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Mourning in Eco-Poetics & Cellar as Linguistic Category

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Mourning in Eco-Poetics &
Cellar as Linguistic Category

By Gwen Moon

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts
in
University Honors
and
Creative Writing: Poetry

Thesis advisors
Michele Glazer and Janice Lee

Portland State University

2023

Table of Contents

Introduction.....5

Part I:

“January Summer...”13

Clackamas River.....15

Time and Nature Yield Us Many Gills.....17

Santiam Canyon.....23

Stillborn.....25

Part II:

“A melody played on a mat...”27

“The car was gunning...”28

“My mother hits her knee...”29

“One month old...”30

“My mother tapes foil...”31

“The oaks of my childhood home...”32

“Rocks in rivers...”33

“Heat wave...”34

“A scorpion off the desert floor...”35

“My father’s father...”36

“My father gained his tongue...”37

“Though I am gripping...”38

“My mother crying...”39

“Isn’t *bite* also *touch*...”40

“Because my father held...”41

“He palms uncooked oats...”42

“I’ve watched memory wound him...”43

“At first we lived in a van...”	.....44
“When I walk in the sun...”	.....45
“I was a pregnant teenager...”	.....46
“For a year after...”	.....47
“My child’s father...”	.....48
“To check the fullness...”	.....55
“The pilot weighs me...”	.....56
“The Colorado friend...”	.....57
“Two months kept...”	.....58
“The ocean blowing and waving...”	.....59
“Working with horses again...”	.....60
“We used to meet along one stone wall marked in moss...”	.....61
“How many Gwens does it take...”	.....62
“My longing...”	.....63
“An old woman...”	.....64
“I look at my body...”	.....65
“I lift my chin...”	.....66
“Biking over the Hawthorne Bridge...”	.....67
“I couldn’t tell if...”	.....68
“My dog finds a round...”	.....69
“Will we flashback to a stable...”	.....70
“I wake up too early...”	.....71
“My daughter would be thirteen...”	.....72
“The weight of her gets mixed...”	.....73
“When I remembered...”	.....74
“The glint of the silver...”	.....75
“If I crawl...”	.....76
“Woke up a little too early...”	.....77

“I woke up dreaming...”	78
Abiqua Falls.....	79
Interview with a Friend.....	80
“I kiss a friend...”	81
“While at work...”	82
How Do I Touch A Void?.....	83
“Around the block...”	84
“Is it that I have a child’s...”	85
“Cats think it's funny...”	86
“A canyon in Northern California...”	87
“I wipe down...”	88
“Taking glassy stones...”	89
“A shadow creature...”	90
“A disjointed flock of coots...”	91
“The first mistake...”	92

Part III:

“In the mornings I bike...”	94
“A woman older than me...”	95
“The swimmer’s body...”	97
“Poor forever having...”	98
“The touch I pay for...”	101
Body of Evidence.....	104
Excerpt from a Long-Ass Love Letter for Two Beloveds.....	115

Introduction

When I wrote the prospectus for my thesis with poet Michele Glazer, I was concerned with and curious about how the rhythms of human speech might emulate weather patterns. In particular, how climate change, ecological collapse, and mass extinction might present sociolinguistically as embodied variations in speech. Perhaps even without our notice – changes in perceptions of time and season registered as unspoken dread, and yet, still carried in how our bodies absorb and emanate kinds of silence through language.

There is something to how sentences are rhythmic, like the body's rhythms. Breathed in swoops of talk. There is something to how our bodies are understanding new ways of loneliness – changes in bird song, fewer bees – and I am sure this is showing up in our gestures, postures, word choices, our ways of touching each other. But I don't know if I could track it – I'm not a linguist, and I have no way of setting up a baseline. The first animal to go extinct as a result of human-caused climate change was the Panama Golden Toad in 1989, the year I was born. Like the poet CA Conrad, I lay on the floor of

my room listening to recordings of its croaking so some understanding of its sonics and continued absence might enter my body through sound waves. But I have never known a time without an ecological existential imperative.

I still have these eco-poetic curiosities and questions around rhythms in speech and weather patterns, etc. Plus, there are many interesting forms to render in poems to disrupt inherited sentence structures – my favorite poets all do it, and I do too. We write with sentence fragments, rearrangements of syntax, gerunds, or otherwise re-structuring grammatical rules. Some of these methods are used in disrupting the rhythmic expectation or timing of a phrase, in my poems and the poems of other ecologically driven poets, like Brenda Hillman's re-mapping of language, subject, and witness in concepts of the environment.

But I found I couldn't and cannot write directly into these thoughts or try and answer ecological questions as a poet without avoiding a kind of listening inherent to my creative practice. I could spend time in these thoughts, but not write them with a kind of heavy-handed intention – I'd lose resonance or become didactic and distanced. I could only carry the thoughts in me, as a kind

of ache to listen to. These ecological themes still constantly enter my work, and are my work – I have a strong background living and working in wilderness, on farms and ranches. Perhaps even more importantly, I am also already embodying those rhythms of ecological collapse because I'm living it. If it's in my language as a result of immersion in the unavoidable external, it's already embodied, and is the language I am writing with.

