

Spring 2018

The town that houses me

Taylor Kensel
Eastern Washington University

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THE TOWN THAT HOUSES ME

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirments

for the Degree

Masters of Fine Arts

By

Taylor Kensel

Spring, 2018

Prologue: This Body of Words, a Book of Water

Hometown: Blinding, this binding
 is shrunken in skin (an empty holding)

 and when
 played at the belly
 I ting and ting—

 a plucking
 disintegration.

 There's a song in my heart
 that's sutured shut.

 Hello, can you hear me?
 I said

 I just wanted
 a bit of stage.

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I wear my colon's ghost

like an iridescent hood. My own private
ulcered spook. Holey
with an *e*. What dies
a violent death lingers, remains
in whatever dripping state it left in.
I catch my dead intestine
throbbing in periphery,
catch it trying to hold my hand.

You can cure phantom limb
with a mirror, in the swift deceit
of reflection. I went to sleep
with one red cheek, felt infection
creeping in like the hallway light.
My rumpled jump-rope phantom organ
sprouts wings of pus, fills every inch of hull
with its yellow feathers. I want to show it
to itself, trick it out of its putrid nonchalance,
but it will leave once exposed. Deep

into the life-flight, all the nurses coo *ah, what
pretty skin*. I am a fresh sight. So young, so
yellow-bellied bright. There are lightbulbs
that will live longer than me—this flight
just one more finger

pried off the life preserver.
Just one quick flick
through the magazine. My body
just a community of organs, some good, some
bad, some leisured right to the end. All of them
just neighbors in the meniscus, ornery residents
that even in their leaving,
stay.

My Body, an Opera

There's a kind of blackness that only the country knows, and without headlights,
I could be beneath shut eyes.

The wildflower weeds in reach we bump up against I name:

“I'd walk, Honey, but you'd follow me anyway”

“See? Things still exist at night”

“Some clever name for a yellow flower that matches the streetlight out the window
of our apartment every third time”

Possible clever name:

“my lackluster, jaundicing life”

15 miles an hour and bumping along,
there's a hum to it.

We are smoke soaked and drunk in your Honda, you, a bluelit, lumbering but still beast
beneath the radio beats. Cracking the windows must have looked like the escape of tiny,
undeveloped wings
amongst mist, amongst combines like prehistoric birds poking around in nests. Us by them:
small, flightless. Them by us: Olympians, full to the brim.

I think of our window in town. I fit in the sill if I scrunch, among pigeons, looking down at
the blinking yellow road, I see old us, at first, before it all,

lumberous, mountainlike, you, large, an arm out. My head the height of your armpit, your
voice a part in my hair. You walking backwards to watch my mouth make words, let loud the
sound of our city feet, your height my shadow, your dark barn door frame guiding my steps
like what will be my taking off, my body an opera, screamed, me the farm that dreams she's
a city and you what digs and digs.

Act 1: Character List

Prairie Lens: only introduced when it's 3D glasses time. It's dusty out here.

One: will introduce *Hometown Girl*. *One* will be used to describe other things later on, but its isolation is used to call *Hometown* to center stage.

Hometown: patient's full name: Hometown, Girl. She's been here for months and is costumed in a grey sweater over a hospital gown. The sweater will have the right sleeve cut off to house the IV. The lighting on her makes the air seem old and previously used.

Ghost: whose creaking about alarms the audience and *Hometown*, should be no beam of light, only noise and action, and at certain times, seems to be waving frantically and stepping quickly. Probably brought on by *Fever* (see *Fever*, see *Ice Chips*).

Fish Bowl: always cornered, murky. We are concerned about whatever was once living that died while *Hometown* was away.

Ceiling Fan: turns slowly by itself as the fever progresses. *Ghost* is almost certainly turning. *Hometown* is in an ice bath with a water cup at her side, mid-left center, in-between being home and not.

Fever: generally accompanied by *Bloody Nose*.

Bloody Nose: whose red is striking in the sunlight, in the dust of weeds. (See *Prairie Lens*)

IV Pole: helps Hometown along, hobbling. *Hometown* is always staged in its shadow.

Appendix: whose presence on stage depends on *Hometown's* mood and should be represented as the actual organ, of which she lost, should only be on stage when *Hometown* feels like defining things, i.e., her own made-up words See *Stoma-Rose*. *Appendix's* sometimes-presence is the only rebellion *Hometown* has energy for. She will, soon after *Appendix* leaves, fall asleep.

Ice Chips: *Hometown's* excitement for *Ice Chips'* appearance is palpable, except when it is accompanied by *One*, which makes *Hometown* thirsty, but she seems grateful anyway.

Stoma-Rose: exaggerated but costumed simply as an intestine that blooms. We bring it home from the hospital.

Curtain: tries to shoo everyone off stage, but the audience quickly realizes that no one gets to go home until this is all over.

Levels of Dismemberment

1. Company Picnic

I was nine. My dad's coworker gathered the kids
and uncurled his hand to a blue dragonfly.
It took turns stilling and trembling
as the man force-fed it its own tail—
I was alive that July
to the meanness of adults.

2. High School Biology

Week 5: Fruit Flies. For tools
only tweezers to move the black
and freshly hatched from the jar
to the microscope. As ginger as I was,
the fly under my eye
was as large as a human—young, wide,
and shattered in every possible direction.

