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## An apology for the lies I tell about my character

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AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

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

Jess L. Bryant

Spring 2016

THESIS OF JESS L. BRYANT APPROVED BY

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“Dénouement” and “A Variation on Threnody,” *Gravel*

“Cold Frame” and “For Wassily,” *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*

**AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES  
I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER**

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## THE BOY I LIKED

On the subway to Jackson Heights  
my eyes left the slow moving train  
bound to the rain and cracking  
foundations.

In collapse,  
I found solace,

I found lines in my skin  
like mortar between bricks  
of family owned bodegas,  
years piling one after the other.

And then a 12-year-old boy  
beside me, hat backwards like mine,  
tapped my shoulder.

He motioned behind us,  
through the window  
where murals painted the sides of  
broken down buildings,  
faded messages  
ran together,  
toppled one another  
and the skin of the portraits  
met mine. The lips drew me in,  
spoke to me in tongues or  
some other language  
I couldn't understand,  
like color.

My neck was sore  
from staring back  
when he asked  
Are you all right?

I replied,  
"I am trying to find  
the destruction."

## MINUTIAE

Your eyes unwound  
toward the grate  
below our window

I waited as you bent  
the iron rectangles  
and walked below ground  
cold as    you were

balancing words  
on your fingertips

"I see myself holding eyes  
in your hands close,"

you said to the men  
who threw smoke  
bombs at strangers

while gathering  
tiny figurines  
into your arms,  
other peoples'  
tiny plastic childhoods.

## ON LEAVING

The wind came stale  
with the scent of tobacco.

The shelter of my skin collapsed  
and you began singing *Ava Maria*—

your voice a negative,  
filling rooms and my body.

I stepped away and waited  
for the whine of the refrigerator,

the child's footsteps  
from the apartment above,

but my teeth moved  
toward the sound of you,

bit you open, made  
way for the crows.

And I left you  
only ten steps from the door.

CLEMATIS CLIMBS THE WALLS

Birds laugh on the ground when  
she says—something like—  
*go over and pet them.*

I stand on one foot,  
flamingo heron, stretch my wings  
and lump over.

My fingers open and a bird  
digs dirt from my nails  
to build a walkway.

She sings now.  
My ears perk, fly up,  
carve out a skyway for the jays.

My feet are cold with muttering  
liver spots, stilt tracks on my carpet  
lead toward evolutions.

My door strains to let out bird songs  
but what she wants from me is all done.

## MY POEMS WON'T CHANGE THE WORLD

I sit on the clothesline,  
decide on boxers  
and throw a clothespin  
through my neighbor's window.

I aim for the television set  
when the phone rings,  
and I hit the dog instead.

I decide to take up slack lines.  
Standing, I feel  
the breath of window watchers  
and remember I'm grieving.

PANTONE #1

Her voice rang inside me,  
crawled out to my skin  
pox-like, the anthem something  
only gods could hear

and me, mourning the mauve  
chalk she wrote with on weekends,  
the wind chimes painted with pastels,  
singing through the walls  
I colored red.

The parchment paper on the desk  
is empty and apologetic.

On the way to work, I watch  
limping pigeons by the  
food court near city hall  
and think about World War II,

how some falls cause begging.

## WHAT WOMEN WANT

Your umbrella cast a shadow  
two sidewalk squares wide,  
but as I neared  
it drew itself in.

Finally, I saw  
the “no trespassing” sign  
taped on the canopy.

## THROUGH THE CURTAINS

Her silhouette  
painted stop signs  
yellow,  
and the air  
was filled with chalk  
that made my eyes  
weaken and shutter.

I climbed the space  
between carpet and ceiling,  
when she entered  
and drummed the fan,  
turned it circling.

The wind, now her hands  
I fall asleep under  
murmuring about iris.

When I wake,  
I am wearing a floral dress  
and in her eyes,  
I see my eyes  
pecking through.

I am sure now that I have lost myself  
as her voice creeps up the walls.



## SALVATION

Suppose	we are
the ribbon	of a typewriter
impregnated	with ink
wound	around two axles
and	in the middle
pounding	strokes
spin	our almost-cylinder
insides.	What happens
when we	are replaced?

I sign to ghosts in the background  
and you in the corner listen  
to the noise my hands make.

