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Three for a girl

Danielle K. Weeks

Eastern Washington University

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THREE FOR A GIRL

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Danielle K. Weeks

Spring 2016

THESIS OF DANIELLE K. WEEKS APPROVED BY

DATE _____
PROF. CHRISTOPHER HOWELL, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

DATE _____
DR. JONATHAN JOHNSON, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

DATE _____
DR. YARO NEILS, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

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THREE FOR A GIRL

I.
GIRL

Lot's Wife

Some say it was the unfiltered sight of God, or angelfire
burning out all her water, or maybe it was just her looking back,
wanting what she was supposed to forget.
It's hard to say. Yesterday I wanted to find her in the new city,
maybe waiting at a crosswalk, maybe feeding
a meter downtown, her hair pulled up. I wanted
the time we sat in her car and talked about what else we could make
out of living. She lit another cigarette.
I wish people didn't need lungs, she said through the smoke,
and we talked about whether it was better
to die young or end up made of metal, the worn-out pieces removed.
Think about how much a day burns. Think of the body: nine gallons of water,
a three-inch nail, forty teaspoons of salt. We never knew
what to make of it all. Each morning
I have to drink two glasses of water before I can even speak,
my back turned to negative space, still memory. I wonder how long
she stood on that hill, skin sloughing off a little more each hour,
worn down by the weather. Here is my body that wants to be nothing,
simplified to salt and iron, water washing down the lost.

Proselytizer

Offers thin green testaments
to any open hand. Says nothing,

shapes the air with wanting:
take it, take it and understand.

A woman shifts her plastic bags
to one hand, reaches out to him,

tucks a book next to the shadow
of eggs and bread half-crushed.

I should take one, too, and say
I know what it is like to want

someone, anyone, to take away
this inherited human heaviness

thin brick by brick. I would cut
my body down, bind my stories

to a hundred spines, hand myself
out to anyone who might believe.

Tortoiseshell Woman

Outside the grocery store, red coat closed with tortoiseshell buttons, tokens of a life that opens only when lifted, dropped from a great height. No snow this winter, just trees wearing silver-ice sleeves. Sometimes I dream my arms break clean off for no reason, drop to the floor like sleeves, and I tell myself this is just the way the world is. One winter, she stood outside the garage in her red quilted coat and grieved nothing she could name. The next hour she was back inside, wearing her smile and everything tucked behind it. I want to ask her if she believes that suffering always has a purpose, or if she too struggles through the morning, carried along by a body that means to break her open, consume the dark she keeps.

Edible Daughter

Steam-bodied mother, water hissing hot
into the sink whenever she washed her face
heaven-soft with almond oil and raw honey,
the kind that crystallized when cold.

Her buttery hair, slick-dark as my guilt
for the chewing gum and abandoned creed
I pressed behind her ears while she rested,
her knuckles and eyes red from shaping
and watching dough that never rose right.

This is my body, given to wrong heat; this is
her lips sticky with black flecks from the ruined
toast I made and she made better by scraping
its face clean over the sink. Quietly consumed
before I could try again, make it right or nothing.

Sewing for You

You must not have learned it from your mother,
her nurse's hands a cat's cradle
of blood and thread, tied to fixing others.

Or your father—who am I to say
that he had less to mend than she, or never
felt a broken thing give way

to needles: all under, over, under, over, neat
as language never spoken.

What can I say, now—on the couch, your feet

across my thighs as you sink to sleep.
How else can I explain the way my skin and blood
complicates with you, a deep

pulling at my seams. I can't even see your face,
can take up only your damaged coat,
thread a needle, sew the missing button in place.

Omnivore

Just your basic omnivore, skin and stem
on the tongue, blood-and-nectar feeder.
Call me all-eater. Call me devourer
of the dead, eater of hearts, crocodile
smile and lion-wild hair. Don't you worry
about a thing, here, take and eat my eyes,
which count as both meat and plant
if you think about it, that seed-black center
searching for light. I'm all about giving
as much as I get. Let's take a look at you.
Let's share what we have, leaf-thin skin,
sighed-out sap, the salt on our fingers.

Two for Joy

I have an appointment with your collarbone
connects to the breastbone connects to ribs, cracked
too much to laugh or breathe last year but now
let me tell you about never going home again, lost
in pulse bend move breathe. Show me reflex,
kick all my glass against the wall and I'll line myself
with that crashed refraction, weave green
and blue and clear hard edges into my hair, tuck
your warmth around my twig-thin body.
There's always other tissue holding bones together
ligament tendon space to keep them from ruining
each other as long as they can. I can't vow myself metal
eternal but it's better than nothing, better as two
beaks in the maple laughing off each other's noise.

August

Even now I think she was sacred, grease
running down her wrist, dark underneath
her fingernails where she tore sugary strips
from what I carried: plates full of poutine,
mozzarella sticks, a cinnamon elephant ear
almost golden under the fairground sun.
Both disfigured in the heat, our sweat ran
new tracks down our temples, lips, chins.
I should have known our memories work
this way, too, the old reborn every seven years
in sugar and oil. Both of us always searching
for impossible fullness, pretending our rituals
of salt and oil were more than an ache to survive.

Trash Day

Two knotted garbage bags
on the corner, lumpy-soft
with old toys: ripped feet
spilling calm white beads,
years of skin cells and sleep.