3. 21st Birthday

I regret not killing
the bug on the bar's bathroom floor—
broken winged, walking in circles
over a brother's corpse. Later, I think
of the levels of living, his stumbling. Drunk—
I'm glad for what keeps me afloat.

Starring Seamus McDevitt
in *Idaho Dixieland*

*[Your dead brother's asshole friends splay
large confederate flags at the funeral,
bonk horns, shoot guns—
a hicked and honeyed soundtrack.]*

The scene: mostly speculative, like *Streetcar*.

What was done to our star is unseen.

There's a hair in my gum. I spit it out in the aisle
and imagine it's your brother's pink,
loose ear dyed gravel.

Amongst sleeping seats, there's remnants
of fall. Seamus, leaves.

Left.

I know no one else buried here,
only old peanut shells that we fed squirrels with as kids and dropped
like popcorn missing our mouths.

I've gotta know:
did they bury the ear with him?
can I jump
to the end of this and spoil it?

The prop, missing: one dried, pink,
peanut-shell, popcorn ear.

The stage: Mountain View Cemetery, South
end of town— bowed,
a mountain shadowed place. If Seamus lifted his half earless head, in sight:
a run-down Stinker station (his permanent view, a concession),
an old cafe selling tiered jello incased like layered rock,
a caked, backsplash of saged hills,
us.

I plug one ear with my finger and hear
the left half of peppering sound effects:
revving engines, snapping flags, clicking boots, silent gum, your mother's drunken
turnstile grief. I shake the sounds off like I'm the arm of an elm. *cushhh, cushhh, pew,
pew,*

shhh, ear, ear, ear.

*[Forgotten but clear all at once for no reason,
I am not only audience but a bodied
extra in this faux Dixie performance.]*

Seamus, can you half
hear me whisper, *We played
in this?*
I could reach out.
I could dig up your hand and bow.

The Index of Breath

They cut all the rings,
the cheap ones, the old brassy
wedding band,
off your mother's swollen fingers.
To reconcile here, I decide,
will soothe no one
but me. I bring
a card with a real, removable Band-Aid,
place it next to her still water glass,
through which I see her broken
body, sharp and folded over
like an origami wing.
Earlier, I mistook a dead bird
for a baseball glove, feathers fanning
its painted face like fingers.
Now, I mistake the machine's breathing
for small broken wheezes, rallying
for the lungs'
littlest inches. All that air
our bated measure. All our hope
revving and revving,
until we're angled enough
for the reveal.

Scene 1: “And it makes a fiery ring”

—Johnny Cash

Hometown: [Symptoms:]

toilet bowl water:

phosphorous dark and
fanning.

body:

light
as air

[Diagnosis:]

it’s a bloodied, burning
thing.

[Treatment:]

- a) medical
- b) nutritional
- c) surgical

it’s all the same—entrance, exit. Food measured. Urine
measured. Trial, error,
error, error, *burns, burns,*
burns.

[Hypothesis:]

My swirling things in beakers
results in no answers:

storm in a bottle,
ground cloud, the curled
corpses of my eyelashes—

I was a child and I fell

for it all—the nerve, an eye

in the potato, something unwelcomely
sprouting.

Dear Catastrophe,

I took on your flaw like a birthmark,
thinskin and
faded into being as you

stumbled about my body's calling,
coaxed out my air like leading string.
Beside my summoning,
cast your line
into my words, pulled out broken bits, tossed
stutters, uttered my mind away like a shaky
ah, ah, ah. What's it called

when the plot turns sour, anti-climax climbs
it's way down and drags us?
Dear our unsettling setting,

you are a dark, sceney thorn.

It's Christmas, Mary Munchausen

The dusty window
at Primary Children's Hospital says *look out*.
I say *waiting waiting waiting*
until it's mantra and the strangest spelling.

This is a holy land where some of us
are dug into and emptied of organ. Salt
Lake City smog keeps me masked inside
and smacking my lips. I am, what's the word,
shrouded? siphoned off? Thank you Ma-
donna, for leaving the ICU for lunch. Leave me
alone to cry like an adult. Give me
dignity. Give it
back. Grant me
things. Peace
is lost in your guilt for hunger, Mother
Survivor, makes you pass on bread and pray
for a body swap. Change out
your colon for mine rusted one. Take me
home. Take
yours instead.
Feel what it's like to be fed from hoses like drying trees.

I'll tell you how it is.

I named my new
budding and sliced intestine "Happy" because
none of us are. It's Christmas, Mother, Mary,
Munchausen, and what happened
when you had to watch your son slink away?
Did you wave away his life
flight sleigh?

There must be a name for a high-
school-girl-too-old-for-the-pediatric-ward-
but-still-in-diapers,
forearm length
incised belly, Mother
blotting my forehead like a stain.

It can't be
adolescent
because when willing myself to sleep, the shadow
from the coat that fell off the hook still looks like a monster and *Jesus*
will we ever grow up?

Did you shit all down the cross?

Gowned, rolled
around like royalty, mid-teened &
preening, the nurse rips off tape and takes
what little hair I have with it.
The noise it makes sounds like *stay*.

My hand is the kind of absent
minded I want to be, and I walk
my fingers down the staples like skip
jump
skip jump,
one-footed track
to track,
circling what still resembles a belly button,
looking down to be brave and finding
a skeleton, our new figure
nailed here,
Crohn's'd & light
as prayer, missing what I couldn't feel to begin with
or prove was ever there.

