


Spring 2022

Grief and other wild animals

Sarah Kersey

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GRIEF AND OTHER WILD ANIMALS

A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillments of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Creative Writing

By

Sarah Kersey

Spring 2022

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“There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”
— Ernest Hemingway

Failed Apology

In purple light, you can see the heavy
seaward-facing forest on the ridge,
a lonely ocean pawing at the cliff's ankles.
This water, unbridled, occupies everything
in sight: the blue stretches out toward the end
of the world, you cannot see woman in this
incredible light. But deeper, in the punishing woods,
sunlight through trees is a tiara of pointed flames
the woman dawns, only to exchange it for shadows,
the easier dark.

If this is a failed apology, I paint it with my teeth,
sand in my molars, seaweed for braids, "sorry"
like saltwater on my tongue: hesitant jumper,
because I'll wake up here again and have to justify
more missed calls.

All of this to explain my absence, a whole world
I created for myself before picking up the phone.

Modified Haikus for Spring

Purple crocus bloom
delicate inside a world
hell-bent on division.

Mostly, I hear bees,
creaking car doors, window slams,
things that hide and hum.

Breeze brushes my cheek,
reminds me of finite living,
season's fated end.

At night I wander,
looking for the sweet, guiding,
trademark song of spring.

Cherry Orchard

Unripe cherries burst
beneath my feet: small
fireworks. Morning mist falls

soft this Sunday, clinging
to low branches, filling in
spiderwebs. The fog is exhaled

from night's hushed lips, a dim
letting go – 5 AM is intimate
while alone, when not everything

is as bad as it seems. I slip
through mist already a memory,
a silhouette in the day's pale waking.

Bioluminescence

For Connor

The human body glows imperceptible
and rhythmic, pulsing light disintegrating

at dusk's dawn. It takes total darkness
to see our bioluminescence, witness

how our apple cheeks shine, polished.
We glow louder together. On certain days,

I ask you to turn off the lamp, let the curtains
kiss. Let me find you in the dark.

Walking a Three-Legged Dog, Springtime

While she bothers herself with a grass patch,
I notice the sweet hyacinth bloom. I crave
its slippery scent and find my fingers
caressing their velvet stems. The dog hears
my heart crawling among these blossoms,
kisses my palm and bathes her good back-leg.
She does not envy the season's regeneration,
knowing her spring has come and gone. She is
patient as a seedling's sunrise; as the soft hands
of lilacs in a dance with hyacinth; like silk
in spring air above us. The sun blushes.

Ant Song

I am a giant to the ant unraveling
the long road's bricks and divots.
My moving statue determines life

in a single footfall and this ant,
scrambling away from my shoe
like static, knows it. To signal

I mean no harm, I step back,
hands up. The ant's minuscule
jaw drops as my heel flattens

his companion's skull.
Something is to be feared
in all good intentions, even mine.

A Trumpeter Swan Wanders Around a Mirror Pond

Dance with me. Let us try a water
waltz. Your beak dips black into green
spring ponds, a cold whisper crawling
South. How can we not find rhythm in this
viridescent bassinet? I stand aside, a cradle

-robber tracking your white feathers
meandering around a swimming hole
as the sun dips lower into the bluffs.
I wish to write your two-step into a poem,
describe your floating grace in watercolors.

But at the sound of me, you turn your sharp
head and sail away. I know my shadow
is imposing, but you have to know that all
objects in this mirror are lonelier than they appear.

Ode to my Hips

I.

White lines stretch
like ombre lightning
cradling my thighs, purple
veins cluster and make lilacs

of my blood. The art of this body
is an evolution I am beginning
to understand.

II.

I am trying to love you
in your strength,
the way you anchor me,
feet on pavement, sun

on my face
like a cracked yolk.

III.

The woman in me has evicted the girl
in favor of new beginnings. Once a month
when I am reminded what you can carry,
I curse you. Curse my pain with your name

in my menstrual tar. As someone who still
worries about passing a haunting
to my future children, I resent
being reminded for the next three

decades of your proclivity
to miracles.

IV.

My mother eats cottage cheese
and calls it dinner
instead of 90's diet culture.
I have always been pushed to shrink.

I remember myself younger, mourning
my size four against a mosaic
of my friend's 0's. I used to suck in
my stomach, inhaling

all the air I could for the camera.
I wanted to fade into this row of women
who could slip through a pencil line.

V.
At some point, while trying
to steal the air, I held my breath
and never let go. Perhaps in this world,
to be a woman unbound begins
with exhaling.

Depression's Dentistry

I feel my depression in my jaw, which is to say I once found flies flocking to my dead dog's open mouth and have been afraid to come home ever since. They say our teeth die first, so I've become an amateur dentist, checking for death in the world's gums and mine, flossing until blood's metallic stain blooms on the thin, white noose. This small, red cry in the wet of my cheek is the way I assure myself:

a crimson an indicator of my continuance. It's not that I'm afraid of mortality's handhold. Death and I have waltzed together before. Rather, I never realize I'm grinding my teeth until I've already sanded down a layer of myself. Such erasure adds up. I fear the day I wake and it's too late, greeted by the emptiness of a toothless grin, having crushed my own pearls.

Ode to Human Contradiction

A gnat swims circles in my sink, drain
beckoning a funnel of mortality. His legs,
like violin strings, dance. It is too late
for this small, winged universe to persevere

beyond the faucet's torrent, so I wait
for death. He does not give up as easily
as I. He is hell-bent on escaping
porcelain, determined to bother

one more set of eyelashes, be flicked
away by another hand. I envy
his grit, crave his strength remembering
my effort to escape from bed this morning.

When the gnat slips into the void, my heart,
with all its sorrow and triumph, beats crooked.

Orchidaceae

What would you ask / an orchid if you could ask it anything?

- "Interrogators of Orchids" by Maggie Smith

I'd ask for an explanation

Where does the blue go when it leaves / the sky? What does
sunlight feel like / in your throat? Is there pain in your
perpetual / back-bend? Do bees taste like honey? / Is
pollination consensual?

before I asked a favor
of grandiose proportions.

