

Spring 2017

# THE INSIDE COLOR OF CHICKENS

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THE INSIDE COLOR OF CHICKENS

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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

Mary Leana Christensen

Spring 2017

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MASTER'S THESIS

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*The Avenue Journal*, an earlier version of “Conjure Lady”

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“Folklore” won the 2016 Montana Book Festival’s Emerging Writers Contest

In the poem “My Grandparents Have Three Words For Water” the word *ama* (a-ma) is Cherokee for water.

In the poem “I Am Made Of Invasive Things” the word *tsalagi* (tsa-la-gee) is Cherokee for Cherokee.

In the poem “Body Language” the word *inadv* (e-na-du) is Cherokee for snake.

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## **I Write About Blood in Two Ways:**

in the ancestral sense—  
kin and culture coagulating

and in the fashion of animals—  
a red stain from a chicken's gnawed neck.

Until now I've avoided writing about  
my own blood and the way it was inside  
of me only seconds before it trickled down  
my leg, seeped through fibers of too-tight jeans.

I yelled at him for packing a butcher knife  
in a plastic bag, a butcher knife for a submarine  
sandwich, the sandwich for a picnic hike.

I laughed at the un-strangeness of all this,  
how the bag bumped against my leg  
as I walked uneven ground to a concrete  
table and bench,

laughed at how the knife slid forward  
through bag, jeans, and knee, laughed  
at the dog who was excited to be out  
of the car.

The dog danced between my feet,  
blending blood into her fur, her fur  
confetti-ed to my injured leg.

She lapped of me, and maybe that makes  
us family. He pinched together the gash  
until the park ranger came, and maybe  
that makes him my god—

setting things into motion, then making  
me believe he's helping in the aftermath.

**Made in**

I study my grandmother's language  
in a book purchased from a gift shop  
lined with dream catchers and  
stuffed kokopelli

sold by a round white woman stitched  
into an intricate jingle dress. None  
of which belong to the Cherokee.

I buy the book and a doll with black  
yarn hair and fabric skin an unnatural  
red.

The doll's dress, in shades of a  
Southwestern skyline, gives nothing  
of the blue Appalachian Smokies where

my ancestors hid in caves while their  
wives and brothers were cattle herded to  
plains flat without burial mounds.

A hundred years after removal, in a room  
without electricity, my great-grandmother  
sat sewing tiny moccasins and threading

mouths for dolls sold to tourists. For each  
pair she earned ten cents and fingers  
that twisted into arthritic claws.

I flip my own doll over, each stitch  
the same width, barely visible. The  
label, shiny white, reads *China*.

**Joseph**

The young boy my grandmother fostered  
suckled grass roots. He ate clumps of dirt.

Animal instinct told him where to find  
the iron his body lacked.

My grandmother fed him raw dark honey,  
high in mineral sweetness.

She cuddled the boy, his head on her chest,  
they nourished each other's deficiencies.

Now, years later, she kneels in the yard,  
searching for a son among aloe and weeds.

With hands like garden spades, she scoops  
loose soil, tasting for him.

**A Penny Between the Knees**  
*A contraceptive method*

I wonder if the Holy Spirit  
dislodged a small clay coin, easing  
between Mary's knobby teenaged knees

I wonder if she felt an ethereal  
breeze between her legs

like breath smelling of a sandwich

maybe it hurt

they say the first time always does

what if she merely looked down  
to find her coin lying in the dirt

something larger would have been easier  
to hold: a silver dollar, a lucky poker chip,  
a rock with rough edges

was it only after Gabriel's visit  
that Mary missed her piece of clay,  
her knees touching indentation to  
indentation

did she throw the coin at his chest  
in denial or was she immaculately  
accepting, placing his glowing hand  
where the coin should have been

## I See Ads for the Bug Lady of Western NC

though I no longer live in Appalachia,  
no longer try to catch hornets or

carpenter bees in birdhouses and plastic  
bottles— the sides window-like, the insects

hitting them over over over  
until they are aware of their confinement

until they hover in the bottle's middle  
and die of exhaustion.

Sometimes a woman is a bug—  
her thorax corset-cinched under

a protective suit, the net over her face  
making her feel caught. Sometimes she's

been asked *Shouldn't you be a man?*  
and sometimes she wishes she were static.

## Illusion

At sixteen I realized  
I was afraid of most things,  
but I didn't tell her this as  
we sat on her bedroom floor.

Instead, I told her I knew  
she was fighting with her mother  
because her hair was newly green,  
the dye speckling her bare shoulders,  
her temples, and she looked a little thinner.

She didn't say anything to that,  
just had me lay back-flat on her rug.  
She slid four fingers, two on each hand,  
underneath me, rubbed the small bumps  
of my spine,

said, *Close your eyes, all you have  
to do is trust me.*

But I only closed my eyes  
when she closed hers.

She didn't chant anything about  
feathers or boards, just added pressure  
to my back, breathed a little heavier.

And I pretended to float feet  
above the ground— I remember  
the sensation of air.

## **Our Lady of Dogs**

She sits on the fire escape  
perched on a lawn chair, a dog  
at her right hand, a dog at her left.

She watches the parking lot  
empty and fill, and empty again—  
a shepherd awaiting her flock.

Rising on mange-infested haunches,  
her companions are called to prayer.  
They yelp ceremoniously, their nails  
clicking against piss-rusted metal.

I lift my hand as I walk under the altar,  
my kind of genuflecting, my way of  
letting her know I'm here.

The dogs bark back and her eyes narrow  
on some light down the street, maybe  
a new star of Bethlehem, or a streetlight  
haloed by reflected fog.