Prelude: How to prepare for the future undergoing

Hometown: [Lesson:]

Massacre
Rocks Campground, age nine. Not afraid
of bugs, catch lizards and snakes, didn't cry
when I got my baby shots, but this
is a June Bug,
loud and caught
in my hood. My parents, used
to the cries coming
from my sister, give me raised
eyebrows, bafflement, as if
hearing
a song they know
in a language
they don't speak.

[Application:]

Primary
Children's Hospital, sixteen. Not afraid
of needles, NG tubes, colonoscopy
probes. Here, I blink
and blink and
blink things in, but this
is real
construction. *Renovation*. A full
upheaved removal.
So now when the surgeon leaves,
and the news is heavy and buzzing
I ask my parents
for a coke from the vending machine. The balloon
pinched quiet. Thirst, my moment
alone.

These Bandages

Chronic is disfigurement, Chronic is marriage and residence,
Chronic, Idaho. Chronic Avenue. Chronic Kensel.

What now? Quickly, with a gun, because Chronic
stops at all the crossings, weathers stone, trickles.

It's no riddle: what you'll die from won't kill you, it'll just
be hung and hang there.

Like the BiLo grocer's goddamn tattered flag, the bird
that hit the glass. All bang
and no bullet

and even though I petted it, birds die
and stay dead.

And here, we go through bandages like bags of oranges.
When you peel them back, the underneath is old and antique yellow,
and the edges snap in the wind.

Scene 2: *Hometown* Meets the Man

[Characters:

Surgeon/Dr. Blank

Hometown]

[Notes to the director:

Surgeon will be played by a series of interchangeable actors but will all be addressed as *Dr. Blank*; Back is an ominous dark where *Hometown* is eventually wheeled; Junkyard and Graveyard are sanctioned parts on stage, each propped with their own type of body and mechanical parts—corpses appropriately individualized by and for each.]

Surgeon: Hello, I'm Dr. Blank
and this is a performance.

Hometown: I know. It was advertised that way.

Surgeon: Can you explain the procedure
in your own words before we take you Back?

Hometown: Before I answer, will I come back from Back?

Surgeon: Not whole.

Hometown: I know. It was advertised that way.

Surgeon: It's for the best.

Hometown: I find out later in the play
that I have no real reason to trust you.

Surgeon: How do you know? It wasn't advertised that way.

Hometown: I was told I find out the hard way.

Surgeon: Think of this like construction.

Hometown: I do.

Surgeon: This of this as a path out.

Hometown: I find out later in the play that there is no path out.

Surgeon: I know, but that's not how it was advertised. This is the most convenient detour.

Hometown: Do you throw out my organs with your used, bloody gloves?

Surgeon: I do.

Hometown: Can I see them?

Surgeon: Think of them like traffic jams. Your body had some stalled cars.

There's a Junkyard
for all things.

Hometown: I know, but it was advertised that they could be revved back up. And wouldn't the term "Graveyard" be more appropriate here?

Surgeon: I think you're thinking "revived," and no, the term here is "Junkyard."

Hometown: Sorry, I remember briefly having hope at one point.

Surgeon: It is our hope
that as we dig these holes,
some dirt will fall into old ones.

You Anew Necktie. An Ars Poetica Crime

I have aline
and you anew
necktie. Pull
out in this prairie
light
in the undressed
air.

Ring (muffled sound). Ring.
It's the New Year
asking for a "Hello,
Spring?"
She's not here yet, I
don't think. Although, I can't
hear the bell from bed. *Who's*
ringing? We're having some big
party. Who cares.

But when asked, I'm the blue map
of the hour.
All the world
is. All the world is
weed. All the world is *tumble*.
Umber. We are what
holds the world in place, mutter, not you,
the *we* that
stutters about it. I would've known earlier
but can't hear from all the tongue
trekking in my ear, nothing
poetic about it, just fucking. Not *your* your, some
one else's, as in, who does this your belong to?
'That regular *your*, the one in front of me. Whichever
your that is.
I was talking to one of you I swear.

Anyway, we can't pronounce
the places we tacked
along and punctured because we
dumb and
drunk. Su-
ccumb:
sounds like sah. *ab*.
sounds like sah. *sab*
sounds like *cum*. Su-
ccubus. I was born

for this, but I'll bow
out, un-
abashed, if not for your
shoulders in that shirt
and where we went
I won't come back because you searched out and found
snags in my tights and bullseyed.

May I?
Borrow your wrench or whatever
your you have loafing around? I asked nice
and since something might need doing and since you keep me holding,

listening for
street names, had me policing walkie talking crackle, don't I get something? I amble,
getaway, until
we parked somewhere together in my spot, in me, in me, *mine*, in my-place, what my mother
called
"area," compassing,
and you almost lined
up you (like you, that *your*, and
I) stuck and could maybe stay.

The town that houses me

is a broken body

of stores, of church windows, streets
gaping to reveal an underbelly.

The town that houses me

has roads, paths, systems for
fluid travel. Import. Export.

A small city

of organs, detoured intestines, pipelined—routes
I succumb to.

The town that houses me has rivers

of veins, tributaries for saline, lipids, Dilaudid,
polluted blood. Input. Output.

I am housed in a community

contaminated. Leaking, slick and under
consistent inspection.