Will you join me?  
I made a marble for you  
from pieces of my teeth,  
shining browns and yellows.

Roll it around on the carpet  
and make your imprint—  
you were always the artist.

I want to see the shatter,  
our eyes reposition  
our mouths. I want the whole  
bodied part  
rising out,  
the new construction spectrum  
painted,  
I want to tape our skin  
back together.

## AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER

The woman whose father  
shot at her through a door.

The woman whose Mormon mother  
used chopsticks at dinner.

The woman whose name  
called Haitian Gods.

The woman whose cratered skin  
worsened during thunderstorms.

The woman who would  
marry a Mormon man.

The woman who would marry  
Adonis.

The woman married  
to a computer analyst.

The porn star  
and the mafia daughter.

I left them all,  
broken in subway stations  
or on sidewalks,

cigarette in hand  
and felt nothing but the cold  
air on my skin.

But now  
through single-paned  
windows and thin walls,

through hardwood floors  
splintering my feet,  
I feel them.

And when, I wonder,  
will I become them  
or free of the lashings  
I caused.

TENDER DEMON...

show me how to shoot without remorse  
a quail or an arrow  
through a lover's artery

like when I was young  
before asking forgiveness.

You were with me when I broke  
that girl at the art store.

She was high when we carved  
her jagged  
lust rough and framed it.

Show me how to find that music  
again.

I want to live within an anthem  
of outlines  
drawn around the bodies we slayed  
and my own.

I remember when we met.  
I was a girl then,  
using only my tongue.

Now, I lie naked  
under bamboo sheets,  
my blinds, cracked enough  
for me to see the park  
at the end of the block

And once, while searching  
for your hands, I saw  
a small girl with her father.

His mouth twisted  
like the trunk of an olive tree,  
his body growing in front of me.

When he neared,  
The girl ran barefoot over  
branches, her feet began to bleed  
her eyes filled watersheds  
but she laughed  
and laughed.

I wondered  
if she knew you better now,  
if you were hers.

## ON LYING

The day before Thursday I saw you  
doing a line off the washing machine

and wondered how many  
miles could help you with that.

I don't care for an answer.  
If I seem callous, then I must be

evolving. I stood by the gallery  
we used to visit on 34th

saw the girl with the orange  
raincoat and asked for a light

She told me sometimes puddles  
help balance her gait

and tomorrow we will walk  
across sea-saws. I won't mail

you any postcards this evening  
but I will reupholster your chair.

I don't know what being  
sentimental feels like, but I know

how to work with my hands.

## A VARIATION ON THRENODY

I tore down statues and left  
no fingerprints, dropped Maya Devi for Sizzzy Taylor,  
came into your hands and screamed Jesus Christ like a sailor.

I'll trade decadence for a chance  
to parlay absence into remains.  
And this is the part that I like.  
Tongues  
raising questions  
of apathy to the nun  
down the street  
who begged me to join  
the gang.

Turn me over, she said,  
and I sacrificed her body  
for humor, I inquired about the  
notion of propriety.  
What happens when we  
delay the process of  
adaptation?

Tempt me  
with absence.

I'll show you  
Resurrection.

## POWER LINES

I walk above you  
watch your body  
hit the ground  
send smoke signals  
to call girls  
and ask them  
for money.

I wonder what  
it's like to make  
a living.



## COLD FRAME

The man who fell tended to magnolias  
in the greenhouse, and when they died,  
he told me to watch his papers  
for snail activity  
and a diagram of the biosphere.

Stumbling through Chicago,  
he found concrete too cold.

Under the recognition that absurd  
was second to reality's marginal  
need for a suitcase and a master suite,  
he walked to the hotel through an alley,  
his language a bridge  
patched with outsourced stone.

I cupped rice in my hands  
when the staircase rattled.

I saw him slip toward carpet  
etched palms and the splintered railing  
of his smile.

I remember his body was warm  
when they took him.

## IN THE END

Birds brace skies for beak  
bored holes, the old come through  
caned bulging larger  
than the hands of any god  
time webbing fingers for flight.

The young below walk  
through their high piled bodies  
as if they were dead  
already waiting for turns  
to cry and shift halos.