I've already tried the obvious,
shook them all over boiling water
and waited for a young girl
to rise, a homunculus holding
my soul in a green-bound book.

She would be all leadlined color,
stained glass waiting for light.
If I cupped her next to my ear,
she could spell every god's name
backward and forward, easy.

She might have even known why
I have to close the blinds when
the garbage trucks start collecting
or why the dog down the road
barks at every noise without a face.

Outdoor Education

I've lost all the names: flower, tree, bird,
constellation where a woman is trapped
upside down, her supernovaic pain bent
into language. There used to be songs

for naming how we hold the living
in our mouths. Unfiltered water tasted
like sanctuary, summer; picking stones,
toads, and goose feathers from the trail.

How many girl hands have folded up home,
found a new shelter in something porous?
How many stars have shivered their last
as girls connected the dark between them,

made one timeless body? There's a reason
I loved the night: all turning, still chorus,
moon with only the shadow side of light
to give, star-blue belly stretched wanting,

too empty to touch. Camped in the woods,
restless, I heard our counselor call *who* raw
to barred owls that echoed only *who* back
as her flashlight burned blue on our tents.

Even at night, the mosquitoes found us
in our dark clothes, our second skins.
We got used to the itch: blood as being,
as proof a body is full enough to give.

Io

Jupiter's fire-skinned moon:
ugly as an orange left too long,
molded white and green, her reds
stirring new flesh from brimstone
under the planet's furious eye.

Better to be a turned into a cow
and cursed with a swarm of biting flies
as she wanders some old earth

than circle slowly in this nothingness,
everything in her
burning for grass, slow moving skin,
water in her atmosphere.
Just another lonely body
hanging in the dark, molten
metal heart wanting.

How awful to be someone
else's heaven. How awful
to be always caught
in your own remaking,
forced to keep turning brightly
to the weight that holds you.

Lexington Horse Mania

The Starry Night whirled across a horse
of fiberglass and paint. Another bore the ocean
on its iridescent hide, a mane of cresting waves
that never crashed. *This is the saddest thing*,
my sister said as she traced its jeweled eyes,
its body frozen in rest without release.

My favorite horse was bolted down
and wore a coat of junk, brass and steel,
glued-on gears and washers, hinges, wrenches,
the number seven from a forgotten door.
All this extra other collecting, guarding
a hollowed middle and a metal heart.

The horse's shoulder under my hand
trembled with traffic or the longing for home
that thundered hot in my bones
like phantom hooves in the street.

The white-fenced lawns of Lexington
were not where we belonged, my sister
with her dreams of water, my body
already too full of running in circles.

My sister brushed her hands along a brick neck,
mortar painted blue like lines on a map
of a world made easy: all straight roads and corners,
the beginning clear and painless as the end.

Obituary

This paper-thin woman, pulped down
with yellow notes, old birthday cards
kept in a shoebox under her bed, essays
and drawings once taped to her mother's
kitchen cabinets. Obsessed with bones
when she was eight—a penciled report
about mammal skulls explains how some
creatures learned to grow horns from hair
instead of bone, their rough points separate
from the skeleton. Who knows, now, how
she used to practice braiding her hair without
a mirror, so she could shift skins, pretend
to weave hair-hard horns down her back.
No soft rope for her, no way to drag her back
by the roots. She dreamed of oxen, woke
hauling on her chest those dry summers
on the porch with her mother, the snick
of trimming scissors, curled clippings
brushed into grass with a weathered broom.
Who knows which bird or crawling thing
made something of it all, in the end.

Anniversary

The farmers' market, strawberries and salt,
a rain of longing on the back of my tongue.
Two girls, eleven or twelve, somersault
along the booths. Dust in their hair, young
enough to never be alone, one pair of shoes
between them while they run to find the band.
Harmonica and banjo twang the blues;
ain't no sunshine when I reach for her hand
and find it gone. Those days we used to dance:
her shaky laugh wet with sweat and lime,
our bodies caught in a tarantismic trance
as if a drum were the cure for losing time.
And I know, I know the slow fall of sound,
girls who make dust-angels in the ground.

Kids' Guide to the Universe

Girls of a certain age always tear and bite
each other's shoulders, arms, hands, hair.
This time, they're made of candy, dyed sweet
and corrosive colors. Last time, they were alligators,
growling like dogs while I stopped myself
from telling them alligators don't growl.

I try to read them a book about stars,
but they're turning their arms
into marker-red peppermint sticks,
busy building their washable selves.
Smart, to make yourself something
you can wash down the sink and forget.

I try to read from page twenty-seven,
which talks about how the sun is a star
that will one day collapse, burn itself out.
Sometimes I think about burning down
my house, going dark. But the sun lowers
its aching red chest so gratefully into the river
each night. Maybe water is the way to go:
call down rain, open taps, block drains.

I turn to a page about the size of the universe
and try to think how I might explain
something like this, so they understand.
Think of the world as a swimming pool,
think of yourself as a drop of water,
think of yourself as a grain of sugar,
think of black, think of everything else opening
a hundred thousand empty mouths.

