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What if this girl has a yellow Labrador?

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WHAT IF THIS GIRL HAS A YELLOW LABRADOR?

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 Torpey

Spring 2021

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Acknowledgements

All that I am, and all that I hope to be is largely due to the tireless efforts of a single mother.
Thank you for being patient and unconditional with your love, mom.

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Vita

Hawks Have Spots

Matthew 6:26

I took a breath in then looked over the face of the ledge.
The wind calmed and the late autumn sun settled behind
mountain tops as the prairie fire's smoke backscattered
the last ray of light in a blood orange hue across the basin.
Spread wings of a high range hawk catch smokey light,
absorbing color onto the feathers streaming along her back,
as she veers down the ridge and opens to glide. It is a moment
of defiance, standing atop a mountain looking down
on the back of a bird. I wish I could call out to her—to tell her
I see her.

This section of the range looks like the headstones of angels
whose wings were too large to bury so the tops turned to
granite to hide and find refuge. Trails below weave like veins
and flowers bloom from halos releasing the light that guided us
to our destined vantage points whispering, *consider the
birds of the air.*

I

Acanthis

After reading Melissa Kwasny

See? They swarm in the air screaming
at decibels that extend through wind
and reach other Magpies'; calling them to join:
Look, look what damage has been done!
Some twenty something, maybe thirty
birds circle the noise in mourning until
finally dispersing in deafening tranquility. Look,
I don't know what love is or what damage it has done
to women—nor do I have the wisdom to tell
you otherwise. But, for all the twine in my pocket
I'd exchange this temporary life for a moment
in the whirlwind; their wings fluttering against
my beautiful body—the loudness. We all have
false expectations of Mortality, how sweet we hope
her tender claws could lift us up into the sky
and let our past selves find solitude. So how far
is the Magpies' ceremonious funeral from our own
mothers' and their daughters if there is nothing
that indicates when to die, when to scream,
and when to fly in silence?

Cabin Blueprint

There is a spot near the river with good soil for flower
beds and a salsa garden to harvest and jar in fall
where wheatgrass is tall enough to tickle the pads of fingertips
and blanket a lone doe without babies seeking refuge from cold
the wind blows, as you know, tall pines on the east side take
the edge off without worrying about branches falling on top of a roof
loud howls only those from the coyotes' songs echoing could make
a beautiful melody with a windchime placed near the porch light
you'll find that the neighbors are good people they'll bring
blackcurrant wine and buttermilk biscuits to watch snow
gather upon the windowpanes they'll tell old stories
under candlelight and a single strand of your mother's
old Christmas lights she didn't think worked all that well,
but you found the faulty bulb to light the house in warm
wool colors to match the cedar.

If you decide to stay, you can build a foundation and raise
the lumber and place an engraved sign that says welcome home
and let the apple cider fill the room with cinnamon and sleep
in your bed wrapped in a wool blanket and dream
about staying here forever if that's what you want.

Sunshine Girl Learns about Hibernation

7 days on, 7 days off

I retrace my footsteps
wondering where I went

wrong as a daughter
always ending back

with feet on a Welcome
mat of the blue house.

White trim, trimmed
lawn with tulips, with

petunias, and a dog;
the creek of a metal knob

entering the family
room of bright blocked

window's light. Dust
on oak laid floors

pink shoes thrown
to the side, *No shoes*

in my house, I turn

in a kitchen of bluebell

wallpaper, stained

vinegar from the ketchup

splatter, a broken rail

condiment shelf. Turn

a dark den, down

stairs, basement stairs

I walk away, I am not

allowed there. Coat rack

packed down by her

back, his forearm across

her collarbone. I am not

allowed to say what—

go to your room.

Jersey cotton sheets

pink room, pink walls

P!nk CD, pink pillows.

A small girl, a girl
crying. Splayed under

a white bed canopy.

Listen: it grows

the creek of the uneven
floor when she comes

to sing small girl
to sleep; *you are my*

sunshine, my only
sunshine you make me

happy. With apologies,
a pinky promise to not

tell anyone, that *it's*
okay that *he is just tired*.

The house stills.

I stand here looking in

wishing someone would
have done the same, but

all I want is to stop
anyone knocking at the door.

Sore Must be the Storm

You threw a remote across the room
it slipped through the cracked door
where I stood to ask if you were okay
it hit me square in the nose
I bled down my shirt
droplets on wood floor
leaned over the white bathroom
sink turned red I tried to push
toilet paper up my nostrils
You said *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*
as a clot of blood drops
I said *my brains!*

White Flashes of Their Wings

Deep chokecherry breeze as sun resigns
closing the purple tulips' blossoms.
Here, Magpies sit on a barbed wire line

waiting for destruction upon some
forgotten highway; pecking away spine
muscle, squawking their credos of solemn

songs; their burdens heard within pines.
Do nests of twig, twine, and sap faucet
drips hold the eggs of divine

babes with hollow bones? Who will learn caution
every time a flash of violent bedtime
impact wakes their sleepy eyes? Exhaustion—

rest when they leave, but without proper wings
babies fall from nests and splay their naked limbs.

