

Erasure

1.

I feel, "I am too far gone." I conclude: foregone.
Make an image of yourself and destroy it.
Don't look at me. Turn off the TV and look at me.
Have you seen the one with the joke at the end?
Remember, while supplies last act now time is running...
Practice every day. Read more than you write.
Nameless white coats phase in and out
all hours night and day.
Fear is real I wrote in a poem.
I can go round like this forever.
I can stop anytime I want to.
Have you heard the story about where plasma comes from
and know "it's all in our heads and everything?"
Do all this and more when you sign up now.

2.

In provinces of corridors: wings wind labyrinthine
circles round every floor you step off.
The only prosperous life is the virtuous life.
Know what is important and not. Learn to heal yourself.
This is the art of the living.
There is no news. Days blur, fall away.
Wake and sleep, rise and fall. Like the nation of the body,
a revolution every 24hour news cycle.
Little doom little doom, still dark.
There are no shortcuts. There is only the process,
and the process takes time. Caretake this moment.
Sure, why not, and each one just like it.
Learn what you love and what you hate.
Do more of what you love and less of what you hate.

3.

Don't be persuaded: pursue good ardently.
Do as you're told. Wake up early and make your bed.
Stand in the doorway. Stand in my way.
Stand up and take off your clothes.
Make peace with the erasing.
Take this plastic pip, breathe deeply,
and thread it over your heart.
This life is not simply a test.
Call twilight...pink bronze copper rust.
Say the sky is on fire tonight.

Say anything by the truth that pollution
gives the evening its shade.
Say anything is an illusion. What then?
Supplies are running out buy now buy now.

Gyotaku

The koi rests mounted and blocked
as if breaking over water surface.
The hour of its inanimate machinery
is the stain the one cold slab its flank
leaves on the construction paper,
the marbling of the scales glitter prismatic
as the brush applies a black shroud,
caressing the form, as if the ornamental fish
has just burst through, suddenly, splinters
into spray, and the water empties
itself on the surface of itself, erasing,

memorable details are lost to speculation.
Color will be added later to embellish
the reverse-couplet of [what it is and
what the print will become historically.]
Pinned dorsal flared, whiskers agape
in a collaboration made between
elements the scale and the brush,
the carp and the angler's telling of it,
both bodies airborne collide with a touch
of cold remains, an impression suspended
on official record, archived as proof
enough to offset the dislocation

together they constitute a perfect plural
the making and unmaking anticipates,
freefall back to the surface, reentering,
the plunk dividing incalculably droplet by
smaller half-droplet, and halves
of halves, the copyist throws ink wild
with a flourish of his fingertips, reflected
in the mirror of the fish's one silver eye
itself reduced to line and geometry,

in soot and glue in stone print.

First Thing

behind the landfills first breeze
trembles the chainlink wound
through morning glory she strokes
a petal between thumb observing
close she says for this velvet
to be as close to skin like dust
particulates settle and further
dispersed in the distance autumn
encloses our gaze over time she asks
that I might hope...hope we learn
how to touch without setting afire
prospect or promise someday
once we return to seeing
au natural it is no more no less
likely we will pass here again
perhaps revisiting old territories
maybe for the first time to be
present when the violets
retreat at dusk our bodies
but not alien insectual
masks thick with pollen
like bees deconstructing the last
veins of goldenrod mouth of nectar

Snowbird

It had been a mistake, looking back,
to Valley winters, tequila and pistols,
 plastic bags dustbowling
across the asphalt from which vacantly
 a roadside inn springs
The threat of uncertain times stimulates the air
like ozone, subtracting
from the vacuum
 of aftermath.
to recalibrate
 the shapeless quiet
 broken only by the routine
of the snowbird migrations
pursuing February predawn dark
 out of town.
It is the panorama of nature's reclamation,
a soothing and sometimes
 terrifying impasto
riddled
in a language akin to metaphysics, as if
I am standing
 age seventeen again
before the severity of unbroken valley horizon
 of so seemingly alien a landscape.
As it happens, happening
all at once,
remembering
 the panorama of cold on cold,
 draining into the Rio Grande,
is the same view
 repeating variations
 of the same yellow canvas
filaments light together
through torn stitches in the motel curtains,
 paint chips
like cicada skins
 mold on the lip
 of the windowsill, coiling back,
revealing the rutted grains of timber underneath,
 of weeds scuttled
 across the sprawl.
Soon clover will bore through the tar seams,
will tangle every cell

Under the Rust

Under the rust
of the historic bridge's truss,
heaven was all humid wind and red sunset
over the river for my brother

and me. The water kept the secrets we threw
like stones. The fries and milkshakes tasted like escape
from a home filled with the smell of shit, and red blood,
and our dad lying in a bed that should have been
the hospital's.

And we feasted and we forgot the ways
sickness wastes the body but not the mind.
And we feasted and we licked our fingers of worries
our bodies might be the next
to waste

as the condensation from our milkshakes
left streaks across the car's leather
like our mother's tears
across my
hand

You Pick Up the Bottle Like a Shovel

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you tip a neck
into a mouth of blue delphiniums with soil between the teeth.

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you peer
through daffodil eyes, you drink your reason,
you watched your father die. Now, in the mirror, you see
a man who shouldn't be alive.

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you swallow
the poison ivy vines around the family line, you drink your reason,
it was college and everyone had weekend bottles on the mind
but you were the only one with a sinkhole in the soul.

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you bite
a bouquet of thorns, you drink your reason,
a toast for your ex in a white gown,
walking the aisle towards someone else.

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you spit
pomegranates through split lips, you drink your reason,
no one can save you from the basement in your mother's house,
it's already after the fall.

