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# At the sink a knife is a tool and other poems

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AT THE SINK A KNIFE IS A TOOL AND OTHER POEMS

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A Thesis

Presented To

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Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Elizabeth Dunham

Spring 2016

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“The term category ultimately derives from the ancient Greek word *kategoria*, meaning ‘accusation’”

– Mimi Marinucci

“it has often been observed that when a knife or a nail or pin enters the body, one feels not the knife, nail or pin but one’s own body, one’s own body hurting one”

-Elaine Scarry

“it is erotic when parts exceed their scale”

-Lyn Hejinian

**AT THE SINK A KNIFE IS A TOOL  
AND OTHER POEMS**

press

i carry my poetry with my hands not  
my voice sleeps in your palm

i hear

such moments built on words  
built on silence

lingers

and lingers in the room  
briefly words could inhabit  
the quiet



the room records my sleep

for three years i slept in a music box and thought my dreams as song heard down  
every  
hall of the apartment if anyone

fortunately they were not i was trying to be bigger  
than i was a recording studio for anything  
but music

a room like the ear  
has no choice

in who it holds

### Roommate

While peeing at three in the morning, Lily met a ghost. It did not have form, as if a heavy wind had condensed itself into a body harbored before her. Never taking her eyes off of the ghost, she wiped and shakily pulled up her underwear. Quickly standing she stared before it, half naked and it naked, the kind without a body, an emptied one.

Lily stood tip-toe to the ghost's eyes, clumpy air she tried to close with her fingers, passing through him without touching at all. The air felt thick and it warmed her fingers; she decided the ghost was a him, he reminded her of her father. Her bare fingers stiffening back into the usual chill, she knew the ghost was not her father. Suddenly it occurred to her, *what if ghosts aren't dead?*

Lily took a few more hesitant toe-steps toward him with assurance. When he did not react she continued to step into him. He was smaller than she thought, her cheeks flushing, the back of her ears tingled listening to him say nothing to no one at all.

may i

unkiss  
you my lips

miss words  
whispering

out my mouth  
comes my soul  
gushing

hello  
it's nice to meet you

what if we are all

running out  
of language?

writing is  
a breed

of  
listening

at the  
bottom  
of the poem

*overwhelmed*

with my  
self

i dreamt  
my breasts  
drowned

my body

forgave  
and decorated them  
with eyes

framed white

nothing  
    except a pink  
tulip (lingers

alone  
    proudly petals  
unfolded)

before me  
my grandmother

painted  
    what she  
    loved

before me  
every sunrise

trepanation

thoughts  
are cavities

filling the nights  
of a brain

with questions

a god's  
eye view

drilled

with questions

a cave  
spreading  
empty

with paintings

seasonal sijo

our bodies do what they can together: create  
friction, cook breakfast each morning, endure the tender rain  
inside the wilderness of our selves (hides a path to spring)

chicago

whispers curiosity  
into the quiet  
of your body  
never sleeps  
windy city chews  
your nerves  
dream buildings  
taller than  
your faith

the monotony  
of each word  
and bone  
bumping  
into another  
who is  
a body? so  
soft and  
questionable  
amongst  
the sky  
scrapers

how they  
become smaller  
when you're  
inside them



back home where everyone dies

tunneled with maggots  
hatch sound  
you are rooms

infested

with pupils  
open and  
purging

*lonely*  
is possession

in a morning  
wake looking at

*you* who  
is no longer  
*i*

my brain starts rumors

once i studied the brain  
now i swim in it

i owe my voice  
to these  
eyes

do not know  
the difference

between ears  
and throat:

the body of a word is *voice*

to screech  
or sing

foggy mouth

i am all  
around me  
*makes me sick*

hand language

lamp rusts  
light  
tarnishes  
skin  
amber-peach  
heavies our  
bodies  
trying to  
be more  
than

with fingers  
bending  
into an/other's  
hands  
carry language  
better than

a mouth  
with  
holds my

bony home

my hands warmed a bowl full  
of blood                      can i lick your fever

into alone with such momentum my tongue

caged  
    inside/this people

unbearable

cinquain 1

you lie  
damp on your ears  
a bell hanging in your  
throat ringing i will never let  
you sleep

breath is the verb of a sentence

crowded  
with anger

i turn  
your head  
*miles away*

words  
wear  
me

//with resentment

i hear you bite  
your tongue

open  
your mouth  
with my fingers  
dig out

the throat  
your nerves  
have sewn  
shut

bat gardens

you took me  
to my new  
home

garden  
of tulips  
    look closer

bats  
slowly petals  
unfold

    fangs

we were eating apricots

on your front porch in june, we talked about work and how bad i was at sex.  
it's been a few years since i last tried it, not sure  
but i really think that i don't know how to be naked  
in front of a man, to be some ornamental sleeve.  
i guess it's warm in there.  
the juice of the apricot trickled down my throat.