## THE MAN I LOVED

Outside the window I see my grandfather  
near the clothesline that hangs, faded blue,  
between two oak trees.

He's here to steal my boxers.  
We've dressed the same since I was a girl.

At once, he is criminal and fragile,  
hooded in black, feet shuffling  
over the silence of grass.

I grab my spray bottle,  
head for the backyard  
and chase him while he ducks  
behind the shrubs he planted.

When I catch him,  
he'll offer his dentures  
so we can go for lunch.

Later, we will sit together  
on a pink and green paisley couch  
reading Don Quixote in German.

He might mock my accent  
or ask why the carpet moves like  
spider legs, why the lampshade  
speaks to soldiers in French.

When he sleeps,  
I'll steal a pair of his suspenders.

## WINTER'S DILEMMA

The snow breaks my bones  
but a soft shatter of skin  
hides in the tiny  
crevices of women's arms.

A death wish due north,  
I gather clouds  
in my teeth and follow  
the lines of hollow chests,  
of others leaving  
flesh beside mine.

When we reach

the boundary of the wind  
my history comes forward  
hanging its head in shame.

## OPENING

Between my rough hands  
and soft shoulders,  
lines deepen and caverns multiply,

though the unabashed child  
sits somewhere begging  
for thumb wars,

and in her eyes I see pain taken,  
like when on my knees  
in a bedroom  
her hands inside me  
trying to pull apart my threads,  
she begs that I give her  
what was given to me.

But like the child  
I cradle in my mind's  
most tender crevice,  
I won't fill her shallow well.

She can have only my breath  
the way the lake has it.

Only five years old,  
I can still feel the water  
in my lungs,  
the panic and comfort  
of being swallowed.

## ARRIVALS

I saw the scraps of your clothes  
left unlaundered  
in cab rolled windows,  
proof of North American sundry.

Still the moving happened  
for salt I licked a mix  
of teeth and tongue.

My twitching eye was reckless,  
voices broke over coffee.  
Because cords are fragile,

tie me in wire from the mandolin  
you hold to your chest.

You played it aptly  
if only for a masque.

Such an aberration—  
I speak in code.  
Hood me and I'll make  
a break for the child.

## HAVE I TOLD YOU HOW I CAME TO SEE EVOLUTIONS?

Concrete statues stand over children  
when they bleed and mother catches  
them, holds them to the ceiling,  
where heads hit plaster  
decaying the place we call home.

I pull my knees to my chest and count slowly.

I listen to taped conversations  
from the grocery store on fifth.  
I am made to believe in my father's will to outlive  
the wavering of his neighbors' tongues  
and it comes back to the swing set  
we shared.

Incessantly I watch him rock  
in linens but what if  
I am fifty, wrinkles crawling  
up my neck with skin, bright red  
splatters of Pollack, it's always  
like Pollack, my toenails cutting holes  
through my socks.

But he's lucid  
and I wish I could harness  
his voyeurs.

## PORTRAITURE

Acetate blinds her  
older man,  
whose alter egos  
he deals out like cards,  
shuffling face down,  
turning them up  
at his pleasure.

Some evolve,  
others have the face  
of a dirge.

And the one who comes most often  
is a woman  
whose left eye hangs lower than the right,  
like her breasts,  
like when you sit  
at a table  
and it tilts,  
one leg shorter  
than the rest,  
and all you wanted,  
was a smooth cup of coffee  
and to read the paper.



IT IS SOMETHING LIKE A NUISANCE THAT YOU EXIST

I stare at corners to find cracks in behavior.  
And I stare cornered.

Did you find the letter I left under the dirty laundry?  
Dear Perspective, Feel it up.

Or was it something like a tissue I folded into squares?

When I woke with you at the end of my bed  
I saw crosses in your eyes.  
The witch wars were only the beginning.

Have you seen Moulin Rouge?  
I would like to, cross-legged on the floor over blankets,  
not under, because intimacy is juxtaposed with nothing,  
except absence.

And what is it, the black book I can't remember?  
Who was the goddess on the cover?  
Who did you fuck last night?  
They all like being dominated.