I unlock my door and bring out a kitchen  
chair. The woman leans back, and the dogs,  
bored with their own noise, begin to quiet.

I sit, ready for my acts of contrition.

## Burial Rites

If you were Comanche  
I'd bury your body in  
an upright position

though you were found in  
an armchair already sitting,  
one leg propped atop the  
coffee table

the Navajo used to knot  
their dead in trees far off  
from villages

but I would like to keep you  
close and the only trees nearby  
are desert saplings planted  
in roadside medians

I do not have the time to be  
Apache and rid the house of  
your belongings, yet

I have always wanted to burn  
the things you hoard, to watch  
piles smolder and disappear  
that would take years

you do not have  
to be Sioux for me to paint  
your face the color of life  
a nice bright red, the lipstick  
you swore was blush

and for a while I'll be Choctaw,  
not saying your name in fear  
I'll disturb your nap  
until I forget

that you are Cherokee wanting  
to return to your motherland,  
but mailing bodies across state  
lines is expensive

I have three days to bury you

## Reservation

I'll throw your ashes  
out the kitchen window

*the window with its view  
out onto the hill of stone markers  
covered gently by kudzu*

feeding your body to  
soil and seeds— previously sterile

*your brothers, bad farmers, planting  
the same crops, draining the  
same nutrients*

with a thumb too white  
I'll tend what sprouts, eating

*tasting, finally, traditional foods—  
the bean bread and lye dumplings  
I wouldn't try*

its soft serrated leaves  
the color of baked clay

*remember how we'd place our arms  
side by side, how loud the  
difference*

the same warm shade  
as your skin

## Folklore

Tribal police picked up my uncle the day after he hit a dog. He had placed a note with his name and number near its muzzle.

The police used words like *vehicular manslaughter* and *hit and run*, insisting he had left an old man on the side of the road.

They showed him pictures of a twisted brown body and, though the angles were contorted, there were two arms and two legs.

My uncle had moved the dog to a lawn, feeling its fur and the soft-bodied ticks that dotted its skin. It left his hands smelling of urine.

*It was dark*, an officer said, *the man was naked, probably darted in front of you, probably dementia*. My uncle nodded, thought his mind had cushioned the blow

of taking a human life. The officers stepped out of the room, the dead man's daughter, a woman my uncle knew vaguely from town, stepping in.

She asked what had happened. He answered with what was believable, his eyes on a crack in the wall, avoiding her middle-aged face.

*You hit a dog, saw an old coon hound*, she said in that slow tone used on toddlers and drunkards. *Some of the elders are more attuned to nature*.

She told him her father, tired of old age, had been tempting the road. She said, *It's easier to kill a dog than a man*.

**Cousin***For S.*

I wonder if it's my place  
to even write this

as I know you only from the portrait  
my grandmother had made for your parents.

You, blond-haired boy in a blue sweater,  
hung in their living room. You, like your father,

but for your light complexion.  
And I wonder if, because of you,

parents kept a closer eye on children,  
letting them play in front yards only,

if before your death, your father were more  
relaxed, and your brother hadn't started

looking over his shoulder,  
looking for you to follow.

Your brother now has a son named after you,  
born with a cleft lip and without the roof

of his mouth. Though his face is a patchwork,  
surgeries have done wonders.

And sometimes I imagine you pulling  
yourself out of his scars and back into the world,

your pink fingers arching over split lips,  
your blond head birthing from his red mouth.

Is it morbid to think this way,  
to think of him living with a dead boy's name?

## Inheritance

We're sitting on a park bench,  
it's hot, and I'm wearing little  
clothing the way you like. I am  
tracing the cellulite divots of my  
left thigh because what else  
is there to do?

It's my own unevenness that  
reminds me of my grandmother's  
legs— a mix-match of pink scars  
from spilled kerosene and  
a wood burning stove.

I wonder how she felt about the  
light splotches of skin, if it was her  
white grandfather showing through,  
if she was ashamed.

As a child, I wanted to be the  
red-brown color of my freckles,  
but curled against my grandmother's  
rolled stomach, I was the shade  
of her scars.

I've been quiet too long. You take  
my hand from my thigh, sure I'm  
thinking only of my appearance.

## Curating

A woman positions me  
in front of landscape paintings  
to see where I fit best. I stand  
with my back

to irrigation ditches and long dirt rows,  
where hunched bodies in flour-sack cotton  
pick vegetables I cannot name from their  
acrylic leaves. The woman shakes her head,

asks me to curve my back and hold my skirt  
away from my legs like a basket. She shakes  
her head again. I blend too much with the  
white Arizonian sun.

She shuffles me left into idyllic rolling hills  
where fair-headed children dance in circles,  
the ones with faces have apples for cheeks,  
red and rounded.

Her fingers and thumbs make L-shapes to  
frame me in the painting. She says my hair  
is too dark and I have a yellow hue that clashes  
with happy villagers. The woman moves me,

her hand on my shoulder, to a final landscape,  
sullen with a cold blue. The dirt, pocked with  
hoof prints, is the same color as the people.  
The few horses are gaunt.

I see the profile of a pregnant woman  
walking, and I instinctively put my hands  
on my stomach, giving warmth to something  
I know isn't there.

Again I do not fit in well, and the woman  
in front of me has grown tired. I stand now  
in the corner of the gallery, face to the wall,  
while she wonders what to do with me.