compromise

do you  
ever find  
your self

sitting  
in front  
of a wall  
(a page)  
a wall  
(a page)

a locked  
door

two-step

my fist was once  
the language I  
spoke to you  
then not at all  
until texas  
your absence  
a fondness  
after

almost a  
decade  
between  
us dancing  
for the  
first time  
your feet

guide my  
feet step  
sometimes  
on yours  
following  
a new  
familiar

our hands  
touch  
my fist  
holding  
your hand

bone  
is gesture

possession:

a crow (eats your skin and sings  
it back to you

a pearl) learns  
to cry

learns  
to learn

this nest of spit  
and blood

for years

in the hand  
of an  
other

i touched myself

my fingers are lips

holding  
teeth  
in the order  
of my  
particular

desires:

oceans beyond  
we  
are  
absence

organized into  
dreaming

meat

contaminated

in all language

wet with  
intimacy:

the water *runs from the shore*

## Rituals

There are only two things Hunter hates most of all: burnt toast, and doing laundry. Because the list is so short, she is always reminded of burnt toast as she folds Jade's boxer-briefs; which makes for an unpleasant every Wednesday morning. However, Wednesday afternoons always compensate, Jade makes fish tacos and they spend the day watching Godzilla movies in their freshly clean underwear.

When they finally migrate to bed, it is late and springtime. Hunter sits on the bed, looking at the moon in the window, "I wonder what springtime is like on the moon."

As she elbows Hunter off the quilt, Jade counters, "I wonder what springtime is like on the rings of Saturn."

"Oh c'mon, Saturn doesn't have seasons." And she turns out the light.

On Thursdays Hunter goes to work in her kitchen, she lifts the blinds and lights a cigarette. She only smokes when she is inventing maps, it makes her feel sophisticated, which she thought made her maps sophisticated. Next she scours search engines to ensure that her ideas did not exist, and then she spends all morning illustrating them in charcoal. After a long day, Hunter ribbons the map and places it in her purse.

One peculiar Thursday night, Hunter is walking downtown with the heavying sun; at the edge of 8:30 and summer, when a disheveled tourist approaches her and asks if she has a map. Enthusiastically, Hunter hands her recent illustration to the woman, "I designed this myself."

The woman, bewildered, not finding her current or destined location on the map, asks if Hunter would guide her. Hunter opens her morning's work and hesitantly leads them out of town to a cliff, takes the woman's hand and jumped.

we are all little

rocks that climb the sky

footprints

just as black  
sound of the river:  
in a hurry

a bone sleeps

alone  
another dust

just as black

enjoys the company

cemetery a park for dead names

am i this paper? with  
my name on it i am

*my*  
possess  
deteriorating

voice  
taught to speak

my hands

once baskets  
brimming with  
language  
carved

i am  
my cage

(plumage)

a ghost rests  
atop a black  
lampshade

lightens

skeletal (architecture

inside architecture  
slowly hardens)



you (a tomb)

shackled (into  
your  
    self  
    varnished)

in turpentine  
and tar

little bells once lifted  
    your fingers  
        now (silent

                    in mine  
            a skull  
            empty)

seasonal occurrences

summer goosebumps itch your knuckles a means never stop falling in the long run spec in the sand	his face a black cat rubs the paper  of production) eventually gets bored which is longer than you	(whiskers tickle  the pinecones another
--	---	--

occasionally used as a litter box

returning home in winter

empty prairie

haunts the  
sky

swallows  
it self

inside

the nowhere  
i saw

my  
breath

brain chokes poet

all this  
convulsing is  
an awful lot  
    of work  
    kind of like

the poem

barely surviving  
    my brain

    (meanwhile  
    a man guards a woman  
    from her  
    self

cries

*please*  
    *just let me die*

in the calm  
of medication)  
eyes opening rage:

    humble me  
    a body  
    no different  
    from a rock

ars poetica

fuck me everywhere    is a bed sentence

without punctuation  
the tongue                    a familiar cage

empty

                                  hands cry  
to hear what it sounds like

notes on driving through south dakota

patchwork of abandoned-sized towns  
where people exist with blades  
of grass cloaked mountains  
that rise and trench  
before them

buffalo and cattle  
wander steeping  
pines to a prairie  
grass glowing a yellow  
that looks alive

as the pale faces  
carved into stone  
the colors the same  
as the road that winds  
with billboard reminders

that christ died  
for our sins:  
interrupting  
evidence left  
in the view  
of an eye

thursday tanka

tree frog perching on  
a leaf of basil my tongue  
so useless the sound

a post man waves me hello  
while i clip my toenails

?