## DÉNOUEMENT

I've been underneath the floor,  
pounding boards to find the one that creaks  
at night and sends  
my fingernails to search  
for mules, to mask the scratches  
on the wall, and below me felt her voice in shrivels  
I went down  
to fodder further  
locked my knees  
and braced for distance. I recall  
a time she welcomed rapture  
and found comfort, now she fucks me with her eyes  
closed. And I escape  
into the dirge, humming  
through the pages  
for better times: the night we beat the walls in  
took the windows  
in our palms, reported bleeding,  
made love on the sidewalk  
while ants got tangled  
in my leg hair  
and her mustache peeled on my tongue

## WATERBOARDING

Pirouettes are for strangers.  
Sometimes I want to  
I mean really kill you.

Let me explain:  
Split seams down your legs  
where your pants rub hard  
against your skin  
tape re-chord the way  
speech slips through  
your tongue  
your teeth  
and pulls out before  
you come  
to decide  
I've taken this too  
literally fill your lungs  
with remorse  
or water  
whichever is quicker.

IF SILHOUETTES WERE LINED WITH GOLD

I pluck eyelashes from strangers  
and sew a black lace of human,  
that, in the right light, become coruscations  
scraping away the rest of each other.

In the kitchen, thinking herself alone,  
my mother knelt where a jar had fallen  
and let glass into her knees.

Through the window, she watched  
her neighbor become crow,  
pecking someone else's skin  
to fringe his feathers with gold.

Her smile fading, she found  
the illusion of beauty.

## ROLLING PAPERS

Gather

your arms with thorns  
meet me at the market on fourth  
where Bali Shag is six dollars  
and the owner counts  
our conversations on his  
fingers.

GIVE WHAT YOU HAVE TO THE HOMELESS, MY GRANDMOTHER SAID.

So I bought this guy  
art supplies  
to use for the portraits  
of strangers he drew  
on the steps of the  
entrance at Bleecker.

I told him to charge  
more than a dollar,  
then bought myself  
wafer cookies  
for the week,  
fine with the taste  
in my mouth  
and my simple  
temporary poverty.

## BETWEEN MY FINGERS

Rolling papers from Bali  
Shag leave shavings  
of tobacco. I saw you meditating  
in your room and fell in love  
with you, between  
boy and boy. I was using  
graphite, crackers split  
my hands into portions. See,  
I gave you all that I had.  
This is what it means to be  
poor; some days it was fuck it,  
let's go to Sunshine Theater, sit  
in the back row and evaluate  
what Synecdoche means.  
I never rubbed  
my hands through your hair  
and didn't want to. All that is  
left are snippets, slightly  
balding spots of curls.

This wasn't romance, it was the time  
I felt like Jesus, fully man. And you  
were Atlas. But after parking  
my car, I couldn't find  
your breasts. In paralysis  
caught between your eyelids,  
I allowed my knees  
raw on concrete,  
I lost faith  
sewed together  
like a toddler  
I watched  
the filament break.

## URBAN LANDSCAPE

Sidewalks carried me to the playhouse  
where you showed  
your ribbon-like tongue, lungs retracting.

Invited to sit, I wanted my body  
to be like yours, our lineage monophyletic.

I retracted, tooth-like,  
into abscess and apology,

watched you write at night,  
meditate on wood floors,  
your knees bruising  
with me at your door.

Others mistook intimacy  
for idolization and pity,  
for me  
stripping down.

Could you reconstruct our ancestry,  
cast me as your brother,  
the two of us, born boy?

I, the lesser one,  
part-ash, part-remnant,  
temporal and bloodlined elsewhere,

allowing the breaking to happen,  
bodies piece and drift like petrified wood  
on water-lined streets.

I left the city's edge to gather the thinning vestige  
thinking next time we'd be synapomorphic.

But when work was done,  
my hands were smooth and  
better running. I grew into other fittings,  
no need for pedigree.



## INTIMACY'S SHADOW

I drew your brain in graphite,  
soft gray lines tracing faces that spoke  
where buildings narrowed outside  
the windowed midnight train ride to New Jersey.

All along, the voices sang broken,  
and I dreamt you killed me,  
though your head lay soft on my shoulder  
closed eyed sunken and circled with women.

I was only a graying sky offering  
to gods who served the fallen,  
yet still you trusted my arm around you.

It was home you were after,  
your head near mine  
and the glass drops of rain.