Hollow Bones

When you hold a new baby in the flesh,
their naked body covered in goop, freshly pink
screaming in the stale room, perhaps an apology isn't
the first procedure.

You're not sorry. Baby, no *shh shh*. You welcome
her. *Hello, baby bird*. She'll grow and become
what it is expected of her.

But can the baby be less—
can the bones be hollowed? Yes,

if this is true that the stress on the womb
pushes against the body
of that which connects
the protected colcasac of flesh, small
tufts of fine hair, tiny fingers

and tiny bones of that which doesn't
even know she exists yet. Tell her

Shh shh, baby. The deliverer

must be hollow too if she is to fly down
and give this new momma a baby,
soft-lit light through the window and wrapped
in sunshine paper, whispering *it's okay*,

you'll go numb. June daybreak—
the flesh of the warm season, strong gusts of
wind to push hollowed bones
out of their shells and into
an uncomfortable flight.

Butterfly Weed

Eight, and a boy calls me
Dani-elion. A play on Dani
and the yellow topped weed
in the grass field where we play
kickball at morning recess.

Roses and tulips are pretty
hard to keep in Wyoming.
The wind is strong—forceful
gusts carry weightless
seeds all over;

Dandelion is tenacious
against the wind. Often
a nuisance—
a surprise sweet treat
to a butterfly.

Eight, night falls, pressed
flowers on my desk lay both
flat and full bodied in color.
I cry for my younger self

standing in that dry field,
frozen, filled with sadness,
an image of diffident flora
stalks and leaves
the light off her skin.

My body, like petals, soft
bruises from sharp honey
bound words to tangle in
the tendrils of hair
twisted into a bun.

Little Griefs

Birthstone: Pearl

I.

Afternoon and you ask your grandmother to lock the pearl
necklace around your throat before she makes lunch.

Gaunt little long neck toddler, pearls hanging down past
the collarbone, honey curls unfurling—tell me,
what is it like to look in the dusty mirror and have no
desire to understand how beauty encapsulates?

Those hang off the body hand-me-downs
swaying rhythmically with little bones hiding underneath;
pearls slide off the string and float in the air: stars in
a new wood paneled constellation. What a treasure
to waste the days unseen and in fearfully
made flesh that dances in the sunshine peeking
through window panes, rainbow reflections
shimmering across tippy toes, as the pearls
absorb into your skin.

II.

Toes dipped into the creek you follow her
into the cold current. She says, *It's okay, you'll go
numb*. So you follow in her footsteps careful to not
slip on moss covered rocks to keep up with your
older cousin. Too much time is never wasted in water,

two mop-headed girls hidden by the willows with stab
 stick for sleeping bullfish. What would you have done
 if you actually got one at the end of your spear? Part of me
 believes violins would play in a wondrously made tune
 as you both shrink and fall into the water, swimming
 beneath the current, gliding around the rocks, letting your
 body become freckled with flecks of fools gold tilled
 from the sand. You feel every prick of cold, every
 uncomfortable touch, and still fill the creek with laughter
 bubbles that surface to the top and echo
 down the canyon of pines.

III.

Science class, and you learn about oysters. *Ostreidae*.

The man with chewing tobacco in his lip dribbles
 spit off his chin and talks on about pearls and their beauty.

Thumb pressed against your cheek, you guide
 inner mouth towards teeth and chew the tissue.

It hurts. Why don't you stop? Those wounds
 of the softest sections of your skin and muscle
 create ravines for blackberry seeds you eat at lunch.

Perhaps, the seeds will act as a grain of sand—unwelcomed,
 buried into the flaps of mouth, exposed in its most
 vulnerable state and eventually, when you learn
 how tight the skin pulls to heal, you'll present a pearl.

Find understanding in complexities; spit

the pearl into the little hands hiding in your pocket.

Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water

I. Stay Hidden

An Oak table, lined with casseroles
and fern, I spot you. Beady eyes.
Tucked limbs under body—
little frog, little voyager.
Would you like someone to be honest
with you? I'm only a kid, one
who is unsure which foot goes
first and which foot follows
but, I can tell you little green tree
frogs, like the ones in my books
about the Amazon, do not belong
in the cold Wyoming desert.
I prick your skin with my pointer
finger to see if you are alive, or just
pretending, you give me
a gentle wink. Earlier that morning,
I told my mother the oil from the
cheesy casserole lining the pan
made a greenish yellow slim
and I didn't want to eat it. The color
reminded me of the whites of my
grandmother's eyes, jaundice

from body failure. Pancreatic cancer.

What would you care, anyway?

I tuck the leaves in a way where no

one will find you, letting it be

our little secret.