Could you let me know when I'm about / to die? Do me the
honor of jumping out / of your vase as a fifteen-minute-
warning? / Let me know so I can say / "I love you" one last
time, feel the moon / on my shoulders?

Tell me it gets easier learning
to the love the world.

Should I become a Buddhist for some peace / about what
comes next? Are orchids religious? / How do I quiet this
trembling? Why do I waste / these days on grief? Why
can't I stop?

Tell me the ache around
impermanence fades away.

Will I be mercurial forever? Does it hurt always / to love
the world? Will I ease into grace before / death? Does the
poet's heart live on? / Will my dust collect on your petals?

And one last thing: tell me
I won't feel alone.

If reincarnation is real, can I join you / on a branch? May I
be purple? / Can I have the window-seat?

Mortality's Haibun

On my most suicidal days, I try to practice gratitude. Two paths diverged into tulip stems and a child's coffin when my cousin died after living a day and a half. My grandma bought a private family mausoleum, dedicated space for family skeletons, and now Megan waits for us there, alone. We held the same absence — hole in the heart — different endings. I rolled the dice for flowers and got snake eyes. Now, I wander the world searching the faces of poppies, tracing my mortality in rose petals. The mausoleum has no windows, so every closed door feels like a burial. When the mornings arrive, my depression is a reptile coiled in my gut, but still I manage to open the curtains: always leave your escape in view. When I'm feeling sorry for myself, I like to think Megan is watching me love the frenzied wild, wants me to live unbound, not in a pale box of claustrophobic endings, smaller boxes inside, death like Russian nesting dolls. When I close my eyes I see my only name and November outburst engraved in marble. If I die tomorrow, don't you dare put me in that cage.

Light me up. Scatter
my ash everywhere I felt
alone, alive, here.

Haiku for the Desert

Sorrow laced with sand
mites and mines, a dry spell
lasting a lifetime.

21st Century Madwoman Redecorates the Louvre

in temporary tattoos and comic strips,
sheet music and medical bills,
arrest records and a father's eulogy.
Spraypainted poetry and vaginas
are smeared over Picasso's finest
while Mona Lisa wears a disguise
of glitter glue and postage stamps.
Let security guards gawk
at my hand-drawn ass tats
on their precious statues as early
morning sunbeams illuminate
my artistry. I want them to know
I was here, a 21st century
madwoman devouring the greats
in the dark.

21st Century Madwoman Makes Snow Angels

An inverse shadow
in cocaine white.
Who said I couldn't
fake my own wings?
The less ambitious
archetypal angels
sucking on God's toes
have nothing on me,
soaking my snowy bones
in the bitter dark, a hell
of my own making.

21st Century Madwoman Disassociating

I used to sacrifice my hands to ice-cold water
to summon sensation to my palms. The point
is to shock the brain out of your first life
and into your second, the one scraped
together against your will. A decade into this
diagnosis and I'm still sunk in the muck
of memory with my hand in a blender
of desperation. Bukowski, just once,
got it right: you get so alone sometimes
it just makes sense.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy¹ (EMDR)

Every Monday she asks me to burn
in wildfire Augusts and arsonist
New Year's Eves. She pushes me
to remember February droughts
and September self-immolations.
I ask to move sequentially
and she says linearity is dead.
I have to let it go. So years blend,
images of locked doors confused
with shattered lava lamps, shredded shirts
no different than boots of blood. Sometimes
they swap words, my abusers, switch bodies,
faces, names. I lose track of which hands
pull and which push. When my breath hitches,
she reminds me to bathe in flames, let
these moments smolder knowing
they can no longer touch me.
It feels like being eaten
alive.

When the hour is spent, I stumble
home and drop to the carpet. I lie still,
counting my fingers, toes, bruises -- trying
to bring my body back into the pink mosaic
of the present, weave healing out of ashes.

¹ During EMDR therapy the client attends to emotionally disturbing material in brief sequential doses while simultaneously focusing on an external stimulus. Therapist directed lateral eye movements are the most commonly used external stimulus but a variety of other stimuli including hand-tapping and audio stimulation are often used.

Blush Portrait (in Pink)

In this portrait of myself, I correct the rendition
of my dimples: not hollow enough. They should
be craters, concave and collapsing, folding in
on themselves. Memory's echo does not grant
me the gift of forgetting your fascination
with my absences cowering under my
blush, your stern index finger nesting
in the pink pothole of my cheek,
your fingerprint like a bad face
tattoo, the time you told me
what a shame it was my cheeks
produced caves with no diamonds.
Eight years later I find you, and with your eyes
on my face, the mines in mine collapse. I look
in the mirror that night and do not have the luxury
of forgetting how I said *thank you*.

On the Anniversary of Your Final Act of Violence

I'm on the phone with a cop
when the trembling begins,
rattling my teeth and bones,
my knees like the tower of babel
in fewer languages. My body
remembers this scarred dark,
having long ago memorized
the vowels in my neighbor's
disembodied scream. The sound
slingshots me back eight February's²
and I am certain her tongue is cement,
her terror larger than an acid-trip moon,
knees shaking just like mine. How do I tell
the police I can't describe the man chasing her
around the parking lot because I'm time-traveling
against my will, because once someone determined
their pleasure more important than my future, because
I can't stop shaking long enough to stand, because
I'm convinced your blue eyes and pale hands will be
pressed against the second-story windowpane if I peek?
Why does this feel like a failure? My roommate saves me
with a description to the cops while the woman continues
howling inside her house with the man trying to kick down
the door. He is eventually deterred by a cat, of all creatures,
and I hear his footfalls descending into the splintered night.
I listen to the woman's sobs until the cops arrive, wondering
how a soul can survive what is done to us.

² February has the highest rate of domestic violence.

