mother and I stage the suicide of Consuela and her lover. I get off at Seventh St. and jog the three blocks to Dr. Cielo’s office. Again, I am late. He is passed out on the couch for patients. Shut-eyed, he inquires what I am hiding in my pretty pearl purse. I tell him I am sick. He wants to know why the handwriting on Consuela’s suicide note matches mine.

I sink into his leather chair. I see mother bent over the cellar faucet, wringing sheets. It is useless to speak. He will never believe it was ourselves we were trying to blot out.
Buy Nothing Day

I am bored with the living and my excesses.
I have lined my walls with blue recyclable bags
full of clothes, flushed my watch, shredded
all the receipts, cards, stubs, overdue bills.

A squirrel fell down my chimney.
I fed it antidepressants. Built it a bed
of torn love letters and bra padding.

I am unlocking doors, cracking windows
praying for an ice-eyed kidnapper to steal
me away from my little literary life.
We will mate and make a home in the woods.

Our children will live and die their own lives.
Getting Out

The summer I worked in Denver
I spent my nights in the kitchen laboring
over Sylvia Plath’s surviving journals,
looking for evidence. A single entry
stood out: *Ted employs a rubber hose
to gas an injured bird. Saint man.*
*But, oh, the squawk of the stove jets.*

After her suicide, Hughes burned
the last notebook: *ash face, cast-iron poker,
big Daddy.* For six sulfur months,
she worked to mythologize him as vampire—
*drainer of blood, squasher of nests.*

*Our lady of the eggshell nerves,*
sealing herself in a London kitchen.

*

The night before I left, I found him crouched
in the closet reading my old journals.
He held his left wrist up to my face,
pulled a plastic comb from his pocket,
and drew a slash straight across.
I hurled a lamp at his head—
dug my heels
into bits of shattered bulb.
The Pact

The lovers have shoved their bed into the sloped-ceiling walk-in closet. They have been planning this joint exodus for years—have wallpapered the closet with pictures of trees greener than the pine scraping outside the small square window.

Her spine curls into the cavity of his sunken chest. She feels worms slithering into the open slits of her wrists, gliding past her shoulders and up through her skull, nestling in the grey matter. His chin rests on the knob at the base of her neck. His arms reach around her concave belly—his blood trickles down her thighs, past her knees, puddling the mattress.

She gently pulls drained veins out of his arms one-by-one; stripped cords hung to dry from the sagging clothesline in their backyard. He scoops dirt from her mouth, builds a small mound of earth for the worms exiting her slashed wrists to burrow in.

A pine cone falls, scattering needles.
Enduring Current: A Possible Dream Sequence

1. The Descent

The instructions for dream
are written in Sanskrit
on the insides of your eyelids:

Look deep into the well,
its mossy walls disturbed
by shadows,
all of them yours.
Cast a bucket down.

2. Guardian Angel

You enter the flea-market reproduction
hanging on the flowery wall
behind your canopied bed.

The floating lady guards
the boy and girl crossing
the wobbly bridge;
her long blue gown
fluttering. You trail
behind her. Blinded
by a sudden spray of cold
you clutch for rope—
one bare foot slips
between the boards.
A tap on your shoulder—
you turn and reach.
No one there—
but up ahead, a single crow
lands on twine.

3. Christmas Encounter

Fearful of the dark wings circling
your canopied ceiling, you sneak
out of the room and peek
at your mother half-tangled under covers
in a black velvet dress as you shuffle
past her open doorway. You tiptoe
down creaking stairs; spot
the round back of your father’s head reclined on the battered arm rest of the family-room couch. His left hand hangs limp above a bottle of Absolut; his right clutches the remote. A woman in red underwear pours a grey business suit a drink. He changes the channel upon your padded approach: *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.* He stumbles to the kitchen for more ice; returns with a bucketful and a glass of milk. Sitting next to him on the coffee-stained couch, you try to watch the grinch’s antics without blinking—he pours himself another drink—you whimper. He wraps you in his pinstriped pajama arms—you gulp for oxygen; your eyeballs glassy and wet as the sweaty bottle that has toppled over. The runoff puddles your mother’s dark red carpet.