**My Grandparents Have Three Words  
for Water:**

- Water     something that can be filtered  
            through charcoal and chilled  
            in the fridge  
            my paternal grandmother  
            takes hers with lemon
- Agua      there's so little of it  
            during monsoon season the  
            terra cotta ground drinks it up  
            living with my mother's parents  
            the agua from the tap was a little cloudy,  
            smelled like sewer, and needed to be boiled
- Ama      snowmelt runs through mountain  
            creeks and underground into  
            family-owned wells  
            we worry about shifting soil,  
            fracking, chemicals other than fluoride,  
            the erosion of land and culture

**I Am Made of Invasive Things:**

of see-through mites living in  
brows and lashes, in the  
chickenpox scar where no  
hair grows,

and in my stomach I collect  
microscopic flora. My soft  
core works as a greenhouse.

It is in this warm environment  
that a vine, kelly green, coils  
through intestines— their own  
ribbons an irritated red.

A vine combines with other  
vines, gets thicker, and climbs  
around pancreas and liver,  
slithers between lungs into  
my esophagus.

It sprouts out my mouth,  
changes my words into sounds  
like my grandmother's toddler  
mouth made, sounds like *tsalagi*,

the kudzu envelops my skeletal  
system and like the plant, originating  
elsewhere, my body has come to rest  
in sugar maple mountains.

## Strings n' Things

I follow a friend as she buys  
small glass beads with centers  
the size of needle eyes.

The store also sells deer and  
rabbit hide, imitation sinew  
better for larger beads—

like the plastic pony beads  
my cousin gave me years ago  
to make a belt with.

I remember working the waxed  
thread through whites and maroons,  
mimicking a rattler's back.

The belt fell apart when I returned  
from my summer on the rez.  
I live nearby now

and still feel out of place,  
my friend telling me what to buy,  
the cashier thinking I'm a tourist.

My friend and another cousin show  
me how to sew the small glass seeds  
onto leather for key chains and earrings.

My stitching is loose and I've miscounted  
colors, making the designs cockeyed.  
I hear my aunts in the kitchen—

*Her fingertips are too rounded,  
bless her heart, she shouldn't have  
been raised so far from the reservation.*

## Scapegoat

You told me Appalachia  
turns women crazy.

That maybe the humidity,  
which never really washes off,  
seals something sick inside

or kudzu, invasive, creeps  
up their legs as they clean  
green worms from heirlooms.

You said the woman who lives  
on your long dirt road talks to a  
goat named after her last husband.

That in curlers and a headscarf  
she chases it with a rolling pin,  
wanting to know if it screwed  
the sheep next door, yelling at it  
*please love me.*

You tell me this over burnt coffee,  
the same morning you ask me about  
big cities, if I think you'd like Atlanta  
or Tampa, or maybe even Phoenix  
with its dry heat and mirages,

while at home, your wife, who never  
held a baby long, follows chicken blood  
to a fox den, a rifle cocked at her side,  
a half-plucked body in the crook  
of her arm.

**Featurette**

## Zoom in:

Her hands are flat on the table,  
 her eyes are glazed with something  
 thicker than mucus, the cracks at her  
 mouth's corners match the deep grain  
 of the table— on the table a pool of  
 blood reflects the woman's face, the  
 ceiling

## Flashback:

She is running through the yard,  
 her shirt is on backwards (she sleeps  
 alone, naked and hopeful), children's  
 screams propel her through the morning's  
 dim light, but the children are poultry—  
 fat and white

## [Zoom in:]

A flash of orange fur running  
 animal naked through the yard, its  
 stomach full of hope and raw pink  
 meats— the woman sees just feathers,  
 ripped necks, so much red (she's  
 too late and never enough)

## Flash-forward:

Her fingers inch toward the table's  
 red pool, on the floor sits a bucket,  
 rag, and mop, all stained the inside  
 color of chickens— her eyes, glazed  
 thicker, stare into the red and its  
 reflected ceiling, here she reads  
 chicken blood like tea leaves  
 (she wants to know why)

## Twined

When you left I preened the carpets,  
finding a white piece of you, burrowed  
for warmth, threaded around fiber.

I used to massage your temples,  
cooing to the white hairs you thought  
looked distinguished.

I favored those hairs, isolated in pigment-  
less streaks, and with my lips I tucked them  
behind your ears.

Now there was not enough hair for a nest,  
so I slipped the strand inside my mouth  
and swallowed it whole,

then wondered if it curled in ribbons  
through my core, if it grew thicker,  
more iridescent,

if it replaced my bones' soft marrow  
with clear thread, if like Arachne's,  
my body was no longer mine

but the hair's. I touched the tips  
of my fingers and toes, looking for  
traces of gossamer—

touched the warm center of my stomach  
for ways I may have cocooned you  
inside of me.

## Conjure Lady

She had soapsuds on her hands when her father's friend, a man with crow-colored eyes set unevenly above a round brown nose, clambered up the front porch steps. He was going on about an old woman, a widow, who sat by herself in the back pew of the church and who sat by the creek, stones churning in her hands over and over until they were polished cat eye marbles.

He said the night before his dogs, three coonhounds put to bed in a fenced-off lot, wouldn't stop barking. Like anyone would, he went outside with a hand-me-down rifle. He saw nothing at first, only heard wings beating the cool black air. The dogs went silent the moment an owl swooped at his head, its three-toed feet picking up strands of hair.

*It was a big white screechin' owl, he said, it flew at my face over n' over. I figured it was rabid, acting all queer-like. I shot its left wing and it flew haphazard back into the trees.*

But what had him shaking was the old woman walking down his dirt road, sunlight playing on white tufts of hair, her left arm in a homemade sling, a spot of red bleeding through.

*Her hands just kept rolling those stones, conjuring sure 'nuff.*

My grandmother shook her head, rinsed the soap from her hands, told him not to drink before going to bed. She left the man standing in the doorway, went to find her father.

The stones in her pockets clicked against each other. They were still oblong, not quite round.