Philomela

Three a.m., the baby in a knotted bag
in the kitchen. How could she forget?
How could a body unhappen and stop
just like that? She digs through trash

but it's only chicken, after all, the same
old night trick. Every sleep for months
haunted by a body that never existed,
owls outside her window turning wings

into impossible fingers, shedding to pink.
Ten years ago, this might have been God
sending her a message, something about
the next step she was supposed to take

or where she'd gone wrong. But now night
is full enough without that kind of thought,
hours made neverending, her mind looping,
back and back until even the smallest pain

is her face trapped in the table's polished
juniper grain. Nothing else moves. She wants
just one myth to turn true, prove that women
can be cursed into birds, forget to be human.

Groundwave

Yesterday I was a groundwave,
hovering but never touching the gray
stretch of sidewalk outside my house.
Something like a soul crawled into my ear,
called out to my brain, and moved on
when no one answered.

When I was five, my mother wrote my name
and address on clothing tags, shoe tongues, inside
my backpack so at least someone else might know
where I belonged, if I forgot the number of turns,
if I forgot how to spell out who I was.

She said don't be afraid to ask for help
if you get lost. Try a policeman, a pastor,
one of the better strangers. Now they'd find
an empty neck, my tags cut out. I wouldn't know
where to start. How do you ask someone for absolution

for being alive? How do you say, Stranger,
there's been a mistake. I'm not supposed to be here.
Do you know where I go now? Can't you see the red
horizon, the curvature of the earth bending away
from me like breath rising off glass.

Oil Portrait

Red curl at the temple, dip into black
to drag down the jaw. It's an old game:
create a thousand faces until you find
the one that makes your name worth

something. This one can't stop laughing,
this one clutches pearls to her throat
as though hers is the shell that shapes
slow beauty. Water alone cannot clean

my hands—these strange yellows, reds,
and blues I always try to make familiar.
Rub baby oil and salt across my palms,
the painted patches of another woman

covering my skin. There is something
in me hanging on the wall, her body
of quick, jagged color that makes sense
only if you step far away and look back.

Recovery Strategy for the Magpie

After a day of small salvations: blue glass bottles
on the windowsill, willow charcoal ground into the carpet,
smudged on her heel. Brain-to-body, she should know
herself well in the mirror, scratch out her lips and eyes
on butcher paper, smear the shadows on her face.

It's not right. Try paint, graphite, ink.
How do you spit out the human voices
caught in your throat like a cough? Do you drink tea,
take purple medicine, swallow a grass-wreathed bird?
Outside, the panic grass moves like a scream.
She wakes on an April night clutching
a new self, silver as moon-slicked bone.

Glass Girl

I am twinned in the window
across the street, one body
ghosting the in-door and one
body out. She belongs to me,
both, although I feel nothing
when I raise her glass arms
to tie back her hair. As last

November, when I ran ten miles
in the negative dark. Other legs
must have ached, other hands
gone shiver-sweat numb
while I ran out, almost nothing
on my body. It was only later
inside morning that I owned
my blue hands, rough throat
raw and real enough to lose.

How can I move from here,
watching myself open, shut
from this distance as other
hands reach, pause, touch.

Persona

The other half of your face
 is sleeping somewhere else—
 the abandoned bus station,
 a cheap motel, on the rocks
 by the river. You are missing
 her like a mirror misses silver.
 How can you know anything
 without her, fierce and simple
 as teeth in a mouth. She will
 not come back on her own.
 You have to starve her out.
 Turn all your food to water,
 drink your blood to a river.

She'll wake to each muscle
 growing its own stomach
 and know that, once again,
 you've forgotten how to feed
 without her. *Stupid child*,
 she'll say, and put herself
 inside your hands, open
 every movement's mouth,
 make you swallow white
 sugared sun, the meat
 carved from human touch.
 She is the one who laughs.
 She is the one who knows

you couldn't do this alone.
 She'll come. You can let go.
 She'll use your legs, walk
 outside. People will notice
 something about your face
 has filled itself in—not
 as obvious as a glass eye
 where there was none, not
 even something as small
 as a healed cut—your face
 like a newlywed's. Someone
 always waiting. Someone
 who shares your name.

Glass Delusion

For two hundred years people knew they were made of glass
and wouldn't sit down on marble or brick, the unyielding
surfaces of the world. Ask Tchaikovsky or King Charles VI
about the fear of being touched, your head cracking off
in looping visions, fearing everything that moves. Yesterday
I stayed in my room when I could, dressed myself in three layers,
drank hot water and light. I couldn't tell you about my body,
how I kept waiting for flesh to fall from cold mirror bones,
how the air felt flat, pressed dry in a book, no water left
to keep the dead away. I couldn't think of a way to tell you
I've condemned myself for waxing dark, turning outside
my satellite self, looking down to see if this bending finger
is mine, this structure is one I've had for years, red rot and air.
Ask the glass woman who pointed to a hospital window
and said *Like that—I'm there, and I'm not there* to explain
how the body makes itself disappear, how the opening up
and closing shut is in someone else's hands, out of control.

Three for a Girl

Gone evil, gone out the morning
gold door without a body, all bird
angles and red glass riot. Let her
be light. Let her leave the pink legs
on the bus, on the street,
on an elevator going sky-close.

In sixth grade all the girls gathered
in one room to talk about what makes
a body. Someone asked how do you know
it's the right time, someone asked
what happens if you get pregnant,
someone asked what if the blood
never stops. What I have to say is not

an answer. Go to sleep, shed inside
out of yourself for seven years until
the cells build a new girl, maybe she
will know, maybe she can tell you
about the real layer:

powder-pink eyelid folding open
and the young star exhaling gold
out of cold black, carrying no sound.