II. Protector

Calico kitty cat, collared, sits
in the window tail hanging down—
are you mad I caught you?
My little hands swooped you
and your sister up as freshly born
babies in the alley and I brought you
into the house, placed you
in my baby doll stroller and pushed
you around my grandmother's home.
When he learns I have kittens
he sighs. Points to the window
as your momma cat sits and watches.
He says, *That momma misses her*
babies. I pass them along to
the callused hands of my grandfather.
Momma cat takes calico in
her mouth, leaves red on the
Welcome mat, comes back later
to swoop her up and take her home.
Later that evening, momma cat
comes back, meowing—crying
between breaths, boney back
rubbing up against the door.
I was told to never feed the strays,

but he places bits of kibble in his pocket
opens the door and sits with her.
Feeds her. Tells her she's a *good*
momma. For the next week she comes
back and surrenders. Calico kitty,
your sister lives in my blue house,
I named her Kiara, gave her a
pink collar. He gave you
a black collar to match your colors,
a pendant etched with Spook.
Each morning, my momma wakes
up early to work before work,
delivers the ironing she pressed
all night, and while his
coffee is brewing, I watch the window
and wonder about bugs. Calico
kitty cat, collared, sits in the window
tail hanging down and wonders too.

III. *Silk*

I never liked black. I did not want
to wear this dress. I wanted bows;
bubble gum pink. My momma
pulled me aside, strong grip,
hand clenched around the softest
section of my under arm, her cheeks
tighten: *Just wear the fucking dress.*

I did. At the funeral, my momma
tells everyone the pink silk of the casket
matched the carriage we sat in, downtown
Salt Lake City, as the mountain snow
flurried around us—the lights
of the temple gleamed; forgotten stars.

The last trip before she grew
too weak we flew to California,
met the princesses and Tigger and
Eeyore, flew back, and all cuddled
in the downtown hotel before
driving home to Rock Springs.

I am afraid to cry. My grandmother
told me, *big girls don't cry*. I need to

be a big girl, sitting in the tiny pew,
holding my uncle's hand, black dress,
trying not to think about the different
similarities of warm bodies and dead ones.

IV. Soil

After school, grandpa picks me up—
takes me to his house. He calls me
Molly Munch Mouth, as I raid the fridge,
the drawers, the cabinets for snacks.
I take my haul to the back room,
watching cartoons, a rock on the ground.
A rock? I swoop down and examine
the brownish green rock. The frog.
I prick your skin with my pointer
finger—to see if you are dead, or just
pretending. *Grandpa! Grandpa!*
What? What? I show him the dead creature,
tell him the secret, show him the plant.
He laughs. I pass it along to
the callused hands of my grandpa. He
finds a broche box, my grandmother's,
empties it and places it's body inside.
Grandpa opens the door and sits
with me, and watches me dig a hole
in the pansy and tulip bed to bury the
box. *Here sleeps the silly tree frog.*
I am glad the cat didn't eat you
as a snack. May you sleep in the dirt.

II

Wendigo Den in the Popo Agie Wilderness

*"Lady, what am I doing
with a lung full of dust and a tongue of wood,
knee-deep in the cold and swamped with flowers?"*

-Sylvia Plath, Leaving Early.

I. *Credo*

The Wendigo stood directly
in front of me, slender body
gaunt—emaciated—ashen
skin pulled tight over her
bones. Her eyes sunk deep
into the back of sockets
stained with dried blood
color of blackberry currant.

A crown of skull from a dead
elk secured with twine
through temples rests
on her head and antlers
drape behind her shoulders
centered perfectly with
protruding vertebrae.

She did not see me as
nourishment, instead turned

to take my hand and guide
me to the back of the haven
where bodies of men hung
from branches rope sawing
fissures into the bark.

Magpies pecked the softest
sections of skin pulling
each piece with intention
of deconstructing bodies; bones
to build birdhouses.

II. *Song*

We loosened the ropes. Lowered
the corpses to the earth, what's left
of the bodies, and buried them deep
into the dirt. We baptized their flesh.
Set the hearts to the side for later.
Sought refuge as we pull thick clay
over the men's eyes and hardened jaws
laying them to rest. She sighed
at the sight. Hand in hand I pressed
my forehead against hers, drawing her
close as we closed our eyes and felt
the Magpies flee, the flutter of their wings
circled, leaving the Wendigo and I
standing in a burial ground surrounded
by echoes of Magpies' whisper songs.

III. *Coda*

“take these hearts” she said

“and burn them open

to release

new wildflower seeds to land in soil

it’s time for them to root

the earth is willing to welcome

a new bloom

the field where we stand

in sadness and sorrow

can paint colors

in your eyes and allow you to rest

there is so much time

the bodies we hang

who we hoped would care

let every new petal

say your name

and let every part of them illuminate

through your veins.”

Grandmother's Hair

I pick up the dead wildflowers in the graveyard
I visit when I miss you the most. Petals
of petunias, the same kind that peeked through
spring snow, by a small flower bed near the mailbox
wilted dry from August heat, petals
of daisy growing tall above the grass swayed
with the wind next to the little green house,
black shingled roof, petals of poppy
just like those that bloom too early
to withstand the wind. Gather them in hands
and hope to hold them tight enough not break
into dust before placing their petals into a tea
infuser—unspoken acts of love surround the rich soil
of the woman I hope to grow into
blend the flora
a deep violet hue
the sun sets and the clay mug steams swirls
around tendrils of fine hair and I hope I am as strong
as this tea steeps when I decide to raise a daughter,
that she has the same fine honey
hair as us to sweeten the first slip.