In Memory

Adele Morales, Norman Mailer's Ex Wife Whom He Stabbed at a Party

They forget you were a painter.
I'd line every hallway with your
pastels if I could. I can feel it
in my own chest, hollowness
hemorrhaging on hardwood

while the party downstairs swung
on. You lied first, promised
you fell on glass, asked the staff
to turn their red cheeks. You
wanted it to be okay, to live

with this like a brief snowstorm
and carry on. What made you
stretch toward the phone?
His radio interview equating
pen-knives with manhood?

How disappointed were you
when they called it artistry,
an outburst of creativity,
a literary escape into infamy
and denial? How many shards

of hope can you keep holding
after that? It must have been
hard to keep living as his success
sailed on, your stitches still fresh.
Maybe your hope wasn't shards

at all, but fine, immaculate dust
covering every stitch
of your fraying heart.

Moon Cinquains

Peach pit,
a lover's mouth,
eye socket of the sky:
you are the nectarine heart
of dusk.

*

You could
be a nostril,
pale on the night's blank face.
Do the comets smell like power,
or rot?

*

Over
-cast, I lose you
in the murky black.
Poems paint you smaller, weaker in
the clouds.

*

Can you
measure silence?
How lonely you must be,
a bright, forlorn escort for
the dark.

Prices of the Pandemic

I.

You point out Orion and I point out
my father's disappointment. Lyra,
janky Wi-Fi on a Monday morning.
Scorpius, expired chicken-fried rice.
The big dipper or Virginia Woolf's
suicide note. All these numbered
tragedies.

II.

The cruelest things I'm capable of
thinking in your direction:
you are a flesh wound of memory,
scrapbook of lost causes,
a belly full of lightbulbs
destined to shatter.

III.

I thought of three wishes for the genie
I haven't met:

I wish I could control hail.

I wish I could eat stars.

I wish I could strike
a stupid cymbal every time
someone near me sneezed.

IV.

Lately, I start all my poems while driving.
There's something about roadkill
in city streets that restarts the parked cars
in my brain. I root for the living, too, though
they're harder to write about. I prefer the dead.

V.

Time is a walnut, an apricot, a pumpkin
bisque refusing to think about death
but thinking about it all the time
anyway.

VI.

A bottle of Aleve was in my dream
last night. I opened it and found flies
instead of pills. I took the prescribed dosage—

two every twelve hours—and by the time the sun
became a debutante, I had wings.

VII.

Eating cork like a popsicle
off the wine opener, I am full
of missed opportunities.

VIII.

Blood oranges are the closest thing to God or Satan
or maybe just the Walmart clerk that looks like my ex.
In the end, they're all just a bunch of men who never
picked up the phone.

IX.

These are the gorilla days of the pandemic,
all of us beating our chests at the itching
sun and rattling our cages.

X.

I am wading through time
and forgot how to swim.

Portrait of Mother and Child with Wildfire Ash (in Orange)

The lake is burning, fire-planes
dropping water on water, August
smoke grabbing the state by the throat.
These fires can suffocate fish with the weight
of their tainted breath. Are all these rainbows

doomed to float belly up once this orange bell
in the sky dissipates? What if my mother
was a butterfly, a duck, a turtle inching along
the lake, or skimming the low unraveling blue?
She has always been better than me at staying

awake, remaining above the mirror, looking
her shimmering reflection in its shaky eyes – I am too
often found inhaling minnows, braiding seaweed
into my wet hair, almost suffocating in my tenacity.
My mother is always the one yanking me up

to oxygen by my ponytail, yelling how I won't
find the answers to sadness in the lake's muck.
What can I say, it's hard to resist running
into the waves of flames, but I am always tugged
away by the womb, attached like an ampersand

or a towel I keep trying to unpeel from my sticky
skin, but my mother is my mother is my mother.
We travel home through flaky ash, snow in summer.

Declining the Fire's Call

The string of fire on the hillside outside Eltopia
two summers ago stays with me, burnt wheat

in my veins, sagebrush static in my lungs.
Oh immobile threat of memory,

why won't you leave me?
I won't remember you right. I'll remember

you crooked, a zig-zag rather than a rule, a shadow
rather than a strobe light. I'll miss your calls, fail

to put you first, set off fire alarms in every room
I enter, welcoming chaos into your already unrestrained

existence. I won't fix you. You should escape
through my ears before my depression turns you

into a burning cross. I say this as if it isn't already
too late. But don't say I never gave you anything,

I made you an omen.

“A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness,
a lovesickness.”
— Robert Frost

Haiku for the Ocean

Salt scrapes shorelines smooth.
To be tethered to this world
you must erode it.

The Reformed Arsonist Visits the Ocean

When she first saw the beach's sprawl,
she missed the smoke that had hidden
and held her close, lent intimacy
to her burning. She feared palms, lips,
bodies full of blood and touch, the unwanted
index finger searching her collarbone's ledge:
trust was dangerous. Any closeness had
clobbered and shrunk her, making her
claustrophobic. The smoke was a shield.

Here,
by the saccharine sea, salt seeping into her
like a stranger's lips, ear lobes stung red,
she felt naked, on display, like a ballerina
in a music box of salt water with a match
-book just out of reach.

The Reformed Arsonist after Three Glasses of Red Wine

The bonfire wasn't loud enough. It needed
 to cackle leap from logs make night
 air itch. The stars should feel like pinpricks
 sterilized constellations lingering above
 a field of ash. Really the bonfire was more
 like a birthday candle or a shrinking wick
 weak with damp wood and vanishing kindling.
 The red wine in her veins made her confident
 she could build something brighter with sagebrush
 and just a little gasoline.

The Reformed Arsonist Celebrates 4th of July

She tells herself it's a controlled relapse, a simple allowance of flame and glowing colors, everyone else is doing it, it's just a taste. Tonight a spark can be a rainbow, not an ignition – this only begins to feel like a lie when she pulls out the lighter, limp plastic meek in her palm, and feel her yearning expand into craving cigarettes and other self-destructions. She brushes the guilt out of her hair as she ties it back, lowers flame to fuse, too late to turn back, trying to justify the sudden bright blue, a star exploding in a smoky sky, her hunger in technicolor.