4. A Warning

You are warning the man of your dreams seated in the large velvet chair by your bedside about the inevitability of disaster. He offers his usual scoff, ashes his cigarette on the carpet, sips his usual scotch. Whirling wings outside the window—you beg him to notice the slow downward spiral of the wasp beneath the lampshade, the plane crashing outside. He roughly grabs
your hands, weeps
for the passengers
on that slow-motion plane,
its scissor wings
heading towards the glass.
He wrenches you
from stiff sheets,
teaches you how to run
blindly from disaster.
The familiar staircase sags
beneath your weight.

On the street you watch
the delicate ghost of the plane,
a white moth, ascend
into a midnight sun.
The rising of your sleeping soul—
the flapping, angelic snore.

5. Christmas Confession

You lover shakes you awake;
his icy fingers trail down your exposed back.
You reach for your dress, notice
the empty bottle blazing on the night stand.
You slowly poke your head out of the black,
feel the velvet graze down your cheeks.

You run out the door, slipping on the ice patches
down the driveway to your mother’s old, beat-up car.
You turn the radio up full blast—the steering wheel
vibrates—you cannot drown out the choking
of your lover’s sobs. You roll down the windows—
flurries slapping against your cheeks from all sides—
cannot undo what he has done. You fly
past billboards of women in red lace,
men smoking cigars.

6. A Familiar Song

The scenes of Calvary run
like a pornographic film.
You are running up and down aisles
chased by drugstore effigies;
saints step down from their niches,
form a long procession line
to the Emergency Exit.
A blazing afternoon sun
on the screen—Jesus is pool side
sipping a martini, humming
My god, my god
why have you forsaken me?

7. A Visitation

You wake up in a room crowded with actors
swinging from trapezes, scarves loosely wrapped
around their necks, defining delicate jaw lines.
You try to tell yourself that all this glamour,
all these private late-night parties, cocaine deserts,
won’t save anyone. The room swells
with silence. The Star of the show floats
into the center of the room in her long blue gown.
Behind her the boy and girl from the bridge
are dressed in drag.

They lift her satin train
above the ash-covered carpet. She approaches
you in the large burgundy chair you dozed
off in, and you close your eyes—
await her platinum forgiveness.

8. A Reawakening

You return to the icy bridge
and fall to your knees. Bracing
yourself between two splintered boards,
you carefully lower your body
onto the frozen river. You know
the gleaming silver object in the distance
is an ice pick and what you must do with it.

A child faceless as a stone
smoothed by years of enduring current
looks at you from under the ice.

Your fever swelling, the river
beneath your bare knees begins to thaw.
The pick’s fierce face glaring,
you realize you must lie flat and naked
on the ice to melt through.
After your guardian angel lifts you out of cold water:
notice the sexless, porcelain child at your side. Remove the icicles from her eyes, hold her tightly to your chest. Rub her forehead; weep because you cannot erase the faint claw marks.
Poetry Reading List

- Anna Akhmatova Selected Poems
- Raphael Alberti Concerning Angels
- W. H. Auden Selected Poems
- Elizabeth Bishop Geography III
- Joseph Brodsky Part of Speech
- Joseph Brodsky To Urania
- Raymond Carver Ultramarine
- James Cummins The Whole Truth
- Mark Doty Sweet Machine
- Lynn Emanuel Hotel Fiesta
- Lynn Emanuel The Dig
- Lynn Emanuel Then, Suddenly
- Carolyn Forche Gathering the Tribes
- Carolyn Forche The Country Between Us
- Carolyn Forche Angel of History
- Louise Gluck Firstborn
- Louise Gluck The House on Marshland
- Louise Gluck Descending Figure
- Louise Gluck The Triumph of Achilles
- Louise Gluck The Wild Iris
- Louise Gluck Ararat
- Robert Hass Sun Under Wood
- Denis Johnson Collected Poems
- Julia Kasdorf Eve’s Striptease
- Galway Kinnell Imperfect Thirst
- Yusef Komunyakaa Magic City
- Li-Young Lee Rose
- Li-Young Lee The City in Which I Love You
- Philip Levine New and Selected Poems
- Larry Levis The Afterlife
- Larry Levis The Dollmaker’s Ghost
- Federico Garcia Lorca Selected Verse
- Audrey Lorde The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance
- Sharon Olds Blood, Tin, Straw
- Mary Oliver House of Light
- Fernando Pessoa Selected Poems
- Robert Pinsky An Explanation of America
- Sylvia Plath Ariel
- Anne Sexton Selected Poems
Charles Simic *Walking the Black Cat*
Gerald Stern *New and Selected Poems*
Marina Tsvetaeva *Selected Poems*
Alpay Ulka *Meteorology*