The town that houses me is a home

for cell betrayal. Ulcer treachery, friendly fire. Spills
ticking away underground.

Lung arena, vagina delta, outskirts intestine, Crohn's citizen, Blue town:
little body

of Construction.

Form a Line, Find your Seat

In selling our family home, my mother says,
Stage.

Tightrope on the edges of vacuumed stairs,
pillows still like an awed audience, blonde and small,
I pull myself to swinging heights.

Bowls of fruit, not juggled, not eaten,
sit untouched until rotten from waiting,

because you have to sacrifice new things to
cover old stains.

When the family came to look at the house,
wore my new outfit, brought my candy
wrapper to the outside garbage, found my seat on the empty couch.

We care when we know we are being watched
and are such little blooming diplomats.
Young. Rinsed and strained.

Under my prom dress are

moles like movie stars, taped cleavage,
colostomy bag like blown soldiers,
under my prom dress are

landmarks, detours, evidence of
months of four walls, of recycled air, scrubbed skin,
holes from laced
stitching, staples, bandages
flapping like flags. Salutations, World—

you'll find beneath these weavings
a map to this threadbare life:
trace backwards with incisions, (miles
in years), trek along
the jagged range, stumble, recover,
soldier &

cheers
to my skill at these hidings, here's to this night
of breathing brand new, to drugs
for thoughts and drinks
for dancing. Sail now, Sailor
Jerry, Red Lipstick, Percocet—my crew comes
to abate.

If only my colostomy bag was helium filled,
I'd have a perfect view, ballooned,
nestled in a sea of streamers
above this pseudo Hollywood scene—
blown up and removed, puppeted
by nothing, bobbing,
uncharted and released
to live above reach.

Dear Diary My Therapist Asked Me to Keep,

Her trick of putting my thoughts on leaves
in my mind's river doesn't work.
They bob then sink.

In my mind's forest, I dream-pitched
a tent that collapsed on me.
I couldn't find the zipper on my own.

Entry: Today I feel...
Easily startled. Lowly.

Entry: Tomorrow I'll feel...
Partitioned. Like an impulse buy.

Entry: The Today Show:
An obese, make-up'd woman
says her dreams are filled with bacon.

I dream I find drugs
hidden in my dresser drawers.
I bring my coffee
to look for them in the morning.

I crave
running away
like I crave that old feeling
in the fall

walking to the harvest festival at my elementary school,

large shadowed, dressed up, cake
walk, knowing myself
a witch.

Antiseed

There are things that,
held still in their swimming spots,
stay bobbing, like a rose to wind, snap
dragons' hanging jaws, your head
you can hardly hold up.

There comes a time
where we are no longer vertical,
like a wave that evens out and sinks
into sand, stays.

We all blow over.

My ease at sinking, scattering like weeds,
would stagger you, drop you to your knees.

From the window, you can't see
that wind and mountains meet, whisper names.

Have you met me?
I'm the Sherpa,
I'll ride you to the top and leave us
for the plummeting. I'll skip you
like a rock among rocks

and consider you gone
long before you settle.

Mini-Scene: A Minute of Versed™

Hometown: There's a performance that I'm a prop in, where I'm flagged as detoured (a cone—small, orange, iodined). I wonder, as I'm solicited to sleep: how many people have seen my naked, potholed streets, graced by latex and knives?

The Fisher Queen

Arrivederci

to this kind of countryside, to our orchestra of days.
Every day and this day,
I am a honeycomb. A revolver empty of bullets. I leave

the shelf half empty of books, leave your body (an obelisk
for the unsuspecting). Let someone else's milk
freeze in the white picket fridge, someone else's

mouth mouth STOP amongst the few words on the telegram. Nothing
serious, but enough that I hear the trigger-fingered stutter
on every line that ends, and they all do. *What say you?* STOP. *What say?* I know that sadness

is an open mouth, know that you couldn't even call the cat
by her proper name. And what do I do when I sweep up the shards
and leave with some on my shoes? Such a small

span of time between the banana being too green and too ripe. What about
when you forget it in the bowl until it's too black to peel? What to do then
except replace it? *Women come and go.* I know the things

you won't say even in the silences of your mind. Marriage is truly
not love but an unraveling. I pulled the yarn from your rugs
and found the knot at the end, the knot that at some point bound

two different colors of string.

My Flighty Operating

We all dream of crisis

of our moment to be heroic and of
how to guarantee we'll come out
shining,

but I'm not thinking of that. I'm thinking of the heart
racing panic brings, my distractions, my not-looking-unyielding-not-yielding
at intersections, and the shuddering
slam and halt, the long echo of
fragments falling, all my wrecking and how we don't all go
in some big Mayan end, how there are other
fatal flashes on any one calendar day.

How do I explain this? I am a flighty
operator of all things—I spill from spoons, full
of everything other than what wheel if any
my hands are holding, absorbed
in spinning in place, how silenced the world by my
hamster-wheel ruminating
up until our head-on greeting,
our mini-Mayan mushroom cloud.

My headlight is slumped and dangling.
It's Tuesday in April after the world kept living and
everything here shines.

Now ritual, I pick through parts as though
sifting bones through dirt but
have no jar large enough
to hold the damage.

And after all the days spent rummaging
(my diagnostic inner looking), I can't pinpoint
what's loose and rattling
and can never

quite settle.

Happy Ostomy Awareness Day!