Following in Footstep

The way the silver bristle shines in the morning sun down the honey melon stalk, topped with a purple pom-pom of a flower bloom is not as painful as it appeared. I learned that because you taught me that the glowing angel plant in the meadow could be cut with a Leatherman at the base and stripped of the leaves, down to the spine to a new smooth stalk in hand. You told me to bring peanut butter and raisins picked from my trail mix. Together we ate Elk Thistle ants on a log before the rest of the sleepy campers woke. While you sipped strong coffee and the other girls started rustling out of their tents to make mushy peaches and cream oatmeal, you told me that early birds get a better breakfast.

Girls think I'm crazy
cutting Elk Thistle to eat
yet not one bite left

*

Island Lake, and you built your banana colored fly rod that your grandfather passed on to you and you taught me how to pull the line through the eyelets by pinching a loop of tippet and float. Ashley and I had been bugging you to let us fly fish so you found a rock away from trees, to practice casting and waving our small arms to ten and two and flicking the line out towards the still surface of the morning lake without a snag of a sappy pine at six. You told us fish don't actually hear, that it's an old man's tale to keep people silent as they strip the line, so we took turns practicing while the other stood to the left side and wiggled their butt in the same movement of a trout tail singing, "Here fishy fishy" and we called ourselves fish whisperers.

Her first time casting
a Cutthroat strikes the line hard
the whole basin knows

*

Midafternoon, too hot to fish and no campfire chores, girls gather in a tent to play cards. Ashley and I are your little shadows and instead walk down the sandy hill with you to look at the lake. We stand knee-deep in water, with rolled jeans and all of a sudden Ashley catches a fish with her bare hands; a hunchback trout that cannot swim and instead floats like a forgotten bobber, gasping for air as Ashley shows us on the shore. You, being a biology teacher, knew the fish would die so you offer to kill it and dissect the body so we can see what caused the hump. We feel sad. But, our curiosity wins. You come back, with a Leatherman in hand, and fillet the dead fish so that we can see it was a deformation of the spine that caused a crinkle in the boney back of brook trout. We take pictures with our disposable cameras.

Tuck the remains near
boulders that line the lake shore
birds patiently wait

Emergency Contact

I've collected these wildflowers in bloom to bundle
with old colored rope and lay next to the peak
where you fell five hundred feet to your death.
I don't know your name. You exist to me in an article.
People who care about my safety gifted me a watch
to wear when I went into the backcountry. I tell them
the trails are my veins and if I get lost or hurt
I can only blame my own recklessness for not
paying attention. It doesn't ever bring comfort
to them, so the watch is equipped with topo maps,
satellite access, pedometer, oximeter, heart rate
monitor, compass, altimeter, emergency alert, and
god knows what else. My mom wants me to set
up her phone number as the ICE contact. In the watch,
there is a tiny sensor that alerts contacts
when the wearer has fallen or if you press
a button twice it is a SOS signal and will send
coordinates to the nearest tower and ping your
contact your exact location. It's a bit much
to think about the ways you could die each time
you walk into the wilderness, so I try to tell
my mind to process all this shit I suppress.
Mesa and I walked up here, before the watch,

and we both cried about the weight we carried
up the trails—just over that steep bitch of a ridge.
She told me Lauren called her for help before she
was murdered by her boyfriend, but Mesa didn't
answer because she was at a Jazz game.

I told her my student looked me straight in the eyes
and told me they didn't care if they died, that I did
not do enough to prevent them from using
their father's gun to kill themselves. Something
about being alone and sad together
feels like part of the job description of an emergency
contact. The other part is just a sigh of relief
when you receive that text that says:

We're out and on the road! Call ya in Farson.

If I remember correctly, I didn't tell my mom
that Mesa and I almost got swept away on a river
crossing on that trip until after and mom asked where
my other Keen boot was. I laughed and told her
it was probably covered in algae at the bottom
of a lake. She didn't find it funny, and any other
outcome I probably wouldn't either. What good
would that watch have done then?

It's not like it's waterproof. Anyway, I was told
the campfire would be lit by six and dinner
shortly after. I still have about a mile up and then
another eight down so I better get going. I just wanted

to say I hope you are resting well. But, if I am being honest I think about your climbing partner and mom more than I mourn your death. One watched you fall and had to sit next to your body until a helicopter crew could lift you both out of there. The other received an SOS and some coordinates to your location.

Sky Burial

I explain,

it's a phenomenon!

Sunsets are caused

by the molecules

and particles

that take up invisible space

backscattering—

causing an unexplainable

palette of hues

as the sun falls over the butte.

An old glass bottle

empty

laying there

for me to find;

if I were an apothecary,

I'd use

this bottle

labeling it

Red Desert Clay

Kokanee in Spawning
Boar's Tusk at Dawn
Prairie Fire Flower Top
and put it on a dusty shelf

only returning
when the color had been
forgotten
while writing on
a blank canvas
in need of medicinal imagination.