Apocalyptic Lullaby

When weather crowns a workweek
with riot and rain bullies the drooping

flowers, when monthly paychecks taste
like cockroach repellent and HR

is the inquisitional haven for lost causes,
when children dance in gasoline

puddles and darkness devours
each Sunday afternoon,

think of me
in the basement crafting

post-apocalyptic lullabies,
torturing syllables to fit

this tangled aftermath,
a new single-sound,

a National Anthem
where no one sings

a sound of spangled stars
gunning for the rest of America.

The Typewriter's "T"

The tumbleweeds twisting toward the sky are held tight in the talons of your tornado,
 twirling its way through this city with a tarp on its face. It wears the taut tablecloth
 like a tattoo tucked in front of tongue and teeth, terrified. I know this method:
 you try to tighten your hold on the world to steady yourself but the opposite
 happens — you spiral like a tarantula traveling down the drain, tangled
 in hair and time, traipsing into the dark. How long do you stay
 awake? At what point in the funnel's turbulence do you lose
 consciousness? Imagine waking into a violence, taupe
 gray, with all your things playing tag in a ring around
 you. Imagine: you are home one day tinkering with
 the toilet, and you hear your typewriter
 trembling. Closer, you see the T
 tugging itself toward the thundering
 roof, try to settle it with firm
 touch, only to be sucked
 along with it into the
 tactless tornado.
 T as in trumpet.
 T as in tiptoe.
 T as in tantalize.
 T as in I always
 thought the little t
 looked like
 a crooked
 cross.

Blood Portrait (in Red)

After picking at a scar on my arm, a dot
of blood blooms into a small bubble. No
tissues in sight, too depressed to get out
of bed, I watch the dark red bulge harden
into a piece of crimson aquarium gravel.
The longer I leave the blood the more
it looks like resin, slightly shiny and stuck
in one place. I experiment, turning my arm

this way and that, causing a slow metamorphosis
of this small red rose. If I move my arm just so,
I can make a painting of blood with mere wobbling
of my janky morning elbows. Amazing, how the body
continues to exude life even when I don't want it to,
how I can make a self-portrait without picking up a brush.

Modified Haikus for Summer

Sunflower madness
in the air-conditioned store,
the season's first love.

*

My shadow stains green
grass longer, absorbing the
fresh viridescence.

*

Sweat beads snowballing
into a watercolor
portrait of this heat.

*

Smoke comes last. Gray breath
covers cities like the weight
-ed blanket of August.

The Language of Bees

When becoming a linguist of the apiaries,
learn discernment. Hornet vibratos tremble
higher than bumblebee's sleepy baritones,
while wasp's slow hunger is silent beside
a yellowjacket's spiraling anxiety. Connecting
with pollinators: a fickle affair. Holding a colony
inside your throat requires the soul's metronome
steady. The language of bees is not best heard
by pressing one's celibate ear to a hive's buzzing
mouth. You must untangle it in dreams of velvet
thoraxes brushing your molars because listen:
the trick to bee fluency is mercy, knowing
you could take life with old wisdom teeth,
you could bite down anytime.

Ode to the Natal Plum Bonsai

Glossy evergreen, no one wants to be alone.
White stars bloom yet your sweet, red fruit
are late. This absence is a tragedy underlined
by a leaf and its lover, positioned like pairs
of duck feet repeating down your forked
and freckled spine. Most of life we do alone,
but the rest is reaching for a love that holds
us in the descent, when a surge of plum
juice drips down our chin.

Underwater on the Psychosis Highway

1.

The asphalt is erasing me.
You are a master of reduction,
a speeding car in the wrong lane
of the 405, naked except for open
wounds, throwing Big Pharma out
the cracked window, failed blood
drying next to a desperate pulse,
I am hanging onto your tailpipe,
convinced I can hold on tight
enough to reverse time.

It takes a dozen 911 and crisis center calls
until the police stop you, 200 miles later.
You're safe
for an hour.

2.

When you refuse treatment, I start sawing
at our cord. I will not go through the guardrail
with you. The freeway sounds a whisper
under my own animal sobbing.

(Picture me a black bear.
Don't look at the rat tracks)

3.

Fresh from the road's burn, I use pharmaceuticals
to dull the noise, the ache between my ears.
I crawl home to rot in bed while women
waltz with white flowers in the static as if
upped Lexapro would give you a garden.
There's nothing floral about this.
I am underwater.

4.

Half of me has left
for a different symphony.
Did you feel the air change?

Cicada Season

III. AUGUST

My ears ring for a month.
Your explosion ricochets
inside my head, your violence
a sound I can't crawl out of.
Grief's refrain is like the cicadas
burst from dormant earth, a static
melody. The same song of suffering.

II. JULY

The sound is all at once.
A tornado of endings.
You erupt into your debut
psychotic symphony on the sun
-swept Seattle street, perform
autopsies on all my bad decisions,
spit on my soul, blame me for being
raped, insist I should've known
better. This ending splits me
to my center while the break
between us echoes.

I. JUNE

The 17 years between us
require patience. Watch
how they can snap in the low,
distant hum.

A Titan's Wrath: July

You deemed me Atlas, passed
 the weight before you threw
 shrapnel at my knees, painted
 me in delirium as a shrinking
 forest

A bonsai

A broccoli head

A crushed clover

A cavity in earth's yawn

You made me microscopic
 under the sky's widening heft.
 a leaf stem planted
 in the path of your car wreck.

And still, you aimed for me
 and my green
 heart
 cracked.

After that?
 What can I say.

We all want to believe
 in something less
 prone to collapse.

The Summer that Whistled

Maple chases twilight and fallen fruit.
She's just a dog sprinting in the honeyed
air when traffic starts to hum behind the trees.
She barks like she's held onto this noise, waited
for this very moment to release her reflexive
tongue. It's honest how her mouth does not
forget. The air around us stops then, immediate
and pale against memory's shine.

What happens when you forget my name?
Will we forget each other's syllables, or
will we always be trailing, an echo ricocheting
in the pines? How long must we repeat
each other's call to secure a harbor
on the brain's shore? At what point
can we not turn back?