next to me a sunny spring day comforted  
by the otherness: cold star monotony

if question could be praise  
what is a sun  
but a self



i fed a flower-faced bison my

hand disappears into picking  
bark off a green  
forest of stars

disembodies  
the stillness

(my veins  
a shredded sky

for a moment  
forgetting)  
how to die

mostly i am pages anxious with turning

don't tell me how to read  
a poem

        i found  
in my bedside table  
        my teeth

        sealed  
jaws  
warm  
        with opening  
        the usual

desolation

        an empty bag  
        of words

at the sink a knife is a tool

how do you use  
a language

i never had one  
before

now

the neurons  
in my fusiform  
gyrus

tell me this word is

*(blood*  
remembers

its face  
even)

outside of skin

the knife's  
reflection:

a mouth  
moving

bone broth

now your body is your absence hardened  
a little more each day I scavenge

for intention    for embrace

with the broth  
    of your bones soaking  
        into my skin

after two years

on the phone i

hear my mom  
smoking and/or  
dying she

doesn't know  
the difference  
patiently

i think

about what  
she'd think

if she ever  
read how  
she dies

steady and with  
intention

i watch

mountain sijo

dreary june morning: the window blinds drape sun lines  
across your nipples pebbled against a cotton sleep-shirt  
mountains that soften when warm or forgotten

## Birthday Party

*Who the fuck actually eats Raisin Bran?* Mona dealt with her distaste by biting her lip which began to drip blood down her chin. The woman paying for her groceries coughed with intention and refused to make eye contact with Mona, who proceeded to bag her blood with the groceries.

Her mother's favorite food was red grapes. Growing up, Mona would watch her pick one at a time off the vine and swallow it whole. She stared as each one crawled down her mother's throat into her stomach, the last place Mona was alone. Upon the lump disappearing, Mona wished she was a grape.

Eventually the bleeding stopped and out the window had become dark. After turning in her name tag and apron to her manager she began to walk home. The double sliding doors opened to air not as heavy on her cheeks as she expected, a mistake Mona often made at night. Her eyes bored with the path she always took, counted houses draped with icicles glowing from nearby streetlights.

When Mona was only three or four years old, she used to wander the hallways of her house confused and looking for her home. Her father often found her lying on her back below the triangular window in the attic. When he asked her what she was doing up there all alone, she would continue to stare at the sunlight held in the window, her pupils' gaze lighter than the dust hanging lazily before her. When she did not get up, he would shoo the particles away with his hands and fold her knees to her chin, carrying her like an empty basket down the stairs.

Almost slipping coming up the eroded concrete steps to her door, Mona let herself fall inside, immediately kicking her shoes and socks off before walking into the kitchen, annoyed. Opening the fridge, she grabbed an orange and began to peel it with her fingers.

Her hands, new to the orange, forgot the fridge door would not shut itself. Before returning to close it, Mona looked at it skeptically and walked off into the dining room leaving behind her a trail of skin. She sat on the decrepit mahogany floor holding the orange in her left palm, closing into a fist. The orange, at first, resisted her fingers burying themselves inside of it, juice crawling down fingers with gradual acceptance.

i am my body is a poem

drowning my way into this  
mouth opening  
an ocean

i collect

words and have nothing  
to do with them



karate taught me voice

the brain is  
a muscle

unconscious  
a ghost

writer  
cannot be tamed

negotiate body into  
hearing  
the touch

of not  
just my own

words  
blackening

a page like  
the eye

of my fist's  
desire

teething tanka

i lick the bones that  
i can grinders we forget  
how primitive our needs

peel my skin into the trash  
climb into this pulsing cave

in the window seat of an airplane

anonymous glowing  
gently below who  
are you  
hope?

looking down clouds  
remain clouds  
from below

the isolating in  
between-ness  
of flying  
over  
whelming  
hope that  
stars also  
glow

below  
you

i kissed a log

citizen of nowhere  
    hidden  
in the rockies

my wooden bones  
rot me softer

the culture of form through the eyes of a body

lick the pupil

taste me: flavor  
of light

ultraviolet at best

i am flailing sound

your ears  
like

but don't know

why

the poem like the body

swallowed  
in form

raking the white

into  
clot

sleepy with intention the roots

are neatly folded ground the winter eats  
*you*

is a condition of  
eyes

that given the choice  
would disappear

slowly  
mouth  
it out

weave  
your self a word  
like digging

## VITA

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