II. BODY

Holiday Song

Now the lights coiled white in dogwood trees, the graying father at the door,
now the wooden angels on the walls.

Now the suitcase in the childhood room, the glow stars dead on the ceiling,
now the dog that barks at nothing.

Now the forsythia shedding its opposite leaves, the sky lifting its hoary lid,
now the cardinal blushing the maple.

Now the groceries in unfamiliar places, the bent faces on the refrigerator door,
now the recipe unfolded like a prayer.

Now the cornbread casserole between us, the empty hands unclasped,
now the wine without its blood.

Now the sleepless midnight, the firewood breaking black and white,
now the glass burning.

Now the Sunday morning under sleep, the mother's song outside my door,
now the hymns a half-step down
from the notes I remember.

Piano Recital at New Harmony Church

No God here tonight, just black-dressed girls
and a piano pressed under a hundred fingers.
Its black back yawns open, hammer to string,
hammer to blue pines shaking out their voices
in their sleep. My sister climbs red-carpeted stairs,
steps on stage to build a song about a dream.
I can fit into her clothes. We are nothing alike.
All of us here become wooden-backed people
with gold-lit lips, metal mouths. Her song asks
what listens at the altar, what circles the church
with polished teeth. Imagine trumpets, mutes
shoved down bells, trombone slides locked still.
No God-bright brass, just hushed breath
like violet sand, water foaming out of sight.

Mother Tongue

Here is one character: summer Pacific sewing itself up your blue jeans one sighing stitch at a time, ink-dark body marking a jagged white line on your thighs, above your blood.

Your blood in the heartland,
landlocked mother and father singing hymns to a spirit of restlessness
note by note, wind on the sea of scarecrow fields, stitched-up mouths.

Here is another: your body coaxed up the mountains by roots climbing over themselves to awaken into words. The sun a note holding whole as it scrolls over your blood.

Your blood calling from yesterday,
your parents three zones, three notes down. Jagged song in the ink-dark
sea between us, stitched-up mouths climbing over themselves for words.

Small Talk

Across the country, father is all voice,
wooden air chipping out the same old
*how was your weekend, did you see
the pictures your sister sent, anyway
I flew again yesterday, got sunburned
mouth-pink.* Let's talk about normal
living, mother, or how today I thought
about growing out my ink again, full
as it used to be when I was a kid, but
there was that winter, mother, when
we pinned God to the basement wall
and tucked our tongues under carpet.
What if we cracked open everything
the way other people do, new cellular
talk, not afraid to say, today I thought
how the remaining years seem circled
already, another ring not worth living,
and what do you think, father, about
leaving our small hometown with its
same old bluish day, coiling up again
and around itself, running out of air.

News

You took the meat off the clothesline
and buckled it in the car, drove it home
to me. Dipped in salt and sun-cured,
it shrunk itself into a hard shape, refused
to speak although we draped a blanket
across its shoulders, made it a cup of tea.
What did we do wrong, you said
as I chopped vegetables for dinner,
boiled water until it sounded like the dead
talking to one another without tongues.

Don't Say

My sister came home with blue lips
one day after biting a pen to breaking,
and the color took two days to wash
off. In the meantime, she was dead
around the mouth—sometimes still
the same blue shadow stains her lips,
now, when she tells me about her day
like an optimistic pamphlet unfolding
in a patient's hands. How careful we are
not to wound each other with our own
breaking. She tells me about a recipe
for butternut squash soup, not the small
triumph of cooking again. I tell her
about the new blanket a friend made
for me, not the ten pounds sewn into
the fabric to weigh down my nerves
when they start to burn and drift
like ash. One day we might talk about
the toxic red limb that grows inside
a brain, keeps growing back even after
you amputate and eat it every morning,
grows back into its space of shadowed
phantom pain. She might tell me how
every morning feels like a trial;
some law has been broken, but no one
can tell you what it is, only that you
should be ashamed of what you've done.

Cargo

This one is always empty, she says,
wiping sweat from her chest
as outside her bedroom windows
the two a.m. freight's braying
hollows the pines.

Cargo train schedules taped to her walls,
the moon turning black with
what's supposed to happen

whenever train wheels
scrape along her sleeping bones
and twist into her
fear of tornadoes, knowing
the two sound the same.

Nightmare rust and shriek link up—
inevitable branches clack and rattle, close.

Cure

Her gaunt cheeks said sickness,
some parasite silvering her skin
in its hunger. How much color
can you take from someone
before there's no returning it?
We lowered her in a bath of
steaming honey, red beads,
anything with color that runs.
Outside: still afterworld, snow.
Tired weather buried itself on
roofs. We appealed to candled
saints, burned wick and water
for her. At night, she walked
alone through the house,
gathered glass bottles, hand
mirrors, broke ice off the front
steps and made a shivering nest
with the rest of the nothing,
rubbed it into her legs and feet
like a painter with dirty brushes
driving out leftover oil with oil.

Tornado Alley

Between two disasters: limp-necked rabbit
on the doorstep and green-lipped funnel
in the northern sky. I didn't know

what to do with death, yet, how to hold
a cold body long enough to let it go
without taking into yourself its nothing.