One ear back, unripe fruit between her jaws,
Maple feels my grief. She approaches gently,
tail in a slow wag, drops a plum at my feet.

Hyacinth Haibun

This summer I think myself a hyacinth, plucked purple bells withering away, one by one and loud. My ears follow your ringing even after you've stopped. I wander along August's grief route, looping up and down my stairs, bed and back, a silent daily serpentine with an echo in its jaws. Admittedly, I'm impatient, tired of brewing this grief, a wild animal I'm failing to domesticate in a teacup. I keep trying to grow back spring's bells with a teapot that will not whistle. Instead, it blurts out its homesick heat, the death march of a new season.

The sorrow doesn't leave space for other sounds. It smells like a front yard type of ending: burned beyond redemption. The tea, me, you, our whole damn world. When your apology comes, I throw the teapot out the window. There's nothing left to say. I dig a grave for broken china, leave the shards, rainwater muddying the edges,

purple petals pale
& fading beside these bitter
porcelain ruins*

**Green erupts / out of frame*

Ode to the Natal Plum (Addendum)

A month after we collapsed,
the natal plum produced
its first fruit in 30 years.

What am I to make of this?

Turkey Haibun

I am walking a friend's dog when I stumble into a man shredding a loaf of bread on his front lawn the way I rip my hangnails bloody when I can't stand myself. Yet this tearing is not from anger or grief: four turkeys round the corner, gliding into the man's yard in their early morning strut, and when the man stretches out his steady hand toward the pack and the smallest bird pushes forward, I know this is a routine. Daily, this man must wake at the sound of the alarm's capitalist dance, kiss the foreheads of a sleeping child or three, imagine how he will disappoint his boss, and listen to the coffee beans crunch. The birds are his only tolerable consistency, evident in the way the small one allows him to stroke her feathered back. She takes a piece of bread from his hand, gently, both of them sensing the other's capacity for pain. Everyone is softer and hungrier than they seem. Perhaps the man and the small bird are old friends meeting in a new life, and once I think this, I can't stop. I force myself to turn away.

This won't be us.
I wish you would grow wings, but
I can't hope like this.

October Sestina

Autumn sends a cyclone to my city, yet the crows
 grow only louder. Their ugly seasonal
 October song conjures each drenched fall
 awakening, mocks me playing house with my grief.
 I see a photo of you, 100 miles from here, your smile gone.
 You pose in a field of decapitated pumpkins in the rain.

In your eyes, nobody is home. You used to rain
 joy, drizzle brightness on everything. Now, your crow's
 feet refuse to flex their toes, tranquilized, your glow gone.
 I know this rupture. We have weathered enough seasons
 with each other to tell when death is pounding on grief's
 door, knew each other too well to fall

lightly apart. Instead, we staggered and howled as we fell,
 and the death of our friendship was deafening. The rain
 makes sorrow a tsunami. Weeks after, I write a letter with grief
 slick on my palms. I panic whenever a phone rings, fear a crow's
 death cry. We are not far enough removed from your summer season's
 psychosis to trust your stability, let alone a drought. Delusion being gone

is a start, not a promise. We live our separate lives. Now that you're gone,
 you've left a crater in normalcy. I try to stop wishing we could go back. I fall
 into old patterns, replay your hurricane of abuse, a voicemail from last season's
 natural disaster, try to predict the future so life hurts less, but it won't stop raining
 on all my plans. It's this preparation to prevent further heartache that the crows
 won't stop snickering about. They're right. Outsmarting grief

is futile: it knows where all your valuables are. I am still grieving
 when the apology comes, eight weeks late. We are too far gone.
 You're different, calling a waterfall a drip. I wish I could say, eat crow.
 You told me I should've known better, told me to fall
 on my own sword, invaded my home, stomped on 17 years, rained
 on everything I held close, spit on me in the street. You seasoned

your destruction by screaming my failures, one for each season
 I have lived. It is an apocalypse. I drag myself into grief's
 arms, wondering if coming back is an option, and that's when the rain
 begins again. The question answers itself. It's too late. You've gone
 too far, crossed a line we can't adjust. The loss falls
 on me slow, like a bad dream. The silent crows

come home. The seasons are full of our murders, the crows

and mine, a piece of my soul lost in grief's violent fall.
I look for you, still, each time it rains, though we're too far gone.

[I carry the letter that ends our friendship]

in my pocket for months to test out
the words, let vowels dance, grant gum
wrappers a meeting with this origami ending.

That's what I tell myself. I'm trying, really,
to determine if I can live with this weight
or if I will crumble in the quiet. The question

answers itself as the first snow of a new season
descends without a sound and I am still
standing.

“I tell you this to break your heart, by which I mean only that it break open and never
close again to the rest of the world.”

— Mary Oliver

Haiku for the Forest

I hear the chipmunks
sharpening their tiny knives.
It's all a turf war.

The Bad Opossum Sutra

Go home, you shivering rat,
you wilted memory,
you caged mirage.
Go home, get off
my porch, you must
go home because I cannot
care for you. Go home
for my sake and yours,
for my cat, beside herself
over your presence,
go home for the neighbors
who will surely come out
for their evening cigarette
and call animal control
when they spot your jagged teeth
in the moonlight. Go home
because when the man
with the noose and stun-gun
gets here, as he will, you won't
raise your paws and say
"don't shoot,"
"I'm sorry,"
"I'll be going now."
Your glittering incisors
and foreign chatter
and fake death charades
won't save you from
these fated ends.