You pick up the bottle like a shovel, drink, dig, you tip a neck
into a mouth of blue delphiniums with soil between the teeth.

The vultures ignore the signs
Climbing Or Crossing Fence Prohibited

they stand on a handbreadth
of wire-wrapped wood

between the solid path and rock-drop
cliffside. The vultures, like angels,

stretch white-fringed wings
at peace on precipice edges.

They turn sunset-red heads and blink eyes that know the ways
the death they bring home nourishes the new life

found within the hollows of their nests.
How many deaths have I died

to nourish each life I have lived?
Daughter, Sister, Strong Girl, Broken Girl,

Good Girl, College Girl, Girlhood, Muse. Poetess.
The woman you loved, the woman you left but say you love.

Now I am the woman who stares at vultures
and throws her love over the ledge

like it is some freshly killed life
so she can stand before the judgment

of the open highway of endless new lives.
The vultures rest here, unknowing

that what they ferry into the sky
can never return.

Husk

On a hillside aged into a husk
of spring,

skeletal twigs reach into the haze-gray
sky as if
 –recalling
the memory

of green leaves
 photosynthesizing
the sun,
 I remember

I watched the motion of hands
aged to a bark of blue veins
protruding
 like roots,

as they carried a napkin basket
full of coins

for a woman
who faltered through
 halls

as if home was an
 unmarked path

as she grasped for familiarity
within
 familiar faces

in search of the daughter who walked
beside her

as she lived the loss
of what wasn't lost.

Hope is the Wolf
After Emily Dickinson

Hope is the wolf
when you are a cardinal
clipping its wings, sacrificing
feather after feather to the wind.

It bites the throat
and runs away with the tongue,
grabs a hand at the door.

Hope is a lover
asking to be loved
staying despite knowing
the answer.

I will never find home
where the blue-lipped babe quieted
against winter's sharded hand,

or in the rice paddies
where the family's feet sunk
under water,

I was not among the children
running the path to school
because no alarm clock woke them,

or in letters read and written
by the letter writer, or in the stories
remembered by elder men,

or in the missing faces, unremembered
names closed behind the thirty-eighth
and erased

I am assimilated into the rust
of train tracks, toes rooted
in river mud,

the orange cat we fed
honey-baked ham as it skulked
through suburb lawns,

yellow grassed medians
and planters in windows without
flowers above the idle car

turning gray next
to the red light near
the smoking cigarette

forgotten against the brick under the fire escape
outside the low pulse of strobes and neon
by the man with music-dulled ears
who wants to take me home.

The Betrayals of Sex

My first memory with sex was mating my dolls.
clothes torn, lips locked and them tossing each other
in the air. Something about their blue plastic eyes
and porcelain body brought me to myself like you
open an imaginary temple and step in and the god
within you overpowers the god over you. A mirage
within mirage. Sex is a mirage and my mind has always
failed to understand it.

Bodies over bodies betray me sometimes.
When a woman's body over mine feels like a restless
bird fluttering in my arms, waiting to migrate. Singing a song
I haven't heard. Her breasts in sync with mine like a ghazal,
But her eyes, her eyes, an epilogue of our love changing
its form; playing mournful music, an end to what we thought
we would keep forever. Sex is a moment of realizations. but
a constant catastrophe rings my body when she asks,
"How was it?" It was great, I say.

A man's body on mine feels like empty weight plates.
His kisses only spit, burning my vagus nerve,
his back a bumpy road where my fingers slide
without motion. An action without intention.

While he is engaged in my body like a hawk wasp paralyzes
a spider. Stinging with his lips and teeth, strong arms around

my neck and the release of ecstasy from my body feels unknown.
a stolen joy. So, I get up and clean my body, shaking mouthwash
and spitting the man flavor. But I go back to him, and he asks
the same question. How was it?

2) TW: Mention of suicide

The Star Girl is Dead

A river's depth desires something more than reflections,
more than cawing of crows, rustling of leaves, water
gurgling, splashing, something similar to the slices of silence.

Maybe that's why the river Ravi in my city lost its voice
as if its mouth swallowed something it was supposed to love
and went into the state of stillness when the star girl died.

Star girl, twenty-two years old, jumped from the fourth floor
of the visual arts department building on a cold Monday
of a ruthless December, star sticker stuck on her cheek.

Her body still moving moment to moment trying to get rid of the claws
of breath still holding her saying not today, try again.
December's soft sunlight riding on her skin and the black blowfly spitting on her wounds.

I stood there, silently, watching her wrestle life one last time
and others trying to stop her from bleeding, her friends pleading,
shouting "call the ambulance" her best friend murmuring "I will save you"

Ambulance came twenty minutes later, took them another
ten minutes to decide how to touch and lift the star girl
as every bone broken refused to be held, refused another chance.

Star girl died two days later, some friends told me she fought hard,
another friend said he held her hand before she passed away
and said I understand, and she blinked her eyes as to say “You don't”

I don't know if she fought hard for life after tossing it in the air like a coin,
all I know is her mother's visit to the university; dropped shoulders,
eyes vacuous, walk slower than grief and her hands carrying
star girl's unfinished paintings of rivers, crows, leaves, and water.

I think the star girl's river paintings meant more than cawing of crows,
leaves rustling, water gurgling, splashing, something similar
to the slices of silence craved by the river's depth.

Maybe that's why her mother goes to the river and throws stones, shatters
the silence, sits on the edge, glides her fingers through the water waves
as if they are her daughter's hair, she hums something, something only the river knows.

3) **Loving a Married Woman**

I said experience with me
the ecstasy of exchanging
energy with exhaustion.