It's true I have a habit or a need to write around a subject, or circle it, before I can find a way in. I once took months on a single poem – and it started as an overtly “horse-y” poem, where I was curious about the musculature of a horse running in a fleet state as a way of describing grief. The poem ended up after months of revision with very little horse, and is now a poem written in description of avoiding the grief of losing a child to violence. I kept trying to write away from this grief – the ecological poems I was trying to write changed course when Michele saw a line in one of my poems, and chose this as a pulse point: “How do I mother an absence?” She called that point of pain my real subject – and matters of ecology, as components of my disposition and interests, melded in without exactly needing my direct attention. I tend to

gravitate towards the ecological. I have struggled with a flight tendency in my life and in my writing.

Maybe this craft essay or introduction is modeling my creative practices of circling in. Of sidetracking, and rabbit holes of research that evade.

The thematics of ecological collapse carried, wave-like, and engulfing, the grief of losing a child. Through the absence of anticipated rhythms, through disruptions in time, with beginnings being endings, there is also the grief of ecological collapse. The themes and the creative practice mirror each other in this way. Again, flood-like, the writing picked themes of my own feral and violent childhood – my parents' childhoods – my time as a runaway youth working on farms and ranches – and all the while, troubling inherited notions of time, of memory, of singular-self, of violence, of language. The fragmented, prosaic structure also serves to speak to my own inner fragmentation – which is present in the poetry as breaking apart a sense of witness to separate selves or entities, or having the landscape serve as witness or “creator” or a self. One of the interesting things in writing this way is how much is unintentional or surprising – I didn't set out to write with a fragmented speaker, for example.

But also, how troubling and breaking apart structures inherited from the dominant culture is an attempt at decaying the language and notions that delineated “nature” as an “other” to be acted upon and “developed” to begin with. Or, my poems and the poems of other ecological poets realize language is another facet of ecology.

While writing, I often have books of poetry open to return to and keep me company; or offer a source of grounding, or some take on craft or technique I might absorb. Robert Hass’s philosophical, quotidian, and humorous lines have such clarity and comfort, and his location in the Bay Area gives me solid resonances of home to return to – and because he doesn’t use defamiliarized language, as such, he gives me a sense of counter balance to how my brain structures and deconstructs language. Joanna Klink’s musicality and “sound-of-sense” in her use of sonics were a guide for me, even before I had read her work. Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s mythological wild narrative structures. Roger Reeve’s imagistic density and dexterity in mosaic richness. Forrest Gander’s assembled associations stitched and unstitched by mass grief in the ecological. Evie Shockley’s troubling of associated phrasing and climate catastrophe in precise and experimental forms. There are so many I am not

mentioning here, but I am grateful for how these poets place me and my experience in dialogue with ecological events. I am also grateful for their comfort and resonance, even when difficult.

My poems contain some very heavy violence. The thesis is organized via proximity to awareness of violence – which is to say, so far, the thesis is arranged to model my own healing process and recovery from surviving nearly lifelong violence and dissociative amnesia. The first section has perhaps some sense of encounter—but also disoriented language that is sonically rich and perhaps a bit avoidant in moments. This section also has some of my only lineated poems in the thesis. The second part of the thesis is organized a bit like a haibun, a Japanese form fluctuating between diaristic prose and haiku, and has a broad scope that might read like a multi-genre fantastical memoir. This is also where I begin to have questions around traumatic memory being a substance circulated through the ecosystem, like minerals. The third part deals with more overtly handling two months where I was kept in a cellar by two men after being kidnapped while traveling in Colorado. While this is deeply traumatic, I attempt to handle the cellar as a linguistic event of totality – which is to say, a kind of eclipse of language made by the prolonged and

isolated-unbearable, that is, a breakdown of time, experience, and the link between the failure or sustainment of language and the formation of narrative memory.

The project feels ambitious, and incomplete. I only touched on some of the craft techniques and themes and influences here in this introduction, but I hope it at least offers some source of grounding.

Thank you for reading.

Thank you as well to my professors – especially my advisors, Janice Lee and Michele Glazer.

Thank you to everyone in my community and in this academic backdrop for beckoning me and my strange way of being into conversation and connection.

Thank you for loving me into being. I have been immensely lucky to be in the midst of such tender, curious, and brilliant humans.

Part I

January summer, sunlight on the streets in afternoon and I walked barefoot. *Two feet and warm.* She opened the door and there I was too, “you look like a ghost all eyes and mouth and bones” (*two eyes, one mouth, some bones and a ghost too*). I knocked without knowing that I knocked. The terror I kept away from me, in a hand I did not own to the right or left. The shape of the mountains and snow. *Two hands two wrists.* The door opened and our childhood spread. There we were again — And in the winter I came from, there had been pleasure. Alone, for months, my pant legs freezing stiff to the morning light not spreading or sinking but breath on snow on pines. The lady on the suicide hotline said I had a great deal of emotional depth and insight. *Emotional Depth, and Insight!* (On your own, kid) Which the horses used to breathe light into the hooves of their four feet each. I lifted each foot to smell for infection. Unfolding their blankets, rustling nylon, winter fur, *two hands, two feet, one mouth, some bones, and a ghost too! A ghost with work to do.* It always circles back to being seen. Now I had seen the lack of rain and long heat, the hills brown dust, from the car, has it rained once and the long shadowed evenings blue the oaks. I took off my coat, my sweater, my shoes. “You are too thin and pale.” (*All mouth and eyes and nose*) She said, “You need lotion.” And I did. *Tight skin, dry lips, the palm of two hands.* Where I come from the air pulls at your water to make the snow.