*

I'm on hold with the supply carrier.

*Ad: Do you experience skin breakdown and leakage around your ostomy site?
Ask your representative about new ConvaTec™ products.*

I ask my representative about new ConvaTec™ products.
(The ad is for the same products I've been using for a year.)

I ask what I need to do to increase my amount of allotted supplies per month.

She says she can increase them right now, no problem. I laugh.
That was easy. She laughs too, a joke
funny only to people who know the punchline.

*

My sister tells me I should write poems about
the stoma on outings, like

“Stoma goes to the mall” or
“Stoma goes to the zoo,”

like that old movie we used to watch “Baby’s Day Out” in which the mischievous baby
thwarts everyone, goes on adventures.
Outsmarts his parents.

The stoma, like a baby, constantly needs changing
at the most inopportune times. Gurgling and leaking in
19th century poetry panels, during biology tests. Stoma wins
when the bag leaks under my sweater, when
I can’t concentrate, drenched and smelling
like last night’s chicken soup
and intestinal fluid. Thwarted,
as usual.

Idea for a poem series: “Stoma Has the Upper Hand:
an Adventure Story,” Episode 1, Episode 2...

*

Family dinner table conversations usually go as follows:

My mom: *How was the bag today?*

The usual: the skin is itchy underneath, upset, weepy.
The supplies won't stick.

Or the question could be about consistency of the "output,"
how my food is digesting.

A doctor made a joke once about this very thing: a family
that is so used to talking about shit
can talk about it anywhere, while
eating, while shopping.
This joke is funny and isn't, is
a joke and isn't.

*

Another dinner table topic: my new boyfriend.

My mom: *Does he know about "little guy?"*
Meaning the stoma.

There is no hiding it. No amount of stealthy outfits
and skirts can conceal this forever.
Yes, I say.

*

There is a strange and desperate need
to make the stoma cute, un-scary. "He"
is always a he, called "Happy"
for a while since he always seemed busy,
like the little smiling dot that bounces over singalong song lyrics,
the thing that does the conducting.

*

My bag leaks in the night for the millionth time this year
and for the second time this week. I sneak the sheets
out from under my sleeping boyfriend, like someone pulling a table cloth
out from under an arrangement of expensive china.

*

I only cry now out of frustration. Like a flustered kid. My dad says over and over, “Stay mad,” meaning no slipping into sadness, but I don’t think I have enough fuel to keep my anger lit forever.

*

Like the bag, the concept of “for the rest of your life” never quite sticks.

*

I usually consider “awareness” days as days that aid in prevention. “Diabetes Awareness Day” for example might bring the dangers of it to light, what one can do to stop it. There’s no prevention for this, and in turn, awareness seems unnecessary at best, counterproductive at worst.

*

My ability to lie to myself and others is a crucial skill.

I have a special talent for concealment.

*

I’m on hold with the supply carrier.

Ad: If you have a copay balance due, please have your card information ready.

I think of the last decade, the copays, all the money spent on this tiny tragedy. Unless I can intervene with some get-rich-quick scheme, my parents will work until they’re dead.

*

There’s room in my belly now for many things, but children are out. Too much radiation, genetics.

“Stoma Has the Upper Hand: Episode Womb”

*

*Ad: Do you experience constant bloody diarrhea?
Ask your health care provider
about a cut down the middle.*

*

*Ad: Looking for a cure for casual sex?
Ask your health care provider
about ostomy options.*

*

*Ad: Do you struggle with your distant relationship to your digested food?
Ask your health care provider
if a stoma is right for you.*

*

Secret: my body is a bush

*

for a single flowering,
rosebud.

*

Food blooms
from it.

*

Dust

me: something to run a finger through, something
in pieces. Or particles. Unwhole.

If you stay still enough,
you can watch my slow spreading—

my spilling
into any crack that will have me.

The world I know is shelf by shelf.
The walls of my room are book covers.
The art that hangs
is fine, shining screws.

You trace circles in my deliberate settlement—
me: your handy canvas.

But the pattern you make
isn't a story anymore.
I have to ask what it all means.

Still, doesn't everything dream
of coating something? Of filling in
all the holes?

Having no hands,
I wait to be collected,
praying in vain to static.

False Intermission: an Insufficient Splitting (*Surgeon* as Magician)

[Characters:

Surgeon

False Audience

Curtain

Hometown]

Hometown: There is a sectioning off about to take place. I am clean and prepared for construction. I am told it will be a rough revealing—a jagged winding of hand and knife. There is no going back to the beginning after this half-splitting, this recess in what was once smooth and unmarked. We all break for it—knowing that this bump in an otherwise uninterrupted street will continue to slow us for the rest of the play.

[Notes to the Director:

Surgeon will be dressed lavishly in red velvet scrubs and mask with a black-top hat used to wave at *False Audience* after his half-splitting of *Hometown*. The stage is lit in red. *False Audience* (clearly eight interns in observation) will be seated surrounding *Hometown* to the left and right with spilling concessions at the feet of their chairs. On stage, members of *False Audience* will be whispering about *Hometown* pointing at her. *Hometown* will be costumed in a red dress beneath her usual hospital gown and red, spiked heels, and her gurney's cribbed sides will be made into a makeshift saw illusion. *Hometown* was led to believe that she has some say in this performance, but she is no more Magician's Assistant than this is true Intermission. *Curtain*, dressed as usual, will be fighting to stay away from center stage, knowing that its full sweeping will result in the completion of *Hometown's* half-splitting (Intermission).]