## Vessel

An old wives' dream interpretation  
states a barrel of fish foretells  
pregnancy— that of the dreamer  
or of a close relation.

I wonder how many times  
my grandmother found a barrel  
mysteriously left on her front porch,

and I wonder how many times  
heat bloated the wood— a smell  
rising from rotting chum.

Maybe the dreams all ended the same,  
her leaving the fish, whole or not,  
on the porch steps— not sure  
what to do with them.

Maybe it was easier to spread the fish  
and red water over a garden plot, fertilizing  
bougainvillea and household herbs, when  
the barrels couldn't have been her own.

My mother said that with each miscarriage  
her first symptom was a dragonfly hovering  
a little too long.

In the Phoenix urban sprawl, the flicker of  
iridescent wings attracted to dreamt water  
isn't uncommon— the sun playing mirages  
on asphalt.

There have been no dreams of barrels  
for awhile, but I've come home to find  
my partner has bought a fish tank—  
a blue light illuminating empty water.

## Something

Dream:

The fish bowl is boiling over  
 hissing blue-green lights  
 something is sparking snapping  
 like high-pitched fingers  
 water is churning pouring into the carpet  
 a sea-snake and goldfish spill over the edge

Interpretation:

The fish are toxic do not eat  
 you will be disappointed

Dream:

Something is caught inside my mouth  
 I slide in two fingers past cheeks  
 full of cotton bottle caps saliva damp weeds  
 the something regenerates repopulates  
 the something is live inside my mouth withering  
 and pregnant and so full

Interpretation:

You are repressed do not talk  
 there is nothing to say

Dream:

My front tooth is loose  
 I touch it and it falls into my pocket  
 molars and canines become impressionable soft  
 rocking in gums as wide as moats  
 something inside my mouth requires more room  
 I'm giving it more room

Interpretation:

Give it more room

**Taxi***Japanese taxi drivers report ghostly passengers after 2011 tsunami*

I left brine along splits  
of leather seat cushions,  
planted barnacles and anemones  
into grey fluff erupting like surf  
dirtied by decades of passengers.

The calendar stuck to the dashboard  
was years off, the months moving  
like fish away from me. I closed  
my eyes and the lids crusted shut.  
Saltwater swam under thin skin.

I wanted away from water. I wanted  
the city I had trouble remembering.  
The driver turned from buildings toward  
a beach farther down the coastline. I tried  
to correct him, but a sea slug

was wrapped around my tongue,  
its slime all I could taste. I wanted  
to open the door, roll out onto asphalt  
yet the coral of my fingers snapped  
against the latch.

The taxi drove off-road into sand, past  
tourists, stopping when the tires became  
wet. A soft wave seeped through window  
cracks, taking my body with it.

I heard the driver say *welcome home*.

### Phoenix Lights, 1997

Lights, too urine-yellow to be stars,  
were seen above the desert landscape,  
illuminating ranch hands in trailers,  
and even the governor as the bulbs  
made their way to the city center.

The governor quickly made a statement  
on the lights' origin, said they were  
flares from an F-16.

*A decade earlier my grandmother  
saw a single white light floating  
the perimeter of the house.*

*Always in a straight line, always  
on the nights she couldn't locate  
my grandfather.*

The lights, in geese-like formation,  
were seen from one end of the state  
to the other.

*After several weeks, my mother  
and uncle, both younger than  
I am now, saw a bright white  
when searching the backyard.*

Thousands reported the lights,

*My grandfather didn't believe  
any of it, said it was his family's  
cry for attention.*

an unidentified craft, maybe alien,  
maybe something from the nearby base.

*One night, my grandfather, hours late,  
swung a leg over the wrought iron gate.  
The wisp-like light found him.*

Later the governor would recant  
his statement, would say the lights  
were otherworldly.

## Blasphemy

It would be best for the Antichrist  
not to come as something expected.

Not a jackal nor a pig, not the cat lying  
on my chest, suckling the tail folded

between its legs. The ideal body  
is certainly not a man's,

but a cow's. Best to be standing  
in a field, eyes glazed by three

full stomachs and overlooked  
as cars drive by, best not to be

slaughtered, best to be a domestic  
Trojan horse brought home

from a corner store— your cold  
wet influence siphoned into bottles,

served with breakfast and  
sat next to the bread. You'd fear

only the intolerant and the vegan.  
Though one of these, not knowing

your intentions, may cast you  
in gold and worship you.

I, with my weak gut, could not  
partake of you, could only watch

from the shade of my patio  
as I do now—

in the field next to my house  
an artist collects bovine urine

for the brightest yellow paint,  
and a woman has her mouth on

a soft white udder, drinking up  
everything the cow knows.

**Idol**

My grandmother chastises me  
when I use the Lord's name in vain,  
tells me to call on someone that knows me,

and because *someone* is close to *something*,  
because men, too, are animals,  
I call to a cow in the pasture.

The pasture makes an island of my home,  
green around all four walls—  
green that keeps a particular cow fed.

The others are starving, though there  
is plenty to eat— a mother cow has  
chewed through her calf's tail.

The healthy bright-eyed Jersey stands apart  
not because the others are dying, but because  
they twitch flies away, and rub their heads against

the electric fence over and over until  
white foam pushes cud from their mouths.  
She hates their weakness, their reliance on instinct.

I know this because the good cow tells me.  
It's her face I wake up to, her textured nose  
leaving clouds on window panes.

She looks at me naked in bed and  
I show her all of my skin, the chaffed  
red of my inner thighs.

She tells me her name.