I never understood why

sending house plants
and flower arrangements
seemed logical
for a funeral

when attendees hardly ever look
up.

But, what else are you to do
when a mother buries her daughter?
Send Lilies;

they are said to restore
innocence back to a soul
once departed.

Their petals soft stokes of an eyelid
and ivory-like freckle painted skin.

If I were an apothecary,
I'd spend my days bottling
up

the colors of a sunset
for all the mourning mothers
who have buried
their daughters

so that sunsets never turn into night

but, remedies rarely are that

easy.

I explain,

the invisible space between
buried daughters
and mourning mothers whose hands

buried them

backscatters—

causing an unexplainable
palette of hues from

holding on
to a paintbrush
she once dipped into
an old glass bottle.

I Think If I Had a Baby Girl, I'd Name Her Eleanor

Against me, Spotted Knapweed tinge their purple wisps tickling my blistered feet. September and I rest under the stars on a bed of Wild Chives and gentle Mountain Tansymustard cradled in the valley below the Cirque of the Towers. Spears of granite shoot into the sky reflecting the mica specks in the same shine as Orion's beaming belt.

Hidden between fallen granite boulders, nestled in the nooks, grows a perfect Columbine. The Columbine cannot see the same sky as I and I feel the deepest sympathy. I can't help but wonder when does a seed of wildflower decides to settle and be complacent and bloom for travelers that long to adore them, and when does a delicate pedal refract into so many hues?

If I were a seed, if I closed my eyes and decided it was time to root, would the earth be willing to guide me where I needed to go, and would the surrounding seeds welcome me? Would I enrich the color palette blooming in an open field, or find my own hidden nook where I can be alone in blossom? This union, drifter to the settler, whatever I may lose, provides the very thing I crave.

Though I hardly know it, I long to be protected and still like the Columbine, but the cold wind outside the tent feels so damn good against my face that I am not ready to go inside and sack up in goose feathers. In the distance, a spotted fawn nestles in sweetly with the Chicory. There she will stay hidden while her momma grazes on tall grass and I will see her flattened bed of flora come morning;

my time will come when the wind settles.

Ladybug

Coccinellidae

Cut from tail fin to gills.

Be mindful not to press

the Leatherman too deep

to avoid puncturing her

guts. *She's a she?* See

the tiny orange bulbs

in a sac; her eggs float

on the surface of lake water.

Will they still hatch? No.

Now, run your thumb across

spine to clear innards.

Don't rip from the gills—

the noise hurts the ear

and heart. Gently remove,

place intestines on

the granite next to you.

Take the Leatherman,

slice the thin casing filled

with black wings, swallowed

bugs. *Poop?* Yes. Just as

suspected, ladybird beetles.

They are all over wildflowers

near my tent. I have one fly left.

Loop head with tippet and twist
twice around to thread back
through then tie it off.

III

Surrendered

I take my small knife and begin carving

into my left chest chamber

until I am holding

my broken compass

heart of mine

in shaky hands.

I will bury the heart

in the clay,

baptizing

murmured flesh in soil

letting the flower's seeds

use what nourishment the heart has

to bloom

beautiful bouquets

of milkweed

as my marker

near a cirque of granite

the west wind

sways the petals

in a dance

mark this spot

I feel most

at peace

with questions I have

no answers to so I may

follow the droplets of blood

forming cairns from the carnage

of my empty chest

chamber back to where

I surrendered

to listen

to understand

in the same way I wish to be

deeply understood.

What Did the Remaining Cabin Whisper as the Pines Ignited?

It might be well to drift despite all difficulties—

fire seems pleasant as sap oozes; dropping tears

of a forgotten rain, leaving single streams of fumes rising

from the carcass cabin's across the way. Ash will drift

lifelessly, washing the sky alabaster, and I'll be forgotten.

She Drew Pictures

-After reading Maya Jewell Zeller's Cemetery by an Empty Barn.

What if this girl has a yellow Labrador, bird dog
and she handpicked him because he was the only one
out of the litter that had a pink nose instead of black
so she wanted to take him home and place a silly collar on
his wrinkled neck with a pendant etched with the name Jake.
While Dad slept downstairs in the basement, darkest place in
the house that not even a sliver of light couldn't peep
through rolled blankets stuffed into the small window
stool, she tiptoed upstairs like a tiny white mouse on laminate
after Mom left for work and she would put the steak knives
that were stashed under her pink pillows back in the kitchen and take
the yellow Labrador outside to play. When he worked nights the days
felt like long winters and the Grizzly Bear that she read about
in her small little books in third grade often made jokes
about not waking the sleeping bear and she was too sad to tell
her teacher that a bear lives in the spare bedroom downstairs
two weeks on two weeks off. She and Jake would go outside
and play in the flower beds and on the dead stump that was cut down
last summer; it made a great platform for Jake to sit like a lion and she
the circus master grabbing her sparkly hula hoop hoping
that the small little puppy would leap from stump through hoop
onto the dirt. They would giggle and he'd zoom across the grass.
Then, as the sun got higher and hotter she'd go inside for a drink—