Surgeon: [*directs a long, whisking arm towards Hometown's gurney*]

It's time for me to perform the magic!

False Audience: [*fall all over itself to hoot and clap; exchange whispers and small squeals of excitement (a few murmurs and a few shouts)*]

How exciting! What glee!

Curtain: I refuse to shield this.

Surgeon: *[never acknowledging Hometown's advocates continues]*

You see her whole! Now I will saw
her in half!

False Audience: *[one member to another in loud whisper]*

Should we be taking notes?

Surgeon: *[holding up a scalpel makes a fake chainsaw sound]*

Vroom! Vroom, vroom!

False Audience: *[laughter, more hooting, two slow claps]*

Brilliant!

Curtain: This is a wicked trick.

Surgeon: *[glances at Curtain and makes an irritated face]*

*[Enters Nurse to shoo Curtain offstage.
She tugs until only a small sliver of Hometown
is seen through Curtain.
Curtain strains against complete closure and stays.
The lights dim and glow redder.]*

False Audience: *[after a moment of silence and stillness, offer gasps of awe and affirmation behind Curtain]*

Aw! [Gasp!] What genius!

Surgeon: *[removes his top hat in a dramatic, gloating gesture and bows]*

Ta da!

[Curtain stays in slight sliver looking defeated]

[Lights dim completely.]

[Begin Real Intermission
now that *Hometown* and the play
are mostly split in two.]

Manners in the Mild Variety

I used to think all fathers
started swaying around 8 pm,
waved at you with a cigarette
between steepled fingers,
poured you small shots of beer from his can
when your sister won at Monopoly,
drew fake tattoos on your arm for New Year's—

that all mothers had an eye for patterns, could win
at any card game, on any slot machine, asked
to stop at passing casinos on road trips, brushed
your hair back with yellowed fingers—

that all toddlers knew their cat's tail was the color of smoke
before they could say "gray"—

that later, all family members had unwanted
guests at dinner, your pet
Opiate curled at your feet that they fed *Heavy Drinking*,
that all tables were dressed in Marlboro napkins—
everyone passing
the pepper after "please"—

that now, there is still an etiquette
for the uninvited. You treat it kindly,
nod to it, never directly address it,
and always offer it
a chair.

The Operator Introduces Her Statues to the Dove and Shakes Hands

—After Anna Journey

Of course what was left of the angel was just wings
as he touched

the lonely wallflower by shimmying
up her stock, blue as the greenest moon,
trumpeting over something
swollen and dark. Let's believe

his amber-melt shadows of an animal bleeding white
roses in the handsome grove meant what we took to be
the season's end. On lesser days, the pretty-headed
huskers are left hanging from trees, the others

born from lonesome: deathly something.
Wasn't it

when the angel reached out a wing, one
dripping in phrasing (lying quietly in red-stricken
wet leaves), the operator unearthed

his sickly tone by whispering up
the damp and endless calls of things

beneath the ground, to heal, (no—
remedy) feather rot? She said

the leaves biting
smell caused her to pluck out all the feathers until her fingertips

grew spindly like lemon pulp. And
we lied—he was a Dove

the whole time, now spread with red,
those angelic front milkteeth beakish like sharp
hungered peaks. Her dark hair was shocked into the ruby gestures

of blood red summers, pockets full of dirt
dipped feathers.
In her jewel-encrusted display,

she introduces to the Dove

her statues of leaves and
shakes hands,
in the fullest woods at daybreak.

For New Views

1.

For new views,
we ride bikes the wrong way on one-ways,
and the woman leaning out the window looks
eyeless, a light-reflecting ghoul. I realize, closer,
it's nothing like that.

2.

I remember things only as a sweeping whole, nothing
day by day. Stole a map, stole
home, stowed away. The months
left open and unmarked.

3.

I feel sorry for people waiting for buses. Some of us are always
looking of shade. The same question, despite the loss:

Under what will you hide?

4.

The mind is something to be kept with its
chummy flock of selves.

5.

I use tracing paper to mark every fine and little thing.

It's the projectionist's job to splice,

I know, but I've come to the realization
 that any scene can be interchanged:
 kiss scene this, shoot 'em scene
 that, some actor for another.
 Line the holes, press and good
 as new. Still, I try to keep them
 all straight: What brown
 haired man did I kiss here?
 Whose gun did I hold to pose? Or
 maybe, which one of his guns was
 I holding on the bed in that old
 blue prom dress? He had so many,
 and they all looked the same—
 so small and innocent in
 their little houses of frames.

I wonder: Is kiss kiss
 always followed by
 bang bang? What is the sequence
 here? I'm missing the scene in
 which that brown stranger kissed me
 on the mouth without
 introducing himself, the one
 where that white bartender called me
 a thief, mistaking me for my old self.
That wasn't me! I yell. It's true, it was
 someone else that played
 my young self. I may just keep
 that one out. The film
 will make sense without it, won't
 skip a beat.

I project it. The illusion
 while the film flickers is
 that there's wind. It starts in the
 middle: When step
 in front of the screen, I'm bathed in
 buildings, houses from my old block.
 I'm wet with sunset. Dark from Idaho
 streets. I shield my eyes against a park
 bench. The wheels that hold the film
 keep spinning even when mounds and
 mounds of it pile on the floor.
 I'll have to cut it if it tangles, lose
 whole scenes. A shame to think of all
 it amounts to: frame after frame
 of every damn embarrassing thing.