My youth melting
into coat paint, primer
to fill in the wrinkles

of your fatigued face.

Your face, your face,
Like a worn-out train
in the railway yard
blocked by the blood-feeding
leeches of life.

You wouldn't say it,
but I know you want me
to steer back your train
to youthful turns of love,
remove the dust, dip in the engine
smoke of your life gone by in seconds.

My arms now cotton like, turning
the train to the station where
you could find your origin.

My legs, now sticks by standing
alone in this heat of your past
while pushing you to give
up the idea of patriarchal perfection.

I said look at the erasure
of my palm lines trying to press
your empty hand bringing you back
from the balcony of life where
you stood alone and said save
me from myself.

I said you always knew
our love is a fragile feather
stuck between two daffodils
kissing each other.

Your denial, a storm
when you say, marriage
is responsibility, a reality
and you are like the pauses of poetry.

I said the ecstasy of exchanging

energy with exhaustion is like
I have become a barren land,
I said I am still swinging the scythe.

4) Some Memories with My Mother

There is a memory of you I hold sacredly,
say I'd be fleeing, fading from this world,
and the last beat of breath will count the most,
will be held tightly. Just like that, I hold the memory
of you feeding parrots living in the mango tree in our house.
The tree soaring skyward and cuckoo calling spring.

My six years old hands clung to your left leg
when you raised me to the tree hole, and filled my palm
with sunflower seeds and said "*Gently, feed the parrots.*"
The word gently has never sounded so sweet after that.

But there is another memory where I know you as a wife,
breaking photo frame on your head, blood cascading,
racing to the ground and my sisters bringing neighbors
to calm you down. I heard you saying "*How many more
women do I have to deal with?*" while hiding under the bed.

Sometimes I feel I have aged under that bed.

I have tried to see you differently especially recently,
when a friend shared a collage he was making of a girl; first finger
on her cheek, honey blonde hair, white bordered glass frame
and the strange serenity on her face like wood before being axed.
My friend said "*it's my mother when she was 14, basically before*

the world got to her. She's a little crazy now."

Days gone by but "*before the world got to her*" kept ringing
in my head and I thought about the drops of drugs dispersing
in your body to kill cancer cells, your hair falling in the curry
you'd make. Your cheating husband fanning the flame
of your fear of being abandoned by him like your father
abandoned you for a woman when you were nine.

Your tears when you beat up the twelve-year-old house help
for not cleaning the kitchen counter. Profound antipathy in your eyes
when you sit in your sumptuous home and say "*poor people are poor
because they can't work hard, they want to steal. And poor women
always aim for rich men.*" I think the world really got to you-got
to you like water in cotton.

I still scratch your bitterness like you scrape a wound knowing
it's going to bleed more. I know you have been bit by life deep,
but I also know that It feels like I am still six and I have lost
you in the carnival of life; running endlessly to the gentler version of you.
I don't think we can meet, mother. I don't think you'd feed the parrots again.

5) The Crow in the Pack of Laughing Doves

Before mother's hair became barbed blades,
They were sweet shades of sapphire sky,
falling on my face like drops of the first rain in July.

Evenings were spent under the spell of her hair,
when one evening on our white painted roof,
I had my head in her lap,
and my eight-year-old round face in her fragile fingers.

Chimney on the roof gave out thick smoke
of her unhappy marriage,
and the paint on the walls falling
like mother's aging cheeks.

Mother's brown eyes brimmed with distractions,
and skin looked like a half-burnt page.
Blank on one side, charred on the other,
by being married to a man
whose mistresses changed like dates on calendars.

My ears glued to her stomach swamped with rage,
like a cage suffocating the bird inside her.
Silence engulfed us both.

My eyes lost in the parting of her hair,
that looked like a trail of a dense forest
when she looked at me,
with a face not quite like hers.

As if motherhood was left behind
like luggage on a train station and she had to get it back,
run, run fast and here she was in a minute,
luggage on her head and she said,
"Let me tell you about the dream I had before you were born"

*I saw a mother dove, feeding four baby laughing doves
and kissing them on their black beaks,
when a baby carrion crow comes, peckish and perky.
Large throat pouch like a male
but with a clicking sound of a female.
Androgynous, we can say.
Stealing seeds from the doves.
Kicking them and wanting to belong at the same time.*

Am I the crow? Mother stayed silent, almost like God.
I've grown older and as silent as her.
But I often ask the women and men I sleep with

if I am ever going to be loved and kissed like those laughing doves?

Will the crow ever fit in? They all go silent too.
Perhaps, it is the time I let the crow know, don't steal the seeds,
let those doves eat all the mother has and fly far away and never come back.

6) Conversations With My Lover's Son

Song sparrows trilled around the arms of the sky
while you walked three steps ahead of me,
between the pansies, marigolds, and sunflowers
and the bees buzzed when you turned around
and asked a question I have been afraid to answer "*will you protect me*"
I hate certainty, clarity, conviction so, I said I think I might.

No, I am not guilty of loving your mother,
her lies to keep you away from the room,
or when she sits on a chair near the window and sunlight
cuts half of her face while the other half glows on its own
and she is free of motherhood. She is free of you
but while answering your question I felt a stone
swinging like a pendulum in my throat weighing
me up, weighing me down to my stomach.

You are seven and sweet so I could not tell you that life
is a ball of thread bound to slip from your hands,
detangling entangling itself while you just watch.
Its more than your father's stethoscope, his Mercedes
and Porsche, your mother's mac and cheese,
and it is even more than my jealousy.

But you are seven and sweet and you think I can protect you.