sunshine iced tea that mom made yesterday morning and leave Jake outside. He started to bark. The iced tea pitcher was too heavy making pours really slow and steady trying not to spill on the floor to cause a mess. She heard the footsteps, heavy, walking up the staircase and she got so shaky that the glass spilled. Dad was woken by Jake's barks and when he turned the corner he said *clean up your fucking mess* and started rummaging through the junk drawer to find a roll of duct tape. Before she could scream he opened the screen and started taping Jake's muzzle shut. The soft silver sticky tape tightened against a small soft fur of a puppy who didn't know any better and just wanted to lick the iced tea off the floor. Dad walked back downstairs into his cave and she sat on the back porch crying because she didn't know how to help and she didn't know what would happen if she tried to take the tape off and she didn't know if it was actually hurting him or just uncomfortable but she imagined that Grandpa would know and if she wasn't so bad at remembering her numbers she give him a ring but she wasn't even quite sure if he would be able to come help. Jake still wagged his tail and she walked him over to the daisies and the petunias that grew and let his little sniffer sniff the petals with such enthusiasm that sometimes he'd give a little sneeze from nose. That next morning she woke up and Jake was gone. Dad said that a farmer outside of town needed a good bird dog to help him keep the crows off the crops and the cows so Jake went to their house that had lots of large fields for him to run and play. Later, when he leaves for work for the night, she asked her mom if Jake

really went to a farm. Or was it like Jazz the black lab who accidentally got out of the yard and hit on the freeway or like Rascal who ran away while she was gone for the weekend at a swimming meet and never came home. Her mom's eyes got sad and she promised that this time the puppy went to the farm with a family, she made sure of it. And the next day at school she drew pictures of farms and puppies running in the wildflowers fields where silly crows sit on the backs of cows waiting to get a bite of zucchini.

Some Get so Drunk Off the Flower Nectar

I kissed you that night in the small apartment building
and a frog jumped out of my mouth. Stuck in my throat
to keep the vomit down, then the frog leapt on your face
because your face had become a lily pad. We chased the frog
around the room, trudging through the mud trying to capture it
in our soft hands, until the frog leapt out the open window
into a field of wild Poppy where it laid relaxed and lousy
and we drowned in the room filled with stagnant pond water.
Leeches attached to our skin and silt veils we floated around
for years hoping that frog would come back to be honest
with us, yelling: *Look, look what damage has been done!*

Cabin St. Cecilia Swing Dancing Hall

He asked her what he should name his new wood cabin. She shrugged sighing. She knew her suggestion would do-si-do out with the Pinedale wind.

Behind the back, hand change, outside turn opened the door, and she thought—
Cecilia. Saint Cecilia. Him a patron and this makeshift cabin built with music.

He bought all the wood for this cabin. Dug the foundation with craft beer, the company he'd backbend for, and pivots for the dogs' run out back.

She admired the work his often goofy hands reversed, turning basic into beautiful and gravity seemed to be on his side—allowing the damn thing

to survive these deafening Wyoming winters. She unpacked the pretzels and dipped a new, softer, dishrag into the sink for coffee mugs and spoons

needing cleaned, later. The push and pull of the wood-burning stove door clicked and sparked flames; loop-de-looping heat and passion and eye contact

a tiny cabin floor scuffed up from boots. She goes. He goes. He goes. She goes—in for a kiss. He leads left-back instead reverse, butterfly kisses her neck and says,

“Good self-control.” His shoulder slides around her, leaving her. She wondered if he was bowing for himself or if he was congratulating her for the tired performance

she had often perfected for his affection. Yet, she often forgot the unspoken rule of the dancefloor, too: swing dancing was about showing off *your* girl.

He didn't want her to fall away break her heart in half, again. Just like Cecilia—she was beheaded by the one who cradled her, sang sweetheart to her, and

ducked out right when the song hit a beautiful rhythm. She was never his partner. It was never about showing her off but keeping their music hidden.

Music faded and a silent profession of false faith sighed from her last breath: at least the cabin was warm and she could watch the snow dim the porch lights.

Circa

A diaphragm of snow separates the cabin from the asthmatic air.

Single stable streams of fumes exhaust from the small brick chimney.

Heaps of fresh powder metastasize down the river banks rising, falling.

Winter is peaceful; nature has palliative care in an abandoned scene.

Some sweet song in warm honey; voiced with smoker's rasp hums.

Occult stage of weathered wood boards that survived many seasons.

Hoarfrost slowly crystallizes treetops, fences, and lungs in breath.

Then, cilia lay and the oxygen of winter gracefully takes the wind away.

A long time ago, winter was a time to paint. Buying cheap canvases,
blank as the snow washed window of the nursing home to inspire her.

Mulled wine droplets on white carpet sit with turpentine cans and
single stable streams of slim rolled cigarette exhaust rise to the ceiling.

Norma painted this cabin; circa '98. I find this painting in my father's shed.