The rabbit was only cat's kill, a gift,
but I searched for meaning in anything animal,
blood against the door as a kind of prayer.

Checklist: emergency survival kit, distilled water,
ten glass-jarred candles, all burning vanilla.
Maybe I needed be a first-born son for blood to work.

Maybe this was God—a sky-long arm
that chooses destruction over loneliness, drags
the living over a rough gray carpet, into his room

like the room I had as a child: smooth gray walls,
shadows twisting away, soft blue light
while my brain hallucinated into a new day.

A friend once told me your brain can't dream faces
on its own. It strips them from people it passes over
during the day, gives them new names and stories

like a child playing pretend. How many nights
have I torn apart his face apart in sleep, searching
for an unknown question. All I can do for now

is put on sunflower-patterned gardening gloves
and bury the rabbit in the backyard,
watch all night until the sky howls itself to sleep.

One for Sorrow

From Steptoe Butte, the palouse is a ruined thing,
paper left out in rain, buckling as it dried.
Standing on four hundred million years
makes a nothingness in air, an empty weight—
no traffic murmur, no insects sawing their legs
in the dark, combed hills weak enough for the wind
to chisel their gentle rise and fall.

My brain keeps trying to fill in the blank hills
with ghosts of pine trees and bright geraniums
like how I still have dreams about the dead woman
from four years ago running parallel to me
through even lines of red trees.

Mountains bruise the horizon, unearthly
rows of windmills watching, blades turning
an unknown wind, and I wait for them
to move in sync, just once. Down below,
a lone magpie folds herself into a scrubby tree
and somehow lives this way.

Chromatic

Say a vodka cranberry yes plastic is fine
kind of sentence today, nothing that risks being
misunderstood. Outside the office's smudged glass
door, where last week a heart attack black bag body
left in strangers' hands, a dog waits to turn to stone.
The carpeted halls swallow words before they sound.
No one else seems to notice the nothing-blue spilled
down the door like a warning or understand why
a person might need to sing scales in the bathtub
up and down for hours just to wear out the pieces
patterned into a throat for good. Washed in echo,
reverberated perfect. Nothing will ever end.

First Beach

Sister and I, salt in our teeth, sighing
backs against skeletal ash,
its washed-up trunk carrying more rings
than anyone could wear.

Sharing brown beer bottles
tilting emptily in sand, the beached red buoy
down the shore
waiting for sun to drown
in a flash of green.

Something dark tethered in the belly of the sea:
hair-clumps of waving kelp
or seals undulating their smooth bodies
like women spilling out of themselves,
water and shadow rising white,

horse-maned waves
tumbling to their gray knees
at our feet.

Claustrophilia

Sunday morning: worshipping with a program
playing on the home improvement channel
about building tiny houses, folding
a person's living down and down
to fit inside one hundred square feet.
Every space is meaningful there: sleep
stacked above wooden bookshelves, a chair
for dreaming in the light of every window.
The kitchen's single coil burner, salt
and oil glowing on the windowsill,
the walls of nested drawers, eggshell white.
This is where the body boils away
too small for feeling anything too deeply.
This is where to go for wholly being:
a finite space, a ladder to the ceiling.

Paintfree Dent Repair

Call now if you've noticed
violence left in your metal,

a rusting scar in your skin.
By now you're surely sick

of the usual wash-and-paint
evening routine: steam off

the slick brushed-on body
where no one can see you

prime your surface in layers
of practiced reds and blacks

tracing the same old shapes
you've memorized: almond

eyelids, snapped-bow lips.
Well, have we got a solution

for you. Come in, take a seat,
and show the face you're tired

of fixing, bent-down mouths,
sun-scored cheeks that cost

too much to maintain anymore.
We'll melt you down to carbon,

oxygen, and the rest, shape
your old damage into diamond

or steel—simpler being, nothing
that's ever known its own face.

Four for a Boy

Youngest of four, named
after my father, so why not
be boy, be a bald mountain
fire-stripped and clean.

Here's my head
pinned to the ceiling, carved
with orthodox metal,
my furred jaw yawning
to its yellow root.

I'll spit out the headsick
clippings of girl like cut grass
caught in my teeth, summer
smell of distress. When I walk,
I'll keep my hands stone still
so no one hears my wrists
clinking in thin red chains.

The Allowable Body

When the starved dog turns inside out
to find meat. When the table's wooden
grain pulls apart to spell its own name.
When the beginning curves. When ice
gets tired of zipping up steam or rain
for company, wants to ring around God
in peace. When the blueprint is finally
approved and the materials have been
waiting under the earth this whole time,
sprouting eyes and knotted limbs, beaks
tapping at shells. It is not what anyone
expected, in the end, not made normal
even with metal and heat. When each
state of being fakes its death, runs away.
When the ending. When ice steam rain.

Reynaud's

Bells came down heavy
as gold in water running
away from dead-blue

fingers. Winter disease,
my mother calls it, white
fingers and toes when

weather drops its burden
into human bodies. Put
your fingers in your mouth

if they start to die. Take
and eat the blue weight
of coming back by blood,

white turning blue turning
red until no one could tell
anything had ever been

wrong. Baptism by heat,
any kettle-hot whistling
waters of a body, bells

clang inside a brain
only when the dead
come back into color,

not when they should,
not when the numbness
first takes a hand, finger

by finger, bends each
joint white as if looking
for information hidden

in a body losing hold.