Sometimes I think we are best friends playing pillow fight,
making poop jokes, rolling our tongue out or me teaching you
how to raise eyebrows. But when you ask me why do you kiss
my mama, you remind me of my ball of thread spreading around
the foundations of your house and reaching your tiny feet. Tiny life.

7)Mother, Are You Listening?

Mother, I never told you that two girls stole money from me on the first day of school. I was trying to eat tissue paper that day, you hadn't made me lunch. Mother, I lied to you that I had eaten French fries from the canteen. I just could not tell you that I was robbed. You would have been upset. You cared about money more than my innocence, I swear I did not know how the world works, I was only seven.

Mother, are you listening? I held a girl's hand when I was thirteen. It felt like I stepped into the sea where every fish kissed my forehead. Mother, I lied to you about being cold, I wanted to hide my girlfriend's first bite. It has been easy to lie to you. You did not care anyway so I was relieved.

Mother, are you listening? The doctor said, "she has anxiety" and you said "she is just too sensitive" mother, who talks about the child this way? I'm glad you did; it was easy to hate you afterwards. How do I walk you through the years I've been aging silently. How do I show you the marks of life on my heels, the blood coming out of them is dry now, the time for you to see is over, mother.

Mother, you are a killer of my spirit. You are acid to my heart. Your eyes are gunshots, and my body is the victim. Are you listening? I have been on a voyage to the mountains and the ocean and to people you do not know about. You know nothing about me and that is the way I have punished you.

Mother, are you listening? You are my closest enemy. I have my head stuck in a tin can, mother. You are the tin can, and my head is rotten now. I beg you to remove yourself from my head and let me go. It is the time we accept that you are just a human being, and the world must end.

Are you listening mother? You are never listening.

My Silence

Like a dagger stuck in my throat,
my silence extends to my back,
all the way to my feet,
numbing my muscles,
burning my skin,
biting my own words, I am silent.

My silence is like a bee
stinging my eyes, eating my ears
but it's a duct tape too

Wrapped around my vocal cord.
It's a pinch of poison, salt in the wound,
my silence is a house, made of broken wood,
I'm breathless, I'm breathless
But my silence is not,
It's still out there, looking for sounds,

Like a blind man yearns for a sight
Once, only once, just once
To take all the scenes in his head
And tiptoe on the earth, nibble on the moon,
chew the sun, kiss the buildings before going blind again.
My silence is a blind man.

My therapist said, "you need to say something"
and my silence laughed, inside my mouth,
I can't speak, I can't speak, my silence is a termite on my tongue.

Woods Walk

the sign says we stop for snakes here
do you love people or constructs?

Solar panels play telephone with solar rays.
Is it that we are unafraid or heedless?

Eagles Lindy Hop below a poached egg celestial and popped
What would use feathers as tissues and benefit most?

Tree tops mimic electric current without the shock.
When will they teach me to take up space?

Oyster mushrooms spiral downward on a zombied trunk.
Does reclamation scare you?

Moss is sponged onto concrete drain pipes.
Are there arms that hold the dead, the ones who could not watch?

Howls start. The sun is bright. I close my eyes and there's clementine.
Are wolf sobs from ache or translation for *listen*?

Oops, Existential Crisis

It's me until it's me and a roach. And it's me and this roach in a coffee shop. And it's me I'm drinking this flat white and it's (there's) this roach it's staring at me. It's just me and this roach and it's either murder or it'll scuttle towards a better executioner, maybe a politician or a Christian. It's still me and this roach and it bursts towards me and now I either slit its throat or something different. Now it's me and this roach and I've flipped it and its legs flicker and stiffen. Now it's quiet and we're no longer different. It's me and this roach in this system within this larger system. It's me and this roach and our benign existence. It's me and I put the roach in a cup. It's me and this roach driving to a graveyard down the road. It's me and this roach burrowing. It's me and this roach and worms and dormant frogs microplastics and bones. It's me and this roach that knows morse. It's me and this roach and some bones that are tired of being a pile as much as I am tired of being alone. It's me and this roach and some bones and even if they are just bones at least there are bones. It's me and the roach and morse code and I teach it to talk to the bones. It's the roach and the bones the roach tells me the bones want to know if I know how to be alive now as much as I was in the beginning. It's quiet bones quiet roach I am quiet. And it's me and these bones and a roach until it's a roach and bones until it's bones and bones and bones.

Necro Nostalgia

I used to hunt for things lacking blood
morels, fairy rings,
blackberries, walnuts,
observing, observe, observed,
until the lens showed stains from hands
I did not recognize. I hobbled down Grandma's creek bank
looking for crawdads but finding a rabbit instead,
flash flood's catch. Its grave
was in my favorite swim hole,
stone eyes staring, stare, stared,
hopper flesh seeping, staining water, and I knew -
it's Death seeps, it's Death stains, Death dyes. Death also has sound.
Don't listen, sissy, Mom whispered.
I'm sure she meant the seeping
as Dad shot the trash bandit
in the head for murdering our chickens,
Death staining hay like fire does rock,
crimson the color I ran, am running, run from.
It was not until I snow angel-ed over the corpse
of my cat that I realized Death goes
into hiding after each no-exit meeting.
Blood grows too tired
to follow directions anymore.
Hoping necro cats grew fairy rings, I spent
dawns sitting with bowls of blackberries
on the second step of the porch waiting for something
to come of the slaughter, for the dead to breathe life.
Nothing ever happened when watching besides
Spring Peepers screaming
about buzzards after calves.
At this age, Death stains in new ways, reanimates
the dead during sex, bites my ear mid laugh.
I see him in skin that puddles in corners of eyes.
I wait for him to crush
under the weight of what he takes.
I wait for him to never have sound again.