Scene 3: Scatological (a Birth)

Hometown: I knew things were different

when I

first rolled
 the name *ileostomy*
 around in my mouth,
 the verb for which would birth
 a little red hatchling—
 warm and squirming
 from my belly.

when I

first held
 the half-digested
 food filled ostomy bag
 like a pregnancy,
 saw whole Spaghettios
 exit the rosebud intestine—
 sauced in its own red hue.

when I

first changed
 my bag
 like a new mother
 changes her baby's first diaper—
 lonely, concerned
 and watching.

Billings, Montana

The broken clock for sale in the record store pointed
to the way back home, some miles off the road.

Hair large, pulled tight like tin foil floral dress,
my reflection ticked an off course elliptical.

Later on, we rumble up the road.
I scoot a rock off the bluff that looks down at the city,
plateaued, like the playground
from the school roof.

The whole town smells of my eight year old
hand after holding pennies, jingles of pocket change,
sky they saw from windows of saloons.

You saw porcelain dolls
and up my dress in the converted antique mall,
the proud Nazi patches,
us hiding under the hum of the washing machine.

I saw us crossing the street,
needing 30 cent bets for whiskey refills.

Where else can I throw stones
and hit metal?

Only in this pocket-change town, tracks like crosses, debt the anthem.

*Dear Damsel from the flickering film strip,
Imagine bearing the train ten miles before it's too late to change your mind.
Last sight: framed gravel. Last taste: breaking teeth.*

I hold up a dress in a mirror and see the wear in the laced sleeve where an umbrella was held,
where she might have gripped a dusty, metal rod.

Moving the Shelf Farther Up the Wall Makes the Apartment Seem Bigger Somehow

I'll never marry,
and this time I mean it.

I say so in a letter, sign *Love*,
loop my *L*'s like lobes, say

*I know no other life than things hanging
over my head.*

I lick the flap, thread my hair
through the lattice on my dress—cream
like Havarti lace, and I, your living
doll, retreat to the point of your looking, cross
ankled, corner
mirth. My sitting gathers the fine sigh of it all
like dust.

So you raise this wooden plank,
raise my skirt, your voice. Raised
on this grained plane:

I try to remember a time
when the lighting wasn't so bad,
when the sky was scrubbed clear of its smoky complexion,
pink.

It's All Bog from Here

Still looking for your face
in the assassination crowd. Its summer,
late, but the lawn still greens,
and who to search for
but you? My mind autumns
and I age, bored of teammates, my pastime
of upkeep. The heart sheds
and I wish to be both clean
and brassy with dirt. The operator,
in her wisdom, resists. Who's to say?
I would've swallowed you whole but my throat was spent
on liquor. It's thrumming. I opened myself
up to so little but held a drowning amount
in the well. I'd hide anything
that'll sink. And you? Still waiting, arms up,
head rusting on your shoulders
like a penny's.

Addiction is the Season

My mother keeps her alcoholism
 in a hope chest. *See?* she says,
I can shut it whenever I like. I try
 to learn the method, but mine is a whole-
 sale love: I am the Green River Killer

of pain pills, cannot
 misremember the path back
 to my victims. I braille my junk drawers
 for lost oxys, pray that every stray
 pill or vitamin will prove small
 and numbered and green, but
 it's only ever the remains
 of a folic acid tablet, or the broken body
 of a crumb-covered Skittle. There is no hope

in my chest; no lid can close
 on what I've buried. Some of us are just
 no good at keeping things covered—
 however dusty, however
 alit with lividity, we long for
 and dread

the unearthing, confuse love
 for some angry craving, broken
 tulips stems for hip-height
 spiders crawling out of the snow—
 however mistaken,

we startle all the same,
 stay open-mouthed
 and pace all winter
 beneath the dirty birth
 of white pill'd blossoms.

I Too Have No Voice

I used my dowsing rod
and found you in the mounds.

I spot the cliff of your nose—it's arc-
my -ology; I'm excavating
your face
like the doll that I voodooed
is stitched, stays silent. I slack your mouth and empty my lungs.

I could rub
life back into you, spell-
bind you to me, spell

out your dying wishes on the graves of mortars, on loose pottery like broken teeth.

Say *words*, say *you*
remember the melody I sing
the magic words to,
say *tap*, say *hum* and hum, say *say*.

See, my stoic, my silent type,
I had a poem to recite but can't revive it; I
had a present I didn't wrap in time; I know
what it takes and brought nothing. I too have
no voice.

I just want to see you saunter again. I just
want to see your breath in the cold.

Lucky Epilogue: The Overdose

[Characters:

Mom
Nurse 2
Hometown
Sister
Dad (late)]

Nurse 2: When was her surgery?

Mom: She's freshly released.

Nurse 2: And the pain meds?

Mom: She's fresh out.

Nurse 2: Is she a drug addict?

Mom: She won't even eat
 a grape off the floor.

[Setting:

About this time there's a wrong turn. *Hometown* opens one eye first, then the other. *Hometown* looks down to see that she has a clear ostomy pouch on—a tell-tale sign she is in a hospital. She looks around and she is in fact in a hospital.]