Hands cold from the dropping temperatures; eyes swelling from this

oil painting left in dust. We've been here before, grandma—abandoned,
and you can almost feel the air in my lungs exit the way yours did.

Winter must be the season where cabins and lungs and daughters
are left to survive the harshness of warm bodies we hope would care.

Washing the Vomit Off My Skin After Too Much Wine

Fetal position, legs and back pressed
against the sides of the porcelain tub,
every drop of water falling from above
boiled in a whistling kettle now pools
around my naked body as it sinks deep
into the undertow, skin an unraveling twine
and my bones begin to turn into the petals
of wildflowers that I once wore in a crown
to catch salamanders under lily pads
as they opened their little mouths to sing
 you are queen of butterfly weed
 drunk off the sweet nectar, sweet
 baby, please.

I'm Alright With a Slow Burn

-Title from Kacey Musgraves

the push and pull of flame, the wood burning
stove door clicking to seal the heat, and warm
what we have built as this makeshift haven.

Leaving hot coals to smolder scorned sap
for temporary relief and exit so recklessly.

Tears of ember will drop to cabins across
the sage until rain washes me forgotten.

Lepidoptera

Some sweet song of warmth, honey
swirls in the ceramic mug she's holding
as the morning sun hits the flecks of gold
of her eyes, the calmness controlled in
some sweet song of warm honey.

Wrap these winter bones in unrolled
sunshine paper and love her until she molds
into something stunning, unclothed
with a some sweet song of warmth, honey.

Have you ever watched a moth implode
drunk off the sharp nectar from primrose?
This gift, it comes when she'll rise
to some sweet songs of warm honey.

IV

Wyoming Field Notes to Jane

*"It's just something that's bigger and stronger
than what I am or what anybody is. I feel it."
- Jane Goodall*

I did not trace it leaning over the edge of the peak,
until I opened my eyes to look down the face
and the spread wings of a high range hawk caught
smokey hour sun on the spots of her back
as she veered down the ridge.

*

I did not press it laying in sage until my nose noticed
the coyote in the prairie holding tender venison rotting
from heat between his teeth and magpies landed
on the barbed wire fence patiently waiting in line.

*

I did not breathe it bathing near dewy spider silks
draped across stumps connecting to willow twig
until a drip raced down my bare skin holding
a micro-sized globe of the knocked-kneed
moose laying near a steep bank at daybreak.

*

I did not savor it under the stars on a bed
of wild chives and gentle mountain tansy mustard
cradled in the valley below until the nestled columbine
flower hidden in a nook reflected mica specks
in the same shine of the granite boulders.

*

I did not mourn it from afar
until I heard the final hollow bellows
of the bison stud stop
and wind settled
the thermal air into
dry grasslands.

*

I did not disturb it.
I've felt it,
too.

You Will Devote Your Body

Elk Rut on Little Mountain

Bugles pierce through sweet
watered prairie fire terrains
scented by the sweat drops
on a wild purple top sagebrush.
Melodic squeals and barks spew.
Hot saliva drips. A young stud hoping
for cows to deem him as the one worthy
to secure the season's bloodline.

Stabbing antlers into hides of challengers,
persisting against the weight of survival
against the muscles of the neck and shoulders.
Who will be strong enough to sire a calf?
Who will survive the elevated winter terrain,
scarce with sweet roots until June?

Soon, it will be her swollen winter womb bound
in the bloodline; carrying the future spring
spotted stud. Devoted, as the herd moves.
The bull's exhausted body stumbling over
granite towards the mountain's timberline.

Everyday Became Slow

July, watching his reign's energy exhausts. Matted fur hangs
from the forequarters, swollen from bodies colliding in force
during his final season of the rut. The broken bull forgot to

feed himself, forgot to drink the river water, forgot that this is

what he wants—sacrifice everything to successfully secure
his bloodline in one last generation of calves. Across the plains,
his last hollow bellow cries; the sodden space of his eyes shut,

and his hooves cut the soil a final time

before his resilient beating heart gives out and the body collapses.

Nightfall, his body now nourishment for wolves preparing for an early
winter and the droplets of blood from their family's fangs seep deep

into soil nourishing the seeds of the painted cup flower.

*

Around the decaying bones,

their flower's tops surge

the most loyal of red

saturation, in honor

of his healthy clay-colored calves born in that same grassland field, watered by April's last snow and the thermal air settles.

Dress of Pearls

I unlap braids laying at the nape of my neck
 causing crinkled curls to spiral down highlighted sun
 rays and dewy spider silk draped across a stump connecting to twig
 stretching my neck red willows sprouting near the winding river
 carving the bank where I sit and begin to strip off clothing
 to bathe the curvature of boney back brown trout rising
 to the surface speckled moles markings soft paw prints
 formed in the mud and a body painted by brush top flowers a new naked
 sun bowing in appreciation as I walk towards the water
 dipping my toes then submerge allowing the frigid current to wash
 over me the river feels my blood and I become one
 with the water
 everything freezes I lift, catch my breath
 as the suds of castile soap swim toward
 a momma moose standing knocked-kneed down the bend
 both drenched
 skin covered in pearls of water
 absorbed from last night's constellation
 making ourselves
 invisible

Dazzle Of Morning an Hour Behind The Rim

-title from Annie Proulx

Draped in silk of perylene red with skin of alabaster
tendrils of golden hair intertwine with the olive branch crown
as you stare into your own reflection until you bloom along
the bank into what I now pick and press and label, *Narcissus*.