I-90 Elegies: Pheasant I

I find artistry in endless roads.
Gasoline trails, a river of watercolor
stretches east. Tires spit gravel
as I hug the center lane, hoarding
starved distance, mile markers
between home and somewhere less
consuming. I keep looking behind me,
intent on outrunning the ghosts

of my childhood in the rearview
as I break into sunlight. Gnarled
trees are reaching like needy infant
hands and 31 miles outside of Ritzville,
a pheasant hitchhikes, feathers dragging.
I almost stop. Open my door for this
plumed stranger, make small talk

about the weather or the ethical question
of reproducing in a burning world.
But I'm too afraid he has a gun
or is an unregistered sex offender,
even though I know it's absurd to think
this creature flies through the world
like a man. There is grief in this decision
as I recall his dead relatives lined up

on the back porch
of my grandparents' hunting cabin.
I want him to make it alive. I settle
for giving the bird a nod as I pass,
hoping we both find peace in homes
we won't run from.

I-90 Elegies: Pheasant II

Highway speed pushes
wind toward a dead
pheasant, a wing rises
and falls, a reluctant
greeting. The robotic “hello”
of inertia. I wave back.

I-90 Elegies: Triptych

I.

Three coyotes stand silently,
blending into ochre rock,
guardians of the overpass.
They warn: carnage in the works,
a heartbreak sound.

II.

A deer twisted inward, one leg
bent in an impossible plie.
Heart bursting out eager
to greet oncoming traffic.
I zip up my coat, even
while driving alone, to hide
my own soft wreckage.

III.

Yesterday, a raccoon starfished
across the centerline, a crucifixion.
If I were braver, I'd stop the car.
Perform CPR on his tiny chest
Risk rabies for resuscitation.
But I don't. It would hurt
to love the world that much.

I-90 Elegies: Doe

Bleary-eyed and scrambling westbound,
I pass a shredded buck on this god
-less stretch of road, antlers intact.

Who cares for the carnage we create,
these feral endings? Some almighty
mortician of the freeway driving in a fugue
state, collecting innocent bones, and cursing
Henry Ford? Does he grieve, hollering
into the wind how this dead deer might've
inverted food chains, been the second
coming, the invocations leaving his tongue
like frantic, fleeing moths before he tosses
the carcass over the guardrail? A wish I make

when I spot three-fourths of a doe three exits
later. I stop traffic to drape a blanket over her
legs turned phantom, cradle her jaw before
guiding it shut, away from the perpetual gape
of death. I dress her by smearing blood across
her closed mouth.

I-90 Mortician Goes to a Car Wash

to scrape skunk out of the grill's
teeth. Splayed like a bent crucifix,
this animal's advent requires careful
extraction: dampening this demolished
deity would lead to sulfur smells,
and there isn't enough floral suds
to veil wet death. Instead,
a toothpick becomes a spine

for skunk kebabs, America's gristled
backbone. The mortician skewers
deflated fur and organs, summoning
a frantic frolicking of flies, a buzz rising
into an anxious symphony. Only when
dinner is fed to the trash can's happy
mouth does he slink into the wash's

lull. Water drops softly first, a child's
rain, pitter-pattering across
the windshield, blink and he misses
the green spilling from the rafters,
pompous emerald causing a blackout.
He is rocked into sharp daylight

like an infant coming out of a dream.
It's enough, raindrops leaking from
the soft white of his eyes. Merging
onto the freeway, he euthanizes

the radio, lost in rainbow thoughts.
He could almost forget
the unforgiving smell.

I-90 Mortician Buys a Gas Station Vape Pen

It tastes like Georgia,
or the gentle fuzz on a lover's
cheek, cobbler's pen pal,
grandma's canning projects,
mother's sole fruit tree looming
naked in the winter.

In the inhale, there are hints
of past thanksgivings, flavorful,
like outrunning something,
like a first kiss, like high school
graduation, or the sweet smell
saturating summer nights
in the orchards, like the sky
opening up to all those stars.

I-90 Mortician Finds a Rest-Stop

It was the guillotine
-d coyote in his head
-lights that made him
pull over, rest his tire
-d skull between his
knees, thanking
god for a thick neck,
pedestrian laws,
and free coffee
at this empty rest
-stop. In flour
-escent bathroom
lights, graffiti on
white walls, bright
blue, advertising
a good time
with Tammy: only
seven digits away.
On the mirror, in
decapitation red,
*to be human is to
suffer*. He crosses
out *human*.

Tankas for Fall

Backyard mushrooms bloom
as rain ushers in the fall,
sudden and orange.
I wish to soften myself
to the changing, to accept.

*

Sunflower bent like
a shower head, the season's
droop trickles forward.
Does November ever feel
like a eulogy to you?

*

The crow shouts at me
as if he knows how to tap
dance, meets God for lessons.
He mistakes me for someone
braver, someone with rhythm.

*

In between frosts, leaves
sweat, dampen the dying grass.
I almost forget.
Nothing lasts and everything
aches: like a wet metronome.

God in the Body of a Buck

I find God eating rotten apples
in my parents' front yard. Head bent
into a blue bucket, antlers fighting
moonbeams, jaws grinding soft fruit,

throat massaging the Golden Delicious.
When God raises his head to savor
a worm from the apple's flesh,
our eyes meet, and in that silent embrace

we express our shared disappointments.
His lament: I only call when I have
begging to do. I've been taking
his name in vain, again, swimming

in sin without apologies, my anger
like an animal and I can't even bother
to pick up the phone. As for my complaints:
I remember the day you went quiet, the silence

that devoured the room the Wednesday
after a youth group pastor told me
you loved only the pure and the sorry,
my fresh bruises blooming underneath

cafeteria fluorescents. God's stare then
is a stare that lasts, until He thrusts his head
back into the bucket, shredding an apple
to its core, nursing a hunger unfillable.

The distance between us we understand:
it won't be breached today. Still, he stays on,
chewing with tenderness until nothing is left
but the rest of the world and me: seeds and all.

Cobwebs

I.

The swingset shakes out a death-march
as a newborn January wind meanders
through chain-link absences. Stray fireworks
detonate against a star-pocked sky, and across
the park, a teenager is being raped underneath
the trees.

II.

I can still smell the winter sap.

III.

I remember you cold; meaty white fists
bioluminescent underneath midnight's drape.
The unwanted acupuncture of dead, sharp grass
against the back of my hands, palms to the sky,
a surrender.

IV.

God, make it stop.
(It doesn't).