Til Death, I Rage On

after Ocean Vuong

I smelled the Ark
the Ark before I saw it.
I slept on top of the rock to wait for a man on wet wood
to come save me because Momma said surely
Sky Daddy wouldn't care
that I kissed a girl when I went to visit Sodom
or was it Gomorrah? I remember the camp counselor
the way she took one look at my maxi dress
with lace hemming wrapped around me like a porch screen and
rushed me to the cabin to keep the boys from coming for my knees
or the way people say it was my fault
the junior titty-twisted my rack on the middle school sidewalk.
I found a way to hold my own heat on the rock,
pulling myself into the same shaped thing
the neighbor girl bled out after word got out
about Roe v. Wade. Momma said Sky Daddy never lied
to people who listened to the stagnant.
She thought the boat would want me too
if I prayed and begged hard enough
for some dude to hear me, that he could change his decision -
I smelled the Ark
the Ark before I saw it
and I watch it sail away
licking splattered saltwater off my teeth.

Amor Fati

I am mere molecules now,
separating slowly,
some drifting skyward
rocking like lazy balloons
on a windless afternoon,
others bouncing
off trunk and branch
 nesting
between blades
of shade tolerant fescue.

One is inhaled by a friend
with emphysema.
She can't catch her breath
without coughing and wheezing,
turning blue around the lips,
water squeezing from her eyes,
clutching at her chest —
a rosary draped between fingers.
I envy her her faith in suffering.

Ode To Pablo Neruda's Book Of Questions

for Rob Gibson

Who could read Pablo Neruda
and not want to write an ode
or Gwendolyn Brooks
and not yearn to toy with lineage
Who does not read Williams
and see wheelbarrows
and plums forever changed
or Pound and see for the first
time the beauty in a bus stop
Who would not want to write
an essay like e.e. cummings
wrote poetry and not get flunked
in Freshman Comp
Who does not want to converse
with Emily Dickinson despite
the wisdom of not meeting heroes
Who does not want to rant and howl
so its pivotal
or transcribe journal entries
that win prestigious prizes
Who of us does not want
to challenge the ordinary
the everyday the treasure
of collective memory and stand
atop Ojos del Salado to declare!

Ojos del Salado (Eyes of Salt) is the tallest peak in Chile.

Happy Dog

I walk today in Forest Park.
The cool of the morning makes
even the dogs happy.
They skitter ahead, trot back,
tails aflail and tongues aloll,
faces bright with expectation —

mindless of leash.

In me it is the same. I feel
so forward and forthcoming,
I imagine *my* face radiant with invitation,
though I keep my tongue in.

I engage eye to eye every passerby
and say *Good morning*
with no expectation of greeting
but heart filling, flooding
like the happy dog's
if we make eye contact — The urge in me
to invite the striding stranger to sit a bit and chat.

A dog knows its presence when it's petted;
knows its purpose when it wags.

This Happened Yesterday

This happend yesterday when we're at the beach
that was closed because of bacteria in the water
from a shark attacking and eating a bird.
I saw the bird floating there peacefully, enjoying
the ride In the swells made by the current.
The bird rose and fell, rose and fell until its wings
shot out to its sides like it was trying to balance itself.
Its head popped straight up like it was on a stick.
Eyes like marbles, it squealed.

That evening at the diner the two of us and mother
heard about no one expecting there to be sharks
in these waters, so close to the shore where people
sun-bathe and swim. *A pelican* the waitress said
as she poured hot coffee into a cup in front
of a bone thin, hollow-eyed man, steam
rising from the cup in tongues. With the handle
of a knife he stirred it clinking the sides,
a sound like the bell atop a buoy.

Ash

My sisters seemed tall back then
and somehow better is how I remember.
So when I saw Mother after such a long a time,
I didn't know how she'd shrunk so.
I saw the top of her head which I never
could before — The white skin there.

She'd called me and when I arrived
she opened the door enough to hand
me a piece of paper with an address on it.
I broke off staring when she says:
He died there, would I go get him? Just ash now.

You could tell it was somebody
by the bone pieces and a couple
of white chips that looked like teeth.
I took the bag of him anyway —
the grainy ash in it like dried meal.

I knocked and she bid me come in this time.
I'd put him in a shoe box and wrapped twine
around it both ways to make a kind of cross
on the top but I didn't know him to be religious
and besides it kind of looked like a gift.

You're A Lucky One

There was enough of us that one evening
father said we'd just have to find our own ways:
His place at the table empty next morning.

My sister Ocala found her's to a man who lived
a hundred miles away she said.
That was the moon to me.

Emmit got shot in the leg hunting rabbits.
Doctors shortened it because it wouldn't heal right,
so he limped some.

Nobody told why Trudy died.
Her place near Mother at the table
sat empty, none of us goin' there.

Emma, Emit's twin, all the time acted
angry at nothing swinging her fists
and kicking her feet until Sheriff Allen
come with some men on a Saturday
and took her with 'em.

Mother'd been away birthin' Jasper
and when they come home she bid me
down back where she'd built a fire.

It was cold and darkening and
she waved her hand for me to hurry.
I remember it because it was only me.

The fire crackled and hissed,
flames licking the air:

"You're a lucky one," she said
her jaws clenched tight like she
was trying to keep her teeth in.

1962

Banished from my Cub Scout den
for telling the den mother's daughter
what *fuck* meant — that story rising
after seeing one horse mount another
from behind in the field past the paddock —
The tour tram driver slowing just enough
so he and everyone one of us could watch.
My friend Allison leaned forward from
the seat behind and whispered *fucking* —
her breath hot on my ear.