## The Denunciation

People talk about a Second Coming,  
but they never seem to mention  
a new Mary—

another teenaged virgin, wide-eyed,  
accepting, favored by both God  
and Gabriel. Maybe the first

was good enough, loved enough.  
Maybe a pink fetal Jesus wants  
no other home, says

*Nothing beats First Mary's womb.*

Maybe the Holy Father is getting  
tired of tantrums

and somewhere in Nazareth  
rocks tumble from a cave.

Maybe a woman or what used to be  
a woman comes out of the earth—  
her bones rehydrate, grow stronger,

grow new meat, fresh organs,  
soft brown skin, her everything  
flowering open.

Though God might notice a flaw here,  
might notice Death has touched Mary  
a little too much, might say

*She isn't exactly a virgin, is she?*

Maybe God turns to his son, says

*Go back as something else, something  
more likeable.*

And maybe in a desert, a mother  
starts looking for her son.

**God-like**

My sister says her pet rabbit  
is the Second Coming,

says the rabbit— old, black-furred,  
and de-sexed— suffered for three days.

He scratched his right ear, trying  
to find relief from the mites burrowed

in the fleshy lining. A small cut  
from a nail opened into a sore.

The sore became infected, abscessed,  
grew along the side of his face

and closed his eye and soft nostril.  
The rabbit was taken to a vet, put down.

My sister was told he'd be cremated,  
his ashes spread across a dog park

somewhere in another part of town.  
The day after his death, a Sunday,

the rabbit reappeared in his cage.  
His breathing was regular, the right

side of his face— a healing pink mass.  
Besides his resurrection, I asked

why she thought her rabbit  
was the Messiah. My sister said

it all made sense— the way he'd  
flip his food bowl over when angry,

the way he'd watch her so intently,  
his eyes measuring the morality

of everything she did, the constant  
squeaks of judgment.

### **Things I Learned Living in the South:**

The summers are all afternoon.  
Everything blends together.

It's not humidity that makes the air thick.  
It's hornets and sweat bees.

If you are stung by a hornet, have a grandfather  
gumming snuff on a wrap-around porch spit

the black goo onto the sting. I'm sorry to say  
there's nothing to do about sweat bees. But

if you want to, a lid of vinegar attracts  
the fruit flies that weasel their way

through screen doors.  
Everything is invasive.

Kudzu blankets the ground green  
and twines around telephone poles

that sprinkle mountain sides and sprout  
through burial grounds.

Snakehead fish have gotten into reservoirs,  
and it is said they eat everything in their path,

including cows too close to bodies of water.  
This is possibly true.

Everything is hungry.  
Teenagers in truck beds parked behind theatres

slowly become one as they taste  
their lovers from soft core to wet chin—

the sweat running thicker and sweeter than  
any molasses. And like sweat bees,

I was attracted to your body's natural salt.

## Things We Did in Oceanside, OR

You tell me how everything is  
my first time. Well, most things.

Ankle deep, we only last in the cold  
Pacific a few minutes before sidestepping  
shells, bonfire charcoal, and late-season  
tourists littering the sand.

You take me to a dingy two room  
aquarium full of worm-like fish,  
and seals shoved into a small enclosure.  
For five dollars we throw chum over  
Plexiglass to fat awaiting mouths.

The next four hours we drive from  
full campground to full campground,  
farther inland with each try.

You complain about the lack of  
planning, then remember this would  
have been my first time camping.

We park at a large chain grocery store  
and fold down the back seats of your  
too-small car. We try familiar things  
under my new red sleeping bag, but  
there isn't enough room.

You fall asleep like nothing is wrong.

### Body Language

Place your tongue between my lips  
 enter sovereign land soft pink easily  
 invaded like kudzu snake  
 past the pallet of my mouth reaching  
 ancestral places where the word  
 for snake is *inadv*

it lives in three realms

land your feet on concrete  
 sky snake's back beaded in lightning strikes  
 wet places its bottle-nosed head

curled inside my chest touching the tip  
 of your tongue now swollen matching  
 my grandmother's child limbs welted red

**Body Art**

*After Russell Edson*

There was a cat in the corner of a house's living room. The cat had white whiskers and a handful of nails on each foot. Each nail was clear and thin, angled into a crescent. The cat, cleaning itself in the living room's corner, turned toward the lady of the house and said *Lick yourself, so I can paint on you something pretty with my face-full of whiskers and your thick human saliva. Afterwards, I'll carve into you red and pink swirls, mandalas worshiping the universe in which you think you're in charge.* The house's lady lifted her arm, rolled up a sleeve, ran her tongue over pale soft hairs, and said *I've always wanted to be pretty.*

### Goat Sonnet

A goat chewed through his tether,  
trailing the frayed leather strip between his legs.  
He grazed yards and rectangular porch flowerpots  
until he looked through a window and found a woman  
by herself. He watched her sweep floors, dry dishes,  
can what was left of the vegetables he ate, all the while  
talking to herself or maybe the goat as he was always outside.  
He liked how slow she moved, how her breasts rubbed against  
a thin linen housedress, the way she grazed the kitchen  
countertop, a teapot, the couch far off. The goat  
was sure she did the same in other rooms, knew  
she teethed on the bedside table, the bed.

He loved that the woman was tethered to the house,  
waiting for him to chew through the window.

**An Observation**

A woman is watched by a goat.  
She notices him at each window,

his nose leaving small round imprints.  
She has stopped cleaning the glass with

blue liquid and the hem of her housedress.  
The woman is accepting the goat and

the trampled plants he eats. She is canning  
vegetables a little early this year,

placing Ball jars on the highest kitchen shelf,  
arching her back, her chest stressing against

the linen of her housedress. She thinks the goat  
likes it, that his salmon tongue lolls from his mouth,

tasting his own coarse-haired chin,  
a little like her last husband.