V.

I am a moth pinned
under your tweezers
as the late hour rips
open around us.
I am the torn dark.

VI.

All the spiders who remembered
me from the moments before—
who crawled into my socks for warmth
for a brief breath before—
who milled about even after—
all dead now.

VII.

Tell me how to let go
of who I was becoming
before your hands.

Trying to Erase the Night Before with a Frozen Spoon

Frozen silver dollar spoons pressed
 against a necklace of welts, one
 at my neck's pulse, the size of a toddler's

palm. The internet said cold would help
 make ghosts of your mouth's footprint,
 but it lied—I wore scarves for weeks.

Everyone called them love bites and I tried
 to believe they were imprints of desire
 and not the aftermath of branding.

I'm still surprised I didn't die, sprawled
 for hours on frostbitten grass, your hands
 everywhere I asked them not to go, a high

of 27 degrees. Eight years later I still dream
 of your teeth at my throat, poised and waiting.
 I wake up needing to drive distance

between memory and my jugular.
 There is never enough.
 I'll spend all my days forcing

more miles between then and now.
 Anything to escape that gaudy,
 dissembling voice, that goddamn park,

that godforsaken New Year's Eve voice
 saying, "Just let me look at you for a second"
 before any god possible, ever,

vanished from my vocabulary
 and left me deserted
 in that cold, dark night.

Writing to the Void I'll Call God
After Philippe Soupault's "Georgia"

God, I'm having nightmares again,
which is making me consider learning
to shoot a gun. I'm a pacifist, God,
but I don't know how to feel safe
in these bones, and for once, God,
I have something to protect, and God,
I miss standing still.
I realize we haven't talked in a while.
Are you there?
It's me, God, Sarah,
not a Judy Blume character,
I am the chrysalis of humanity,
the moth's underbelly, a mosquito
bite. And yes, I'm disappointed too
in all we have not become.
But I am not a god, God.
Sometimes I wish I were,
then maybe I could heal
the earth, cartwheel, sleep
through the night. Can you melt
the knowledge of our errors, God,
take away their sting? Prazosin
only made nights worse, God,
I am terrified to sleep. I'll leave
my light on for you —
and a little bit for me —
hoping you'll touch my palm
or spit on me, signal somehow
that you hear me. I'll wait for you
to turn out the light,
and if you don't show,
so be it, God,
I'll sleep with my house ablaze.

Exorcism by Wind

A miniature Halloween skeleton
skewered by my neighbor's car
antenna sways in the wind storm,
limbs loose and free, a gust throwing
the whole body backward, like an
after-the-point exorcism. Whatever
you do, please: don't string up my bones
on your Toyota Corolla, do not make my dust
your femur-white flag of surrender.

Restitution

I.

As earth brews violence, I carve shadows
 into your shape, in hollow spaces under trees.
 I squint at grass mounds convinced I see you
 lurking everywhere in the dark.
 This is not a love poem.

I hunt you in absences, see you
 until outlines quiver, eat one another
 and dissolve into desolate dirt.
 I tell myself if I spot you first
 I won't fold inward,
 I won't mimic a deer in high beams,
 I won't
 I won't.

My therapist tells me I cannot live
 like this. I should believe my safety
 of silence. Build a world, not
 a watchtower and sleep through
 storms. Rely on snare traps.
 This works

until it doesn't.
 Hearing you have moved
 to my city, I line my townhouse
 with windchimes of bone.
 A cacophony of forewarning.

II.

I don't find you in shadowed ground
 or boneyards, but grocery store fluorescents
 make you undeniable. Here you are. Fear
 crawls over you when you see me: I am a
 reminder of your violence. We stare in
 stillness, saying nothing, swearing to
 ourselves we have survived each other. I let
 my eyes slide away. I do not look back.

Hyperventilating in my car, I watch you exit
 the store and look for me, empty-handed.
 You spin in circles, still-hunting, combing
 the lot full of strangers. Camouflaged
 in afternoon sun, watching, I know:
 you can't find me in this light.
 This is my reckoning.

Unraveling [,]

I am homegrown, handmade,
 desert local of the evergreen state
 in the U S of A, baby, & I wish
 I could forget this origin tattoo
 but I can't: tumbleweeds nest
 in my tires, my rapist follows me
 across the state like the dictionary
 definition of Narcissus had Narcissus
 decided to become a lawyer at my alma mater.
 But I'm getting ahead of myself. First I should put time
 in reverse, insist there were a few years of me scraping my way out of my hometown
 because I am not a sob story, I am not a testament to your violence, I am not (I am not),
 no, I spent undergrad learning to look my body in the mirror, trusting your permanent
 Texas distance, letting safety crystallize, but only for a moment, a glimpse, a trampoline
 second, a handful of fingernail moons & then reality pixelates out into the fireworks you
 hurt me under when I hear that you're moving to my second attempt at home to practice a
 law you only know how to break & with this linearity collapses, time starts to look like a
 peach pit, my genesis becomes a mirror, like no years have passed & again I'm
 convinced you're following me home when headlights linger, light slicing dark, & I had
 something going, I was practicing rebirth, I was on my way somewhere I can't remember
 directions to & for once I feel I have a beginning worth fighting for, I just can't seem to
 stop spinning, stop looking for your following shadow, & I recited the wrong address at
 the dentist the other day, a trick of past's tongue, & it felt like resignation, like maybe all
 I can draw is circles, maybe I'm a ferris wheel watching all the homes I've ever held
 collapse into one, a watercolor portrait of impermanence, life swirling outward, a spiral
 unraveling, & then it's a Tuesday, I'm buying wine, out of the afternoon sun's dull whip
 we're face to face for the first time in four years, since the last hometown suicide that
 found us both, & it is like all the noise in the world erupts then falls
 absent, deafening collision of time in front of the fucking soup aisle, &
 every night since I fall asleep
 to see you recognize me again, watch your face hatch with a
 recognition
 that feels like dying, like an autopsy of the past, dissection of liquid
 memory,
 a test of the spiderweb's stability, & I'm running out of ways to keep myself
 awake, stop
 dreaming, separate graveyard history from my present bones,
 I can't
 hide, I am butterfly -ed open, & everything since has felt
 disconnected, like I am holding all the parts but not

 the sum, timelines pressing inwards, & all I want is to stop this endless
 pirouette, all I want is to stand still.