Sister (speaks first):

Sister, *[pause]*
 you went straight
 for the conditioner in the shower,
 your Junior High yearbook.
 You forgot I was married.
 They thought it might be bath salts.
 You were out of it for hours.

[Hometown makes an "O" face but no "oh" comes out.]

Mother (interjecting):

I was left
 in charge of you for this life.

[Hometown looks at the empty chair that will eventually seat Dad.]

[Silence]

Sister: I took a video of it.

Hometown (coming to): I told the witch doctor...

Mom: There was no convincing you
you were you.

Hometown: Ooh, ee.

Mom: Did you mean it?

Hometown: Ooh, ah, ah.

Sister: She means no.

*[Hometown puts a hand
over the clear bag, hiding the visible
undigested food for privacy.]*

[Long, heavy pause.]

Hometown: I was counting backwards from 30
pills.

Dad (walks in, sits down): I really hope
the pain is less.

Hometown: All this just had me
dying.

My Corner Home

The left outline of my ache is the
shape of a diamond—sharp. A marriage. I have lived
lifetimes. I started small
and will end small.

I have seen
what is sure to be
the future, like a loose button,
lost and coated in dust.

When I went to leave home,
the large spider spun
and glanced back, serene,
like a child on a swing.

I am the thing
that looks up to you in search of answers.
I am what is snug from tombs, drowned in web, wifed, angled
by bones, & kept afloat
in this sticky home
like flight.

Taylor M. Kensel Curriculum Vitae
kenstayl@isu.edu | 208.226.6627

EDUCATION

Idaho State University: Bachelor of Arts in English

Eastern Washington University: Master of Arts in Creative Writing

GRADUATE STUDENT ASSISTANTSHIPS

Writers' Center Responder, Eastern Washington University, 2016-Present

Collaborated and responded to students' work from a variety of courses and at a variety of skill levels, including English as Second Language Learners and students in the Accelerated Writing Program. I was taught vocabulary and approaches to provide collaborative responses to aid in student writing, focusing on big ideas and global issues in hopes that students will walk away with skills to better develop their writing process and develop a positive relationship with the writing process.

Instructor, Eastern Washington University, 2017-2018

Taught courses including Composition 101, 201, and Introduction to Creative Writing 210. In teaching these courses, I followed, elaborated on, and produced original curricula, teaching student populations with varying skill levels, including students enrolled in the Accelerated Writing Program.

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Head of the Triceratops Poetry Project, Eastern Washington University 2017-2018

Traveled to third grade classes across Spokane to teach poetry to third grade students. Worked closely with teachers and school district employees to coordinate placements of MFA student editors to teach poetry to third grade students. Implemented new approaches and components to the program's established curriculum. Produced chapbooks of students' poems.

INTERNSHIPS

Copy Editor, Management Staff, Willow Springs Literary Magazine, Eastern Washington University 2016-2018

Participated in frequent editorial meetings with the editor-in-chief to determine the contents of the magazine. Culled through submissions of poetry to decide what poems would be opted for potential publication. Copy edited galley proofs of the magazine before the final printing of an issue. Participated in editorial meetings regarding publishing schedules and magazine design.

AWARDS AND PUBLICATIONS

The Patrick McManus Scholarship, Eastern Washington University, 2016

The 2018 Pushcart Prize for Poetry

Nominee

Rogue Agent Literary Magazine, 2018
Contributor, "Under My Prom Dress Are"

Z Publishing's *An Anthology of Emerging Poets*, 2018
Contributor, "My Body, an Opera"

Play Inverse Press's "Unemerged Playwright Contest," 2017
Semi-finalist

Patrick McManus Scholarship, Eastern Washington University, 2016
Recipient

Black Rock & Sage Literary Magazine, 2012-2014
Contributor, "Rhinestone, Milestone", 2012
Contributor, "Beautiful. Hungry. Universe", 2013
Contributor, "Dust" and "The Life on Land", 2014

Black Rock & Sage Prize for Best Short Prose, 2013
Recipient, "Strangers in Rows", 2013

ACADEMIC PROJECTS

"Let me tell you/ this: someone in/ some future time/will think of us': On Sappho's Immortal Relationships and the Contemporary Address Poem," 2017
Investigates the poetic lineage of the intimate direct address, tracing contemporary American poet Nick Flynn to Sappho.

"The Known Stereotypes and Beyond: The Ethics of Using Sales Techniques to Teach Rhetoric and Composition," 2018
Proposes that techniques of persuasion in sales could aid in a teacher's role in student engagement in Composition courses.

"The flying wedge of dissent and quest': Complexity and the Contemporary Consciousness in the Poetry of Anna Journey," 2018
Investigates how a critic might situate poet Anna Journey in the contemporary American milieu.

***The Town That Houses Me*, Master's Thesis, 2018**
Collection of poems that investigates the treatment of the body through a variety of poetic styles, tones, and voices.

SERVICE

Get Lit! Literary Festival
Booth operator, 2017 & 2018
Proctor for Poetry Out Loud! High School Poetry Recitation Contest, 2017

Spark Central, Spokane WA, 2017-2018
Volunteer Literacy Field Trip Coordinator

Worked with the director of Spark Central to create a poetry field trip for third grade students from

low-funded schools. Wrote and choreographed a poetry field trip script for students, complete with fictional roles for volunteers. Recruited volunteers from the MFA program to participate in literacy based field trips at Spark Central.