Five for Silver

There is some silver-lined space in fives and tens
if you know how to talk to it, know each second's
name, like how yesterday I wouldn't leave the house
until 6:31 became 6:32 because you know what happens
when you leave any left over—have to divide it out until
you find its fractured name, no place to keep it except
your mouth like your last breath before drowning.
See how the equation for peace never stays still, hides
in hours and elements and steps, and if you don't
keep up, it might crawl into an air duct, never find
your mouth again, so here's to ninety-seven steps
to the doorway, here's to six o'clock being divisible
by three and two, here's to another pretty pattern
maker caught in their own sharp stitch.

Leaving Prayer

Lock and bolt the door, ask the dead chimney's crows
if there's a word for the feeling of forgetting something
as if they would know, anyway, every day's iridescence
tucked to the breast.

Walk through cold white sun, your skin shivering out
oily blues and violets feather-pointed behind your step.
Crows cross over. Know there isn't a word for forgetting
that devil who spells

its name dark down your neck and back, hanging
on your spine when you wake, hollowing out color
from your sunless mouth. You never could name
something's absence

when absence was everything and that devil kept
calling like a crow for your ghost. Know light keeps
the named and dark the nameless, the ones you always
keep forgetting.

Animatronic Methuselah

Let's talk about the time you visited that museum themed on the creation of the world, and all around, automatons dressed in animal skins moved metal jaws, repeated recordings about sin and death as if they had any idea how a body falls apart. Adam and Eve couldn't speak, their lips painted plastic, tongues never made inside their mouths. A damned shame, you said, since you wanted to ask them how God fit four and a half billion years of decay into a body just six thousand years old. You said you wanted an argument—and that was all—but I remember sometimes in the middle of the night I'd find you upstairs in the red armchair, your movement rusted still with feeling like you were a thousand years old, like someone tried to program your body younger but forgot about your brain, its dark oceans boiled to nothing, patiently waiting to collapse into light.

Animal Grief

You want to leave your body
the way you leave your face
in the mirror every morning,
silver-backed and specular
light-print hitting the glass
again and again and again

like a bird cracking its neck
against itself, leaving quick
and necessary as blinking.
You want to leave your body
the way an animal abandons
its sick young, for the good

of everyone, a healthier dark
bending down to swallow you
full. They say living is a circle
of breaking down and reflecting
back and you want to leave
your body, this mirror-being.

They say you should leave
the body for others to touch
death silvering hard and cold
or else they won't understand
what you've become, won't stop
searching in circles for you.

Beginning

Stripping off hard-wired sleep, I say
bring into my board, oh little one, a brick
with all the colors

overwhelm this voicing skin
in the corner. Stack a new city
in walls soft enough
to ask the fried yellow wheel
about the turn of legless bodies.

Fever child,
don't you know
about the million red
sand-small bones morning
out a metal heart.

Good Morning

This morning I cut the devil off my neck
and watched him drip into the sink limb
by viscous limb, his face still inscrutable
after all this time, his gray sludge still real
enough to clog the drain. So I scooped up
his eye with a floral-patterned paper cup
and drank and drank the lips, the fingers
tapping down my throat, my stomach full
and barren as a grave. This is how it goes.
Two summers ago, the boy allergic to bees
kicked rotten crabapples until the stings
in his feet stopped closing up his throat.
No one believed him. But I saw the violet
pins in his ankles, his hard-won bare feet.
I saw the re-ordered air open around him.

III.
GHOST

The Love Lives of Trains

Outside the window, like a phone call
 from a friend who walks home
 at the same time each night, giants
 whistle through the lonely
 precise hours. No need
 for arms when all their holding
 happens in their chests, no legs
 except the blurred bridges
 they borrow, thighs tagged
 with neon-yellow lost loves.

There is no one out there
 for them. No algorithms made
 to match them by common interests:
*I like moving inexorably
 along the same paths, over
 and over, I like short runs
 above the beach, I like
 when the knees rust out,
 drop me spineless into the river.*
 There is no one like them.

Sometimes their noise
 is self-conscious, as if
 they are embarrassed
 by their necessary howls,
 their artificial breath
 disturbing the cold.
 Mouths full of stone,
 steel, nothing that knows
 how to rot. They never wanted
 any of this.

They would trade
 their hollow organs for hands,
 trade a renewable body
 for lips to blow warmth
 back into their fingers
 when the cold comes down,
 when no one else will look
 at the man who tries to pay fare
 with a fish, his rattled eyes
 pressed under too much slow weight.

Twin Bridges

Three a.m., summer warm and sleepless, driving
to the Twin Bridges, where last month an old woman
parked her car and jumped. They found her
on the rocky edge of Indiana, water pushing away
her ghost, name stitched to birdbone, spirit trapped in dust.

I could have asked her about evening meditation, sweating out
the morning, dusting off whatever light would listen.
It's come to this: driving from Indiana to Kentucky,
sifting the devil through the latticed metal bridges.

Maybe I'll pull off to the side and try to find
that shadow pacing at the dirty water's edge, give a shape
to the dust scraping through my blood. Tell me why water
won't keep the dead. Tell me nothing is what it believes.