Winter Eulogy

The gray dress of the sky
flutters, stutters, lifts in the bleak
dawn. In winter, we weigh our respite
in sunrises, moments of gold

tracing November, as if to say,
“here lies the yellow bursts
of morning.” It feels like
we’ll never find our way back,

but this winter is merely a bidding
of time, busy-work for God
and his off-duty angels. I call
this pale season the year’s

annual funeral, and spring
the earth’s resurrection. I get
more religious in the dark of it all.
It’s always the poet’s job to provide

the eulogy. I say: may the color
of the world sleep gently beneath
this gray riot.

Death, the Bounty Hunter (in Green)

Braided emerald yarn tricking down
my arms, catching on my wrists
like a suicide attempt. The river snores
loud today, but not enough: driving home,
I stumble upon the runner's discovery
of the first winter body. Soon after, sirens
blink. I hide my ripped hangnails in viridescence,
slip away from Death, my bounty hunter,
while he's busy collecting taxes. I've already
evaded him twice, so he keeps me on his radar,
reminds me I'm not out of the woods, fistfights
the pharmaceutical green of my Bupropion, rents
a home in my neighborhood to ensure I remember
all those July's ago when I started writing goodbyes.
He is not convinced of my decision not to kill myself.
And yet, I watch from my window as EMT's shuffle
a bodybag up the frosted bank, thankful it's not me
today, swear I'll pen an elegy for all those hands
that end blue. Blood blooms on my thumb
from the earlier tearing, though, so Death taps
on my shoulder. I don't turn around. I wear the forest
as a challenge: tell me I won't survive my own winter.
Watch my defiance turn evergreen.

Tankas for Winter

Thick snow falls endless
on brittle, yellow grasses.
A worm hibernates
under the frost line, at peace
in unforgiving dark dirt.

*

The impatient day
shuts its eyes early, adjusts
to night's premature
gospel. Evening cages us
too soon, lengthens winter's woe.

*

Spiders crave heat's tongue,
sew home decor under vents
and skip out on the rent. I
find inspiration wisps in
a bug-themed bed and breakfast.

*

Teeth vibrating like
a blender picking up speed,
I flex stiff toes in
wet boots. Here: glittering black
January, lonely ice.

“Forever is composed of nows.”
— Emily Dickinson

Haiku for the Mountains

The air thins my dreams,
slices away stray fat, leaves
me with your dark eyes.

The Intimacy of Earlobes: A Love Poem in Four Paintings
For Connor

In the winter that drags
 its feet and throws tantrums,
 I trace famous paintings.
 I begin with *American Gothic*
 because I, too, am in love

with a stoic man, can
 discern grief in a forehead
 wrinkle, joy in a lip twitch,
 fear in a crease between eyes.
 On days I wake first, I find

his sleeping face slack with peace,
 arm heavy around my waist,
 and I taste home. When he gives
 me pearls for Christmas, I become
 the *Girl with the Pearl*

Necklace because I never liked
 earrings, always preferred the cold
 gold clutch against my clavicle, never
 liked to draw attention to my large
 ears, but he knows me like this,

so I reserve my intimate earlobes
 for nights with him, allow his kiss,
The Kiss, to sink me into a sunrise
 cresting over *The Great Wave*
off Kanagawa, and how can I not

fall in love with him all over again
 in that magnificent ocean?

Loving You at the End of the World

For Connor

After Jonathan Pike's "Balconies on the Grand Canal" painting

We row past rose-covered balconies
in your living room, your laughter
and violins redefining melodies,
reinventing spring. There's a lightness

in this love lingering in open windows,
intertwining with soft winds.
If I could, I'd freeze us here
in our technicolor glide, sew stillness

around this chaotic present. I'd bring
fossil fuel companies to their knees
if it meant I could keep you longer.
But the world rages on without permission.

Wildfires, new plagues, old fascism: suffering
is an art painted onto the world's bedsheets.
I am powerless against these reclamations.
Hurricanes will blow half a country away

and I must love you in the waiting. As I will
love you when whiskey spills and piss
lingers on porcelain, I will love you
as the balconies above us crumble,

and the roses begin their sweet, slow rot.

Siren Song for the End of the World (in Blue)

Life will be worth it for the sunsets
and the streets, even the cracked knees,
crumpled suicide notes, and bent violin
heartstrings. As the impossible magic
lantern of time turns towards us,
I'll grow, dare to walk the beach,
watch white waves blow before
I wade into the blue siren song.

[All we are is ash³]

and sorrow promised,
small crucifixes
waiting, rounded

with flowers.
Mornings collapse
under the sober bite

of depression
and beneath the moon
I resist the taste

of endings. The night
I choose not to kill myself
there is a light falling

in my chest, a resigned
willingness to try again.

³ Title comes from Karl Shapiro's "Elegy for a Dead Soldier"

[our] bones,

we forgot spring

remember: this
parable

of dust, bent
This is how the world ends:
slowly

***4.**

death haunts The body

[d]esigned to disintegrate
rot

we

remember this
parable

of dust,
This is how the world ends

***5.**

The body

disintegrate[s]

we

remember

dust,
This is the world

***6.**

The body

dust[s]

the world

***7.**

dust

VITA

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Finalist, *Sunspot Literary Journal*, Germinga contest, 2022

Graduate Assistantship, Willow Springs Books, Creative Writing
Department, 2021-2022, Eastern Washington University

Professional
Experience:

Graduate Assistantship, Willow Springs Books, Spokane, WA,
2021-2022

Internship, Writers in the Community, Spokane, WA 2021

Internship, Willow Springs Books, Spokane, WA, 2020-2021

Internship, Willow Springs Magazine, Spokane, WA, 2020-2021