What A Good Boy Am I

I recognized him at Starbucks.
He sells cars in hastily made spots
for TV usually with a gimmick
like balloon drops or confetti cannons.
In one I watched last evening
he sat, flanked by his children,
arms draped across their shoulders,
and claimed how proud he was of them
while touting low prices for Chryslers.

When I saw him this morning,
I wanted to tell him not to exploit
his children to sell cars.
But, while I have opinions like these,
I've learned to keep them to myself.
When I don't, I carry a rock
In my gut and lose sleep.

While I sipped my drip outside the shop,
I watched another customer emerge
carrying a full tray of drinks with both hands.
She approached a car and stared
at the car door considering how to open it.
I offered to help and when I did
I was rewarded with
Thank you!, How sweet!
and *Hope your day is good!*

I mention this not to boast
What a good boy am I,
but to remind myself how to sleep well.

Blue Chevy Bel Air

Stan Bodie was in the car —

months later at school,
arm still in a sling, one eye patched,
limping between classes —

His older brother Steven
was the one to die —

At the gated railroad crossing
by the neighborhood pool,
those of us swimming
on that suburban summer day,
heard the familiar chimes
of the crossing gates as they lowered
warning of the approaching freight train.

Then sounds loud
for never having been heard before,
drew me dripping to the fence —

Blares of horns —
Squeals and screeches of skidding wheels —
Fountains of snapping sparks —

An enormous locomotive
plowing a blue Chevy Bel Air
sideways down the track.

Drive-in Movie

Mother sends me with my brother and his date, Marilyn,
when they ask for the car to go to a drive-in movie.
I'm happy to go — I get to roam the playground
under the enormous white screen until dusk.

Before the movies begin, I take orders for sodas & snacks;
then walk to the concession stand, real money in my pocket,
swelled by duty.

On the way back, I balance the drinks, tubs of popcorn,
bags of licorice bites and peanut butter cups,
only once getting a little lost in the maze of cars

The best of all — I get to sit behind the wheel
resting my hands on it like I'd seen our Dad do.
I fake turn the ignition switch then press the blinker lever,
slide my hands, one over the other along the wheel,
leaning into pretend turns this way, then that way —
until dark when the shows start.

A cartoon captures my attention — then whatever
movie is showing. I hear them breathing in the back seat
but can't make myself look until all of a sudden my brother
is shaking my shoulder
calling my name
coaxing me to sit up and scooch over,
all in a kinder voice than he usually uses.

Marilyn slides to the center of the seat
smoothing her dress over her knees
and we drive to her home.

When they cross through the streams of light
from the headlamps on the way to Marilyn's door,
I toot the horn. They lurch and shout and my brother

glares at me.

When he returns,
he sits stiff-backed behind the wheel
and yanks the door closed.

Without a word,
he punches me with a knuckle
hard
in the arm.

A warm reminder throbs under the knot
I keep a hand pressed to
all the way home.

Spring's First Layers

Miniscule movements.
Minute moments.
Frenetically organized energy quivering...

Vibrating.

Quiet cores no longer able
To hold back their sound.
Tight centers cry for release, exploration.

*Lowliest loams break again
Revealing a ripe new season.*

Dusted mossy blankets
Holding soil's secrets wash clean
Beneath pure dropped waters.

Intricate intimacies hidden yesterday,
Now, stretch into lighted spaces.
Warm arms elongating, calling, pulling up
New treasures nestled below

Salt of the earth peppered in a billion buds.
Electric leaves shocking waves of life
Across forests undergrowth.

Lingering no longer in dampened dirt
Unleashing in ubiquitous laughter-
Ignited verdant arrows
Draw back to meet the warming sun.

She awakens bottom up,
For her full head would surely
Prevent rays and raindrops
If she unfurled and uncurled
Before her abdomen swelled.

Thickening paths seem not
To disturb fluttering feathers
As fanciful flights quicken.

Foliage, nest, and flower
Now occupy space
Once vacant to explore.

Ripe with a trillion tandem births-
She is expanding.

*What does it feel like to split-wide
in so many pulsating places?*

Chlorophyled offspring splitting fresh, wild.

*Her song calls them.
His song calls her.*

A rebirth in her uncounted labors,
Giving repeated, resplendent, rejoicing
Through tangled toils.

What bliss released
As she bares down again
Through expectant pains.

Her rivers surge in reclamation, declaration.
Ancient liquid paths run, edify, rise.
Grounds below swallowed, returned, broken free-

*Surrendered to the motion.
Holy Living Waters...breathe.*

My heart spills her own banks
For I am the undeserved recipient of Spring's
beauty abundantly shared.

I awaken with her to the wonder.
Marvel in the communal mystery.

*Our stories sing together
of the impossible made new.*

Plein Air Altar

A gardened grotto -
exposed and expectant,
rigid in wisdom. The old
handcrafted relic waits...
never to retire or exhaust
in receiving our humble
offerings.

She is open, as was the
Black Madonna, to be filled with
faith. Objects obtained,
collected, confessed, given in
tears, trial, triumph.

An arched holy house
holding God's gifts -
Blessings given in surrendered
spontaneity we dare not defile or
touch. Intrinsically, we
understand the hushed
unspoken keeping and honoring
of hallowed things. To even lean
in and linger long with closer
eye, our breath is withheld,
afraid of moving tiny trinkets of
love particularly placed.

Pocket-presents pull me towards
a palpable presence.
I pause.

My inadequate imagination, and
weakened humanity, can only
ponder the vestiges pilgrims
before me have laid bare. Will
my heart take me in to a layer of
their life? Seeing, I try to
understand. Storied possibilities
stir in me.