This section of river runs red
in fall before winter water tills
the sand smoking water with silt.

Silver colored Kokanee spend their adult lives submerged
in The Gorge before returning back to their spawning beds upstream,
near the rim of the dam, where mothers lay eggs and males follow
to deteriorate their silver scales into an olive green head,

a crooked jaw underbite snarling
spine of bone curves upwards hunch
that turns red; pelvic fin to tip of tail.

You may have turned into a flower,
but the silk covering your untouched body
slipped into water and male Kokanee
swallowed it.

The males with unloving bodies die

washing up alongside banks for coyotes
to eat and hear a wind whisper,

enjoy my body.

Leave No Trace

trailing down the baby's neck
to her crevasse of collarbone.

Wrap this sunshine baby in
paper doll quilts, string up
paper dolls

in garland to sway
with breeze of the back porch
door opened

to soothe. That's what
wind is to do
wind is to
soothe.

Who?

Sunshine baby, she will be a sun.

Sunshine baby, she will be

Sunshine baby, she will

she will

dissolve in water

when the current is high
sunshine dress of paper

leaves her skin and she will
lay naked on goose feathers

your fingerprints on veins
veins sweating with heat

of cold nights and she will
ask why does she have to

be so naked?

Did I Build This Ship

to wreck? Wrap the body within sunshine paper
 tie a bow of twine, twisted around healing
 yarrow, for the magpie's spring nest.

Send it down the river that spoke soft sweetness
 of honey drips, where I bathe and wash
 with castile dissolving in canton jade water.

Because in this world
 haven't you found everything hidden
 below the earth
 is often decaying—
 haven't you found
 everything hidden
 haven't you?
 You haven't.

Did I build this ship to wreck?

Did I build this ship

Did I build

Did I

did I?

Speak what you will at my dying hour.

Go ahead: say she did

say she did

I did.

Say she did

because what captain would not

burn the sails, burn the ship, burn

rotted roots and begin to sow

a new garden in the field of broken

wings of the fallen before her—

leaving the scorn vessel behind

to build a new ship to wreck.

-After listening to Ship to Wreck by Florence Welch

It All Went Back to the Girl in the Log Cabin

with another man, filling the void

of another man

he left

to take a shit in the outhouse

while I tended to the cast iron

stove feeding the fire

clicking

the door shut to keep

heat from escaping.

I can only picture her body

tangled up with someone else's body

that body

I wish to press against me.

Winter morning

behind the cabin, empty

I agreed to layer insulation

for his cabin in winter

having never touched

insulation before. I didn't know

shards of fiberglass

would shake off and stick

to my hands

hair
body.

Hauling pink roll after pink roll
from truck to floor.
We begin
unrolling.
Her eyelashes long
focused
as I press behind her to raise
insulation up space between
oak panels.
She's not my problem anymore.

I wasn't wearing safety goggles
no beanie over
thinning hair.
Could he see my scalp? I hope
not. This time
you decide there was enough
for another layer.
I said, it's so warm already

She got so cold
at night she'd wrap her body

around me; foot laced

with foot

a body filling the void

of another's void body.

I once told her about bison
how they face the storm head on

how the females are tenacious.

I think

she took it to

heart.

That evening, sitting

in a Mexican restaurant,

my skin painted

micro scratches

from fiberglass

surging red

from layers.

I itched and tears

swayed on lids,

Wet-Ones from the gas station

didn't help,

a new change of clothes

become laced

fiberglass seeded in skin

my mouth couldn't ask

to stop at a YMCA to shower

roll to my side
lay an arm over her skin
and pull her close.

The skin of protected skin
against the skin of shard.

I am easy

to access,

when the skin I am in
hasn't felt warmth.

-After Reading Pam Houston's Cowboys Are My Weakness

Carrie Ballantyne's Stephanie

I step into the graphite drawing of the girl.

I am not even surprised I can do this.

She continues to look out in silence
her braids fluttering in the wind with baby
hairs accompany them from underneath
the cowboy crown, allowing me to gaze, too.

Iris couldn't do her job without a tongue.

I am too afraid to tell the girl that old cliché

that rainfall brings rainbows.

I don't think she would care.

There is so much the body of west wind can do,
can keep secret,
can pretend the iron isn't hot,
can throw a little dirt on a fresh wound sitting
on the softest sections of skin.

Maybe, if Iris unraveled her body,

unfurling into satin scarves we'd all wrap
ourselves in amenableness

as if they have the sunshine captured
within each stitch. I don't expect them to heal,

but at least grant permission to lay down

in the fields of wild irises. Maybe it could
let us not be too tough, too proud. If being
beautiful wasn't enough, what could she
possibly say?

Vita

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