WHEN, FOR A MOMENT, EVERYTHING

I fell down littered streets  
toward the awning where I found  
you in uniform concrete  
tissues torn from your body.

You told me a story of *desamor*,  
of separation, without language.

We drank champagne  
from my hands, your eyes  
alive with damp *diadema*,  
our movements tied  
like puppets in play,  
threads heavy on our bodies.

And together we watched  
dashboards battle tremors,  
trees burn into asphalt,  
a train braking,  
hands coming out  
of a woman's chest.

The rain relented.  
Our eyes staked clouds  
from our need to suspend time.

This was before my plane left,  
before foreign money hidden in passports,  
before once more we collapsed into personae.

Sometimes I mistake this for creation.

## CHILDREN

She left her uterus on Heidelberg's  
cobblestones during a Christmas lighting  
and I was left to hold her.  
She was a desert in me already.

On the cab ride into town we endured  
windows and beyond them those broken  
Coco Rosie songs she sang on stairs  
of the farmer's market in Park Slope.

That night in San Telmo she played  
mandolin and strangers tossed coins  
while I pinned a piece of music  
to the back of her dress.

Soon we'd take a bus to Las Toninas,  
play with stray dogs and climb  
Jacarandas tearing twigs  
to send home with notes of sacrifice.

## FEEL ME UP

Bodies broken and disarmed  
like tiny figurines  
from my daughter's toy chest  
after the war  
were scattered by your feet.

No longer a statue,  
I was among them  
with blackened bones,  
and a neck craned backward.  
You said you couldn't find me.

But I was once you, held together  
with tendon, skin  
and façade.

I remember you showed me  
once on a movie screen  
the person you thought I was,  
spinning in circles and laughing  
like a child.

But now I am a deconstructed god  
and you splinter at my feet  
unable to weave  
toward forgiveness,  
as if forgiveness ever existed.

## I WAS DERIVED FROM VARIATION

Your lips lassoed clouds  
lowered and zoned them  
like me  
twitching my outcry.

Out speech,  
I became your instrument  
and a melody  
that pleased no one.

You told me our sky  
shifts with seasons,  
gray covers to pull  
over my head  
made you feel safe  
inside breaking me.

You taught me what human  
means, what hands become  
when severed,  
the sound pain makes  
when it stitches  
a via dolorosa.

I woke one night  
from a sleepwalk  
miles from the house  
we shared and wrote  
hermitic distance  
from the flesh  
I have shed.

## WHAT I MEANT TO SAY

I syncopate the elegy  
with scribbles  
on moleskin.

I'm only good at portraits.

Finding your body  
on my hands,  
I wrapped in  
in organic cotton.

20/20

I recently mistook a trash bag for a dead animal,  
all day lamenting over its ragged body on display  
street side below my bedroom window.

I refused to leave my house.  
Dressed in black, I lit candles  
And mourned for this creature,  
this flattened body.

I thought to sing,  
but “ooh child,” was the only song  
that came to mind.

Feeling that it was an inappropriate ode,  
I watched television instead.

When finally, I left for work the next morning,  
I saw that my creature  
was only a plastic bag,  
run over by cars,  
frozen to the ground.

I knew then my prescription was outdated  
and death is subjective.

## THE BODY WON'T ROOT

When the ground moves  
and life bisects into twisting  
blinds and terminals,

somewhere on a swing set  
your legs go limp,  
your head goes ocean,  
crawling  
toward your yellow house  
on the corner of Poplar

where song birds  
won't play for you  
and your mother  
smokes in the garage  
with the door closed.



## MY LOVE

I await your return  
while young men tracing  
their lineage to Hemingway  
strip you  
with turpentine.

## ON BEING GOD

Her tone cracked into erasure  
hollowed my chest and moved  
toward the corner pushing walls  
apart. The vase fell and I buried  
myself under nails of yellow pine  
collapse      The record scratched  
with its last attempt at music and I  
caved into a foundation holding  
your bodies in my womb made you  
better this time without me made  
the night believe in paisley and  
memories of fucking on the  
sidewalk in May rain clinging  
clothes the need to strip bones  
not skin I made your mind my  
extension and it was just what I  
needed.