Charms, cherished from
childhood are wet with
morning's dew, having been left

within the safety of mortared
rocks.

Two metal keys twisted
with a meager red bread tie.
Somewhere stands a locked door
whose access was intentionally
denied. Entry enshrined in
anticipation of other openings.

Crimson inked pen, left to write
no more, as the Word will
permanently fill its atmosphere,
cover lettered pages in
manuscripted memory.

Ruddy fiery pebbles, minerals
held with pressure, are hard,
cold, rough. Once lost. Now,
found. Left by faithful fingers
safe inside a storehouse.

A sweet creamed strawberry
sucker, stick stiff and clean.
The only present gift wrapped.
Offered and waiting.

So much blood-red running
through these artificial veins.

Benevolent blessings of a fake
flower formed on a barrette.
Gems glisten. Catch the light,
holding stillness and shining.

Two by two transparent mirror
complete with beveled frame
bounces color, image, captures
time moving by, and reflects the
profundity of closed off
consecrated chambers.

Brown dried leaves, curled and
crisp are beautiful in death.
Decaying statues of sacrifice -
lives given for the nourishment
of next generations.

Another pair, gold studded floral
earrings, lie poised, piercing
nothing except darkness when
he falls.

I am awakened fully by a
tarnished butterfly charm. She is
beautiful, transcendent,
transforming. Fragile and fierce I
whisper, *"You allure me as you
rest, after flight, upon the
chancel floor, soon to soar
again."*

Gratitude stirs and swirls as
sacred treasures teach me. Every
legacy left told in private
parable, only two know the
mystery -- the one who offered
and the One who so willingly
receives.

Yet, riches are my reward as I
bathe, drenched in the overflow
of being a witness
to this witty wisdom and
wonder. I have only my invisible
awe to leave amongst the
blessings overflowing.

The round of a rainbow rubber
bracelet, infinite with words,
*"Kaleidoscope - Never the
same..."*

The Altar has altered me.

Burning

When was the introduction
to that which I am so intimately familiar,
but with characteristics so unlikely, my
heart was struck with terror?

What drew me, this particularly peculiar
day to walk westward around the bend of
new discovery?

Fear hung low, yet, curiosity gave her
clarion call, and I inched my way
carefully closer as defined threshold
demanded a halt,
and feet so bare my soles
breached brambly ground.
Soiled shoes, indeed, would
contaminate and spoil messages
soon delivered with intensity.

My angry arguments assault the air
enough without the faithless filth
of the wearied world to add to my
muddied mis-understandings.

Frightened, I stare on
too dumbstruck to deny
what I intrinsically knew –

I did not want to be consumed.

Attempting to protect temple and thoughts,
using my own self-defense: tongue, as
incompetent as I thought her to be, flapped
in the breeze
until I flat wore out.

Recognizing, as if for the first time,
both speech and wind were formed
by a breath not my own, and

Lacking vision for this moment,
and all those to come,
my word-wrestling wearied to a halt.

Widened atmosphere made way for the
acuteness of sacred sound to find her way
inside my internal reverberating rooms -
Buried. Alive.

Echoing back melodies
of deep empty filling to overflow
as the rushing of Who I AM called to me
to become who i am completely.

Reflecting on mirrored time
lines formed overlapping in
robust overtness to paint, with accuracy,
the true picture:

I was wholly consumed

by the frightening radiant fire,
and what was left of me
shined.

Fatherloss

I prayed for invisibility –
a cloak to hide,
transform,
consume my being
to ensure he would not
recognize,
see,
or know,
my heart beating presence.

Thirteen years the
present my beating heart
wept in winged hope for:
A reunion wet with his hot
tear-soaked repentance,
broken sorrow, ownership
of wounds wielded
and cut deep from every
vain affair holding priority
over me.

But instead, laying eyes
upon his aging body
swelled and wrinkling,
hair lengthened to
disheveled white strings,
my breath escapes.
I freeze.

All buried shards of embers
holding on to oxygenated hope
extinguish and crack
under the icy inhale
my shocked body absorbs.

I fear him.
The unstable stories I know,
experienced, heard,
manifest his physical being

and replace the man
who raised me,
looked upon me
in utter delight.
His affectionate “Sugar,”
Soured.
Bittered.
A dissolved daughter-ship.
No longer the sailing object of his affection.
Only the mirrored hate-filled reflection
of his self-absorbed obsession.

The truth is, your love for others
matched your love for self because
the love you live in isn’t love at all.
Packed high piles of the rotted fruit
you bear tell us all the naked
reality of your sad story.

Volatile fingerprints dirtied,
not from soils rich with life,
but from ridges of friction
your fiery anger raged leaving
remnants of ash
from all those you’ve burned,
not with your hands
but with your words.

Every bridge disassembled,
unjointed, cut hard
with no way back
as the ripe olive’d branches
of forgiveness extended
are extinguished again and again.
You destroy what you need.
Self-sabotage surrounds you.

Like the folly of a netted lion,
you trip into your own trap

time repeating footsteps traveling
limited lengths.

Ensnared.

Estranged.

Enraged by the cage

you built yourself,

Shifting the blight of blame

upon the innocence of others,

your voice carries a song

of injury into the night.

All you know is how to harm.

I pity you.

Slender vocal cords

tucked tight within you

hold the ability

to bring sweet beauty –

I've heard you sing.

Instead, your musical muscle

finds itself flexed,

continuously,

for a fight.

Harmful patterns of repeated

persistence exhaust .

Quarrelsome divisiveness cuts you off.

Drowning in lies, no capacity for truth.

