


Spring 2021

## **What if this girl has a yellow Labrador?**

Danielle Torpey

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WHAT IF THIS GIRL HAS A YELLOW LABRADOR?

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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

Danielle Torpey

Spring 2021

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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 Grievs

*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

\*

Mid-afternoon, 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?

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