## Preparation

A woman taps an egg  
on the edge of a bowl,  
so her husband will have  
breakfast at the time he likes.

Like castor oil the egg's  
membrane spills from the shell,  
the yoke replaced by a blood speckled  
chick. Its fetal eyes look up at the  
woman from the bowl's cup of flour.

She pauses only for a second,  
shifts the chick through the flour  
before rolling the small bird in the  
liquid yellow of an unfertilized egg,  
rolling it, then, in bread crumbs.

The chick sticks to her palm  
as she carries it to the coop, a bucket  
of feed in her clean hand. The hens,  
who know only instinctive need, won't  
taste the difference on their bud pink tongues.

But again, the woman pauses, longer this time.

She turns back to the house, her heels  
leaving small moons in the dirt. In the  
kitchen she lays the chick on the open  
belly of a skillet, cushions each side  
of the small thing with butter, hums  
as it cooks.

The woman serves her husband breakfast.

## Snake Lightning

My uncle, who didn't fare well with his last two sets of in-laws, wanted to impress his new wife's parents. He bought a fancy cowboy hat: black, pinched front, a band of snake skin around its base.

As soon as his wife's father opened the door my uncle began showing off the hat.

*That band is genuine rattler skin.  
It was a damn pretty snake, sure 'nuff.*

His father-in-law shut the door in his face. No man wearing any part of a rattlesnake would enter his house.

My uncle sat in his car, while his wife played go-between. She said her father was superstitious, believed the old folktales, thought rattlesnakes attracted lightning because of the bolted design of their scales.

My uncle, who thought it was all nonsense, refused to remove the hat. His wife, who thought both men were too prideful, had dinner with her parents.

To do something useful while he waited my uncle decided to give the car a wash at one of those do-it-yourself places.

The car was mid-rinse when it lurched, shoving my uncle into the steering wheel. Before he could taste his busted lip, the lights dimmed and the doors at either end of the carwash began opening and closing.

He ran outside, leaving his car sitting in neutral. He looked up at the building, saw the blackened brick, the smoking electrical panel, saw a single cloud floating above him.

My uncle threw his new hat with its genuine snakeskin band at the carwash and started the walk back to his in-laws'.

## Grazing

A man's cow doesn't want  
to like the goat next door—

the way he looks at his owner,  
a woman who the cow thinks

she could look like if she lost  
a set of legs, if her snout were to

flatten against her face, if long hair  
grew from her head.

The woman doesn't seem  
to mind the goat as he chews

through the rope around his neck,  
and noses all of her house's windows.

The cow counts smudge marks, and  
wonders how the wet nostrils would

feel against her Jersey flesh, how it would  
feel to be caught in his lopsided grin.

The cow imagines the goat jumping  
the fence into her field, but the goat's

bearded chin lies against a window pane.  
Neither seems to notice the cow's owner,

a man with a thick built and face clean-shaven,  
a man who looks nothing like a goat

as he walks through yards and enters  
the woman's back door.

**For N.**

I always told myself  
I'd never dedicate a poem  
to a lover, but here we are.

Or well here I am, writing this,  
while you are three-hundred miles  
away, oblivious.

You never understand my poetry,  
only tell me the words you think  
sound pretty, like I don't do that

on purpose. Like I don't tell you  
stories just so we can laugh together.  
Like the one about my mother

instructing me to find her white sage  
growing on the reservation, because  
for some reason this would be better

for smudging. And when I didn't  
bring her any, she found it to be  
a sign when the shrub began

to grow in her yard. You and I  
laughed at how I am an unbeliever,  
how neither of us would ever bless

our home. I only made fun of you  
for a little while when you bought  
small sticks of holy wood to burn.

Just for the smell you said,  
something about it reminding  
you of home.

I won't lie I've been burning  
the sticks you left behind,  
smudging my apartment

with a campfire scent that smells  
like you or the childhood home  
I imagine you having.

## Persuasion

There's a woman in my town  
with a glass left eye, her right  
has fogged grey. Sometimes I help  
her with groceries. She tells me stories  
she doesn't think I'll believe.

Her sister had a way with animals,  
spoke to them through closed lips  
by silent vibrations or maybe  
by quick moving eyes— both of hers  
soft and clear.

She also had a way with their father  
who would hum only in his youngest  
daughter's presence, and as he hummed  
he'd forget his other girl-child, two sons,  
the crops rotting with age, the pig  
half-butchered.

I once asked the glass-eyed woman  
about her mother and received a laugh  
in response— after giving birth to the sister,  
that's all the mother could do.

Between snorts she choked on food  
and water, laughed in her sleep when  
exhaustion finally took her, and during  
a deliverance at the pastor's house,  
she died from malnutrition.

The woman, her groceries unpacked,  
remembers getting lost in the woods  
after a picnic lunch with her sister.  
The girls walked arm in arm, sweaters  
pulled tight— the weather turning cold.

They wandered through the night.  
Sugar maples and kudzu-covered ground  
all looked the same. The next evening  
they came across a living being,

a cottontail. The sister bent on her knees,  
eye level with the rabbit, who began to  
gnaw and claw its own belly—

the red gush kept the girls warm  
for awhile, and its meat was cooked  
over a simple fire.

A girl, now elderly, tells me how  
her sister smiled wide at the carnage,  
how she said she'd only told the cottontail  
they were cold and hungry. It had merely  
offered itself out of kindness.

And I, standing in the woman's kitchen,  
wonder if the rabbit knew the sisters  
were only meters from home.

## Sound

A woman swaddles small bats  
found in the back corner of her barn—

their mother taken by a cat or  
broom-chased by a husband.