## FOR SAPPHO

Your sand-dried hands  
crippled my  
home in your eyes

the blue  
    blanket shielded you

Mine  
    a body  
liftless

sacrificed breath  
    and built your tower  
the way Atlas would  
    shoulders caved  
for a lover.

And yet, I am a desert in the waking  
dust of eyes muddied with worship.

Naked and curled into bone  
my skeleton weeps  
your skin song  
its hollow knowing.

## PANTONE #2

I dream of becoming Pantone  
in a walled marsala hotel room,  
holding my body while violets  
outside the window,  
shrivel into tiny  
nothings and reveal the winter white's  
dilemma: where to find you  
in all the snow.

Wait till bird's eggs come back to the nest  
of the tree topped home we shared in  
Poughkeepsie, the wet weather shining our skin,

I might say something like,  
"We've been here before under  
this dusky orchid sky that follows our  
screams."

And you might say  
"I'm better at this now  
and besides the citron light  
followed me here."

## ASTORIA AT 2:00 AM

Her voice inhabited my body  
empty and shallow  
when she asked  
“Will you walk with me  
through the rain?”

Because I was young  
and close  
to loneliness  
I said, “yes.”

Our hands held  
the yellow lines  
on the street down.  
Our words settled in the air.

And that is the last time I felt innocent.

Months before,  
she had left me, bleeding  
on the 33rd street sidewalk,  
but that night the still child in us let go  
and ran through the rain covered streets  
the buildings sweeping by in waves,  
the ashes of neighbors  
blowing through the air,  
their lives already given over  
to window watching,  
but not us,

not until I stopped believing the night,  
and rain could wash away mold,  
sweep me up and cover  
the headboards of lashings,

until I stopped believing that umbrellas  
were for the dying.

## FOR WASSILY

It was a crevice I slid into that reminded me to cross-examine the way bricks fold in on each other—the way that precedes collapse. My hands shake like they do after playing handball in Staten Island. The roof shifts the birds into occupied space. And then I am home where linoleum tiles are replaced by concrete, replaced by letters. My head pounds against the floor. Kandinsky said, “the eyes are the hammers.” The ceiling fans fall by my hand and the blade feels—like a machete—as it goes to the walls. It’s composition seven. Wallpaper slides to the floor takes over the weeping. The ceiling falls in calcimine fragments on my skin. I can’t think of a better opening. It points to 1920, to just a bit of colour, to the time I saw my mother’s heart stop just for a minute, in a dentist’s chair.

## GENTLE PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF MASSACRE

She brings her fists to the floor and feels  
floorboards splinter the heads of tiny  
men who speak to her at night,  
“you’re saved,” they say, “go find your lover,”

stripped and open on the carpet downstairs.  
“She needs your” nothingness again, whispered  
into her broken nothing left for you  
to promise but a soft white opening

where children play with their fathers, held high  
above their heads and skies feel breakable.

Her eyes and the fragmented  
ceiling, collapse. Armed, you walk  
outside. You find a bird singing on a branch  
and shoot it.

Some things die for no reason  
and you might as well have power.

## BRIDGED VOICES

She crawls  
inside sermons  
and brings our bodies to circle.

Dementia broadcasts through gray  
walls. She loses bearing and watches  
almost empty passenger cars,  
through windows, searching  
for breath and smaller endings,  
the no more wood stove kinds.

Have you ever seen cows struck  
by lightning? They land haloed,  
outstretched and bloated.

All she wants is to hear  
your womb hold her.

She no longer drops pennies  
in acid to watch them hollow,  
sees only the silence between stations.



## ON RECLUSION

Sidewalks  
give under  
the weight  
of strangers.

All the while  
I sip my coffee  
stumbling  
over graves  
and fluorescent  
lights.

## SUNDAY AFTERNOON

## I.

I decide between boxers and briefs  
arrange handkerchiefs  
sit cross-legged on the floor  
facing my closet and think  
what it might look like  
if I hung next to the sweaters

## II.

my legs dangling  
off a southern Indiana dock.  
On my skin, lukewarm water,  
cloudy from fish food.

## AFTER YOUR DEATH

I spent hours trying to reach your voice,  
but the mailbox was full.

I only wanted to talk about the birds I saw  
on the drive to your house, red bellied

on a fence post, two in a row.

## VITA

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