Selkie

You'll have to keep a bucket
by her bed, let her dip her hair
in seawater every hour

lest she turn to air
for freedom, string herself
from the ceiling like dried flowers.

To keep her, you'll have to hide
her coat somewhere dark and latched.
She'll ask, *Do you ever feel*

*you were supposed to be born
as something else?* And you
will not know what to say

unless you, too, have woken
to the weight of wrongness,
needing a skin you can't find.

Knuckled Months

I am going to disappear in July
so I tap out the months on my knuckles,
thirty days hath September, April, June,
and November, trying to figure out
if I have one day left, or two. I might leave
my shape in the air, on the carpet, memory
as buried skin, that old ghostly fear left
for someone else to find, keep as a reminder
of what has been or a warning
of what still exists. I throw out the milk,
bread, and eggs left in the refrigerator
because I am afraid of the red stitching
and slow growth rooting down, closer
and closer to the deep earth every day.
What have I become, bones yawning, wanting only
to lie down inside a silver-plated mirror.
I want a body like the first feelings
of sleep, caught between
weightlessness and hallucination, the last
pieces of living close enough to lose.

Wisp

Someone left a light in the trees
so I followed it, let my ribs turn
to salamanders, my skin to rustling
wings. I always wanted someone
to tell me where I was going. Before,
I started each day lifting gray eyelids
from where they dragged on the floor,
combed dead leaves from my lashes.
Say some are blessed with blindness
and I'll say curses are what make
the living. Now I am the light and its lamp,
a blue body hung in the air, calling lost
eyes to the root, the water, the dog's mouth.

Inheritance

White ceramic girl
on the shelf her hollow head
filled with dried eyelids
papered yellow-pink. Black stems
from her mouth grows ceiling-still.

Process

You're pulled up to the red curb
even though you know it's for firetrucks only
and you'll get towed away soon, but
 you don't move
even after ten minutes
even after the mountain slides down into itself
and the song on the radio stops playing
 goes dead silent
no other cars on the road
not even a crumpled fast food tumbleweed crossing
 the sidewalk's broken places
know your cold body
but no one has found it
 and this stillness
is the reason you can't pull your hands off
 the steering wheel
carpets itself over your hands,
zebra-patterned, and the leather seats have taken
 your skin
a yellow wound like the worn-down road
trying to close over itself, old enough
that the normal processes shut down
 your body's waiting
to know whose hook is caught
through your voice, and why her hungry mouth
has yet
 to open
her hand and drag you up
by the neck.

Ceiling

Not even night yet and your ghost gets caught in the ceiling fan. That's what you get for standing on the bed, the way your mother told you never to do, your mother probably making tea in her socks downstairs and not getting caught in her own fixtures. You just wanted to reach up and press a planet to the ceiling. Pull matter here, the only thing you can do like living. But then chaotic arms, black feeling in your gut, you disentangling your eternal soul from mid-space spinning on and on in its mechanical circles. No time to even change the flickering bulb. Star-sputter, spin. Plink. A burning out. Your eternal soul turning green. You know you need to get it down, might need it later if you ever leave the house again. The news says four car crashes in the last hour alone. You think about driving. Black turning, snagged breath, plink. Good thing there's nowhere to go.

Other Girl

She is always biking over the red bridge
in my brain, sun-peeled shoulders
soft pink as a newborn's dress.

She leans on the rail for shadow, to darken
purple like a scar. Pain knits
itself, eventually,

into some knotted thing to wear.
She waits. Sweat pools on her lip
like so many words
the bridge's fingers lace
into a rusty prayer. I want to feel how
her dark hair falls
on her raw shoulders.

I would be anything for her,
her deep water
dancing down bones,
sweating out poison,
rushing too fast
for the dead to touch.

Ghost

Her sea-flicker mouth leaves a stain
on windows and glass cups, wine-blue
sighs kiss me awake every eight a.m.
This old house wood warps apart
and makes space, invites her in
to the thin, dark places. I wash my face
and wonder if she wore button-downs
or leopard print, if she sat feet on the floor
or knees tucked to the table. She slips under
my shirt collar, bites with a brushing touch
like eyelash teeth. Sometimes I ask her
if I should move away, change my name,
donate all my clothes and paint
a second skin. I want someone to say
I'm alive enough to change. She takes shadows
off the shelf and knits their metal
through me, crosses over and over.

Wrong

Bleached hands,
steam-cleaned lungs
hung on the clothesline.
Looks like a question
you don't remember
asking to grow here.
Wrong species. Maybe
should have been cotton,
sun-kept, simplified,
harvested. Today
let all sheets be stripped
from their beds. Let us
shake out threaded ghosts.

The Emperor's New Body

In the winter I folded away my clothes
and hid them under the bed, walked emperor

through the house, searched for deliverance
at the hand of some common god:

the hour-long shower, the comb and mirror,
the tea kettle screaming out its metal belly

until I emptied it into my cup. I opened
a window, let the cold in so teeth might rattle

my own metal belly awake, might shake
from my throat the answer to what runs

inside a body besides water and blood,
or what devil lies down beside me slow

in the morning, yawns a gray mouth
down my shoulders, breathes my iron

bones to rust in his cup. I might be
a self-deceiving organ tricking itself

into having a name. I might be
the memory of something larger

crumbled and sealed in a pale skin,
small enough to drink. Whatever god

will take me back: leave me here
as steam on a colorless window pane,

boiling out bright from a hollow skin.
Let me split open as water and light.