Your counterfeit faith fails you.

Overhauling the work

of even one previous generation

requires grit and goodness.

In some ways,

you surpassed

your patriarch

who still mars you

with centuried breath.

Repeating is easy.

Reestablishing requires

unbroken courage.

I lean in hard,

Breaking all that wants to keep me broken.

Poet: Lauren E. Meadows (she/her), Group #2

Assigned Faculty: Jason Vasser-Elong

And while your prayers

continue to be pleas

to not be caught

in your disjointed affairs,

I will limp on in faint hope

towards a glimpse

of our blessed reunion.

Mother Tongue

She no longer speaks in the lullabied language my heart once understood to be her love.
When my father took her for what change she had left,
he silenced the clinking in her pockets:
sweet sounds of purchases I understood to be her steadfast affection.
She spoke in beautiful melodies of ensembled wardrobes,
school supplies syncopated in notable rainbow colors,
nick-knacks and accessories clustered in tune while
filling the surfaces around my childhood bed room,
and shoes I kept arranged by style beneath the soft apparel.
One glance at my body, my sacred surroundings, my hands holding tools to create,
and I knew I was covered and safe in her love.

But his lazy greed gartered the soprano syllables she used to sing so freely.
He took and he took, and she could no longer give –
 Not in the ways I'd known with blessed insurance.

I recognize the resonance now, in subtler, quieter, less extravagant ways.
Her dialect dialed down to a frequency requiring my own patience to hear.
Reading her music, I catch the reverberations her heart still sends out.
A new syntax to comprehend, grammar to feel, parsing to know my mother's melody –
-- of extravagant love.

Water Colored

Watered movement as pigment pools
Puddles and paddles wetted streams
Trenching pressed fibers made to hold hues
Harbor imaginations fleshed out in a
Coordination of hands and eyes
Creativity and ideas.
Secret sketches in neurons finding life
Outside in the natural.

What a powerful wonderful living being:
O' beautiful mind,
Show me:

What you are made of
What we are made of
What
I am
made of.

Potentials and possibilities
surrendered to your infinite suggestions
relinquished in rainbows of color
moving in the stippled, spattering, spilling.
Silencing and stretching all that falls
from filled brush and quill.
Bouffant'd batons drenched with beauty
waiting to release where conducted,
guided, and going,
crying tinted tears
where the shaded waters flow.

Blacktop Geranium

Part I: Discover

Broken apart from what sustained you, I spot your tomato red petals, and earthy green leaves unmissed, misplaced, and out of place, lost on stale ground prone to kill you, not cultivate.

Left behind, as the one who originally purchased and claimed you sped on into their day leaving you to dehydrate, shrivel and devoid yourself, alone, of pulse and promise.

The sun, once growing you, will soon destroy.

Was I the first to notice you laying there?

I certainly was the last.

Part II: Remember

Parched secluded soul-places inside me ache as I pluck you from greasy hot asphalt in a rescue mission my hands know are more connected to my heart than the foliage I now hold in resurrection hope.

My water bottle rehydrates your body (and mine) as we head toward my home on the hill. Hollow cells plumping, cleansing, re-freshening.

Your musty aroma begins to leak from your refilling chambers. Familiar familial fragrance connects me to memories of front porch beauty

from generations past, curated by feminine love.

Women I love.
Fiercely.

Ladies whose lives labored, with water and time, to birth beauty from clayed vessels where they planted others like you –
Perhaps, parents from your own pedigreed past.

A smile, widened but weary, draws across my mumbling lips. The unwelcomed collection of life's heavy burdens bubble below the surface as I serve your stalk a crystal cut vase filled with cool liquid ready for a deep dive.

Gleaming rainbows bend from etchings in the glass, catching in sunlight, while I remember sweet affections generously given to me, far exceeding those your ancestry received from my beloved matriarchs.

The tangible presence of your velvety leaves cupping my palm pulls me back to this present moment.

Setting you on wooden sill to rest and revive, my own posture slumps matching the position I gathered you from.

Even grown in goodness, life leaves me severed. Not pruned for purpose, but lopped, carelessly –
Or so it seems.
Parts of me, ripe with bud,

were detached and left unattended – to limp, wither and die.

I want revival.
I need life to come -
To burrow in the buried,
and breathe.

Part III: Dream

I leave you perched and pretty in the window above our stove. I will witness your wilt turned full flourish. You are safe. All conditions set to thrive.

Weeks later I come back, with intention, and remove you, momentarily -
you have rooted.

Stretching, swimming, bearing down to reach high, matching your ancient namesake: crane. You echo my own cry in listening ears, and have returned, soon to flower.

And those places left for dead in me?

I picked them up. A few, anyway, and even asked for help.

I am waiting...

I watch, eagerly, for hungry hairy arms to find their way to living water and for my tender buds to heartbeat in color, again.

Poet: Lauren E. Meadows (she/her), Group #2
Assigned Faculty: Jason Vasser-Elong

How She Tells Her Story

My life
cracked,
dividing days from nights,
sliced marks pierced a heart open
dripping gold inked memories of
history. A bleeding story told
through wounds once wide, now sealing
to provide raised layers
catching light as it bends
deep into the reliefs of saturated skin,
acutely aware of all the
yesterdays' afflictions.

My body drones
on dull in ache, re-growth,
and transformation. Hot
breath of wind blows and bends me.
Shivering, I survive. Questioning it all –
Am I ruined?
And if this body restores, will I still be beautiful?
What evidence do I shred to conceal,
every sliver groaning under wasted time.
Senseless lies I've skinned myself in,
but the world moves on ...

...
(help, please!)