She centers the bats on receiving blankets  
stained by pups and afterbirth, the edges  
chewed by nesting rodents.

The woman tucks the cloth around each  
furred body, holds the bundle to her chest,  
croons a ballad her husband no longer sings.

She's sure his lips and tongue have dried,  
wonders what he's cured them with.

The bats' pink mouths work plastic nipples  
in and out, and with arthritic fingers she rubs  
their brown tufted heads.

Her husband, entering the house from outside,  
steps in front of her and flails his fat hands  
at the flannel bundles.

His mouth moves in the shape of *babies*,  
and *bats*, and *no*. He may be saying  
something about rabies,

he may be saying he can't love her  
like this. Or maybe he's saying that if

held close, she could feel  
his reverberations too.

## Menagerie

My uncle is fond of small animals: chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, the occasional groundhog before it gets too large. He collects them from roadsides, from the deep place under the patio where sick things crawl off to die. Friendly with a taxidermist, he takes the animals to be stuffed. My uncle places them tenderly on shelves, places them like they still feel the unevenness of the wood. He gives each a name, dusts them regularly.

His new wife tries to understand this affection. She goes to a shop in the nearest city, spends too much on a great horned owl, its taxidermied feet clawed around a piece of hollowed tree. She thinks the owl's outspread wings and eyes the color of a harvest moon are the epitome of the wild her husband loves.

My uncle grimaces at the owl, at the sharp curve of talons, at the beak that could shear bone like an aluminum can. He doesn't tell his wife he prefers the small side of nature, the side he has some control over. He goes ahead and sits the owl on the fireplace mantel, pretends the bird doesn't stare at him every time he walks by.

My uncle's wife notices how the dust covers her gift. The great horned owl notices this too, becomes jealous. Slowly each squirrel, rabbit, chipmunk, and young groundhog disappears, leaving clear spots on the shelves. My uncle blames his wife, asks what she's done with his critters, says she's never liked them—the way their small glass eyes glisten. She says she isn't the culprit, asks where she'd hide the animals anyway. Says, *Don't you know owls are harbingers?*

**Performance Art**

A cat tucks a child in bed, lays a husband and a wife next to their offspring. The cat walks around the house for awhile, the rooms somewhat familiar. The cat doesn't mind the muddy paw prints it leaves, doesn't mind that it was buried in the backyard. The cat has no concept of time, only knows that it now breathes. Knows it woke on the child's bed, curled around his feet. Knows that the people are smaller, lighter, and so tired. The cat doesn't wonder about this, but wonders why the light streaming through the house's windows dims, brightens, then dims again.

A cat crawls in bed with its people— so comfortable it stops breathing.

### **Appalachian Báthory**

She didn't like foxes, crows, or  
most men, didn't like how they  
wasted so much of a kill.

It was up to her to use what  
was left of a chicken when one  
of them found its way into her coop.

She'd take any strewn feathers  
and pluck what was left for pillows  
and a comforter that wasn't quite down.

Bones and beaks sounded pretty  
in the wind, but when it came to  
the feet she didn't want them  
pickled like speckled fetal pigs.

So the feet, too, were hung on  
her front porch. The untouched meat,  
raw or cooked, made good bait.

It was the blood that was tricky.  
At first she kept it in jugs until  
she noticed how smooth her hand  
was under a red smear. She filled

a bath with blood, some oxidized  
blue-green with age. She slid in, and  
though her skin caked brown, she felt  
all the tints of a rose and just as soft.

## Instinct

There's a story about  
an eagle egg that rolled  
from an eagle nest and  
found itself safe inside  
a chicken coop.

A mother hen, thick and mean,  
claimed this large egg, pecked  
away any other hen, and rolled  
her own *nothing special* eggs  
away from her.

The story goes that the eagle,  
once hatched, thought he was  
domesticated and didn't know  
he could fly

until a female eagle flew  
over the coop and recognized  
a familiar form pecking  
the ground.

She reassured the lost eagle  
he was made for flight, though  
the story says he didn't believe her.

But what if the eagle,  
now knowing he was an eagle,  
didn't turn his own kind away?

What if he invited her  
into the coop— where she  
wrapped a taloned foot around  
a soft yellow sibling, squeezed  
a little too tight?

Maybe he watched this,  
and realized why corn feed  
left him hungry, realized why  
spreading his wings or clenching  
his own three-toed feet sometimes  
resulted in death.

Maybe the wild tore  
into the tamed, into the fat hen  
that warmed the eagle's egg-self.  
And while yokes were sucked  
through cracked shells, a farmer  
stood in the distance, indifferent.

## Precautionary

### *On a distant relative baptizing her daughter*

You sent me a picture of your daughter  
being saved, her hair dark and drenched,  
her pink shirt clinging to her nine-year-old  
body— water dripping from the shirt's hem  
onto her feet.

On the picture you wrote *Hallelujah*  
in pencil, like baptism were erasable,  
and I find myself laughing at this,

at how I was confused by her being saved  
in a mountain creek, the Catholic in me  
used to babies and baptismal fonts.

I try not to be hypocritical, since I came  
a little late to the customs of being saved,  
my parents having taken me, and my new  
white dress, to a priest just in case.

I was thirteen when I had my first taste  
of wafer and wine, again a little late.  
My grandmother and I went to Mass,  
paid tithes and offerings, so I could go  
to a private school in a safer part of town.

*Just in case*, my grandmother said.

I haven't been to a church in years,  
and I feel fine with this, fine with  
the water on my forehead drying.

Yet I understand why you chose the  
full immersion of a Baptist. Not for  
your husband, but because the more  
water, the better.