Laugh

Sunday knows what it's like: red at the morning edges
noising into my brain, two gray halves lit up, scribbling
themselves like dogs barking, neon green signs blinking
outside the closed window. All I wanted was blank rest
after everything that was supposed to happen had already
gone, the natural architecture opening and closing itself
just fine without these fingers I'm trying to belong to.
Crack ankles, knees, hips, wrists, open the window to bird
mouths waiting. Yesterday I found an old string of beads
spelling out my name and hung it around my neck to see
if it made sense. Say a word or live a body until it loses all
meaning and you have to just throw back your head, laugh
or starve. Today I'm back in the mirror-habit, rinse wash
rinse the hours I stayed up pretending I'll never have to go dark
to wake up. Get dressed, wear a pink leopard jacket for the hell
of it, coin a joke to get going out the door. Today's white hot
throat waits to either choke me with laughing or swallow me gone.

Light

Mother lost her face
opening the mirror's cage
spindle-locked gold necks
found mouths ground her bright color
her dark corners between teeth

Lantern

In the waiting room, a kid picks up
a year-old issue of *Camping Life*,
asks his mother to define *fluorescent*
and *lantern*, so she tells him about
the dark that grows when lights
are nowhere to be found, for miles,

the dark of a heavy rain or snow
shorting out the power, remember
how they used a lantern to find
the basement stairs, the furnace
and the breaker, how she pressed
switch nineteen to bring back

the light? She looks over at me
as if she knows I'm thinking
about last winter, how my mother
took the extra lantern from
the basement and packed it
in my luggage before I went,

and I was careful to say *back*
West instead of *back home*,
in case it mattered to her
that I belonged somewhere
else. When the doctor calls
my name, I don't get to hear

whether the mother tells her son
how the unexpected becomes
sacred at the atomic level,
luminescent, which is another
good word to know, how light
is only borrowed, passed down.

Seven for a Secret

Come here. I'll show you
where the bees have gone
if you give me the receipts
and silver gum wrappers
in your pockets. Look:
see the sweet pea clinging
to the clothesline poles
where your mother hung
bright skirts you gave away
years ago? Either tell me
the names of the bodies
that wore them after you

or give me these strands
of your hair and your faded
shoelaces, if you're the kind
who still tries to remember
the exact way your mother
removed her rings, set them
on the windowsill before
washing her hands, as if
meaning burns spell-deep
in everything. Give me
your eyes, down to the root,
and I would give you

in answer only a room
of corners, every surface
the same to the touch. Give
me your tongue and teeth
and I would seal them tight
in a jar of honey, say,
Listen. I want to tell you
the secret to surviving:
it's easier to pretend
you were never young
enough to have a mother,
that there were never any bees.

Axis

There's no name for the moment
everything grows a silver sheen,
as if to say the game is up, break
open anything and all you'll find
is television snow, Styrofoam core
showing through its painted color.

Today the roof shook off its shingles
and lay down in the yard. Women
turned like weather vanes standing
in the ruin, waiting for the next
violent push. Red morning, sailor's
warning too late, stretched down
a hand and lifted their metal limbs.

Out

There is no room cold enough
to keep her insides from rotting
so she does the next best thing,
throws forty pounds of eggs out
into the street. A blue face plays
in the background. Gridded sky,
like paper, oranges itself careful
box by box. Wires went down
hours ago. The food on the stove
is getting cold. She walks outside
and grows down, plants herself
by the fence. When it falls down,
no one will pick it back up, cut
out the softened parts, dig new
holes for its posts. Power lines
snap and feed the starving air.

Final Hour

I was nothing special,
born inside a bird's ceramic mouth.
Mother watched over water
for the living, kept her stone wings still
while others bathed. She watched the sun
bruise, bleed, lay its red liver on the edge of the world
for us to eat. Stars crawled out, clicked their teeth.

Down the road, the white bridge
wrapped close over the earth's open vein.
The rails allowed an arm to stretch all the way
up to the shoulder, up to the lung breathing out ice.
Below, the water furred over white with frost,
closed grass eyelashes. Church bells called like crows
at the hour, never stopped to wonder.

Six for Gold

First was a grinding blush of light
coming from the kitchen, someone
already awake at six a.m., switching
on every bulb, crushing coffee beans

small enough to bleed. Still in bed,
your blanketed body a dome amidst
the blue sun on the walls. Then teeth

falling into the earth like wet seeds,
the impossible task of gathering them
together, your neck's sudden snap

into eyes. Wait. If you let there be a day
and a night, you will turn the sun
into a hungry mouth snapping after

itself. You will have to fill the world
with meat—feathered and temporary.
But there is someone in the kitchen,

although you don't know their name
(you've never been good with names)
and the weight of their living brushes

itself on the walls like gold. You try
to speak, but your raw throat cracks
in its own kind of language. Somehow
you have let all of this happen again.

VITA

Author: Danielle K. Weeks

Place of Birth: Oxford, Ohio

Undergraduate Schools Attended: University of Evansville
Harlaxton College

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2013, University of Evansville

Honors and Awards: Graduate Assistantship, English Department, 2014-2016,
Eastern Washington University

Professional Experience: *Willow Springs* Poetry Editor, 2015-2016,
Eastern Washington University