My partner is an atheist, and maybe  
I'm agnostic, but I'm writing a pro vs. con  
list in regards to baptizing any children.

You know, just in case.

### Threefold

My mother instilled in me  
a fear of karma, while her mother  
instilled a fear of thin stick switches  
to the back of the calves.

I have discovered I do not expect  
the positive, that there is no way  
for it to find me, no key-size entry  
for it to make its way back into me.

But I calculate for the negative—  
think if I do this [insert a thing,  
like marrying the man with the  
pretty eyes, like trying to be a writer]  
and times that by three,

what are the chances that a bad  
thing will happen? [insert car crashes,  
stolen belongings, *I-told-you-so* 's]

The above-mentioned man  
tells me I do not let myself enjoy life,  
that I worry too much. [insert that cliché  
over and over]

He says he's figured it, found the root  
of my suffering to be Catholic guilt,  
yet that's too easy.

I fear my problem is one so inherent,  
there's no way to solve for it, no way  
to divide it from the soft skin on the  
back of my legs.

### **Feminine Secrets**

A girl's aunt told her  
men came in two kinds:

those who nipped fox-like  
at soft flesh until nothing  
was left recognizable, and

those who, like big black birds,  
scavenged what was left.

The girl asked if women,  
too, were animals.

The aunt answered

that men think women are plump  
white chickens made ignorant by  
household chores and *the want  
to be layin' eggs.*

She held a finger to her lips,  
thin skin speckled black with chew,  
told the girl that womankind had  
something even the best man  
couldn't see.

Multiplicity:

A woman could be content  
in her nest, new life growing  
from her warmth,

or she could tire of being man's  
kill and make her belly heavy with  
buckshot— every bite of her poisonous.

The aunt leaned in, breathed  
tobacco in the girl's face, said,

*Sometimes a woman learns to talk  
for herself.* This leads, she explained,  
to walking upright and into the woods  
with a rifle in hand— *protection from  
all kinds.*

## How to Dissect Culture

Divide me into the five pieces you think you can handle.

Hair:           an extension of self  
                  nerves outside the body

Throat:        snake curled through vocal cords  
                  allowing you to hear only ancestral grunts

Breast:        your hand draping from my shoulder  
                  the whiteness of it all blending into  
                  the fuzz of a peach

Stomach:      a valley of kudzu  
                  everything invasive

Feet:          arches collapsed from flat land  
                  and miles of red dirt

### **I Do Not Write Political Poems**

I write about my grandmother,  
her sunbaked terra cotta skin  
cracked by scars from a kerosene  
fire, and the rerouting of tendons  
in her arms.

I do not write about Sioux elders  
my grandmother's age, the same  
spectrum of warm skin— the flesh  
around their eyes splitting open  
like crude flowers from tear gas  
and rubber bullets.

It's my grandmother's stories  
I write about, small things warped  
by superstition and memories one  
does not talk about at the dinner table.

I do not translate living on the land,  
or big black snakes. I write about myself  
in relation to my grandmother, how she sees  
me as something so other, how I'm not sure  
if she likes me, how I miss her.

I do not imagine myself standing  
in a cold field, or on a reservation  
I have no familial ties to. I imagine  
myself with burning skin and limbs  
too heavy to be my own.

## Out of Style

My partner took me to a museum  
for a Native fashion exhibit, though  
I don't know much about clothing.

We took our time walking around,  
reading descriptions of each piece,  
and looking at artist bios.

There was plenty of beadwork,  
feathers, and different sorts of animal  
hide. Though some clothing included

designs from pottery shards or baskets,  
they were modern and what I think is  
called high-fashion. Other pieces were

more classic. Like the cinched waistlines  
and dart-work of 1950s dresses— the type  
I can imagine my grandmother wearing.

Sportswear and skateboards were also  
on display, made for and by urban Natives.  
I knew the last names of several

of these designers, Yazzie and Begay,  
from years of living in Phoenix. My mind  
has forgotten it now, maybe out of shame,

but I also recognized a Cherokee surname  
when I saw it. One my grandmother has  
mentioned in old stories, one I can't connect

to a face. This artist had made a scarf  
printed with the Cherokee alphabet,  
and I'm sure Sequoyah never expected

his lettering to be fashionable, but  
it feels appropriate that it's worn  
around the throat.

I try to imagine myself taking the scarf  
from its clear display case to pull tight  
around my neck.

Though, it would have clashed with  
my outfit, and fallen loose around my  
shoulders. In the same way Cherokee falls

broken from my mouth, in the same way  
my hand can only write Cherokee words  
with English letters.

## Reunion

### Cherokee Reservation, NC

My cousin, six and cleft-lipped,  
curls his tongue against a patchwork  
pallet. He is practicing my name, the scars  
between his nose and new lip wrinkling.

Soon he's comfortable talking to the  
strange kin from out west, wants to  
catch fireflies.

I tell him I've never seen one.

He grabs my hand, pulls me through  
our great-grandfather's front door.

We're only on the lawn a few minutes  
before his arms shoot out and there's  
a flickering between his fingers.

*If you squeeze their bottoms just  
right all of the juices come out.*

With phosphorescent fingers, he draws  
a wide streak on each side of his nose.  
I imagine him several shades darker,  
skin like our grandparents, little chief  
with the mix-matched face.

Unlike him, our ancestors never  
glowed, but blended into craggy  
mountain caves, survived removal—

none of the scars on their earth-tone  
bodies came from a scalpel's  
small precision.

With my cousin's war paint fading,  
we are organized into a family photo.  
The youngest generation is in front  
where our grandparents' brown skin  
is washed out.

## VITA

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