I had made this gathering what it was
surprised by memory called up
against stronger buttering light
my sister pardoning herself
to the bird shit flaking for
months on her floor rescued
pigeon open window empty swing
and the questions I ask when afraid

I can reference dry lightning crickets
in the sand and sage I pissed blood
in hot dots of damp again while a man
watched and I watched lightening
I tried to lay down to sleep before rain or man

not that I ever speak of that but am I doing wrong
is everyone okay to be around me and the hum
of the baseboard heater which simmers the sun
to the dirty window and I repeat to the breath

Clackamas River

In my fear of
summer, empathy
is a shape to adhere to
like a film of spit
surviving the pleasure of hissing —

traveling hollow by boat, hard
like the rocking
I prefer at an open window
for the fall —
my desire frightens you
for I have tipped
the harshness of me
filling the river braiding stones into my body
within swimming distance of last year's burn.

Wanting to stay alive is hard, you say,
moving our hands
to the bank of fireweed
purple-lighted from anguish grown
to sun in an opened wood.
I dive under again to stream bubbles in spins—
green brightness to the algae slip and sink.
I can only come to the word
surrender, so I drop low.

The taste
of drought is closer
to blood than blood.
Salt-copper piping, salt.

Then the clean stone
neutral of approximation to wealth,
a quality education. Water, too.
Like the air, clean light.

Why stay? For what belief?
Where the humidity of pink sky catches
how I spend my daylight time — to whom
does the mourning belong, swelling
with the aging heat.

Time and Nature Yield Us Many Gills

I:

If color feels color does the land change to meet it? As running uphill in pine and the smell is of memory uncontrolled to green. I stop. Breathe where it happened. Water at rain blooms the spread, knows itself grown. Gray-blue sky somehow pink if shifted to the right of my childhood. With a speculum I core the tree of an opera, a narrative in closure gaps of recall resolved and rising. My life's entirety witnessed. Spring after spring drained to the ground, sticking and visible mash to run. Today I split a bowl too hot to hold spilling oats. I sucked from the counter. Musky warm grains. I broke the handle off a mug, the way a bird spreads dust taking off in fright. Moment given to sweeping. My habits of scavenge, leftover foods nearly spoiled I resist eating from housemates abandoned — *I don't need this to live anymore*, dropping the stale nacho, I find the fresher foods, the past, my past, too much disturbed trailing in me stacked on the milk of better shadows. Bears can stay formal and upright, but don't, believe me — stooping as I do empty leaking dry oats from my hand onto the floor. Gritted into corners. My hunger is a clarity I neglect.

II:

In the river, as mud
bubbles cup the bank
like spit

a seal dark sleeks the shine
from the sea in pursuit of fragile
few salmon — Fatted off

the pink, an undulating rogue.

Survival is an art around here.
Acidic and
marked in bite;
a slow cooked soup
whose steam smells like
acid reflux.

The seal dives, lattice of tail
briefly hung
quick to drip and gone.
Where the under-rush
of water hears like flame.

III:

All night, the windows layer
shadow with rain:
Hot apples graining in alkaline slough—

since childhood, I've known drums
bloom the hollows of my body like rivers
met by rain.

If pressure is sound,

tapping, language
smacks the wet into reverb.

Rhyme or the storm
to resolve a cadence,
thinly held

swimming lights.

IV:

Time and nature yield us many gills.

Tree shadow brushes to breathe
slitting the ceiling to movement sway —

Light breaks down light, maggot sticks of stars
wrinkling into the blue-black.

The home is a life absorbed into light
before light ever came.

And your gills and my gills and the gills —

At first the light frightened me. Not upstairs watching white roll in from the gray-blue, but standing in the kitchen looking out. Something to the bright on the streets. Something pale. I cried coming into a sense of near solidity.

Not quite sure who I was in the room. As I'm not quite sure now, watching light change over my skin. Will I survive it? What belongs here in this memory. Curled around a sorrow I barely understand. Not a singular entity. Not entirely mine. It is sitting across from me staring, gills gliding open —

V:

The night above me was more
in me than my breath
 the stars
always shifting in my chest
below freezing and sharp
curling inward wolf inside the
den of my belly chewing ribs
early morning nosing warm
feathered feet press snow under bough
gliding light over-shines ice boreal pine
hurls needles without sun
juicing the horizon deep sinking heat
killing teeth organizational incline
laces skin through threads of force and pace
marking movement's sniff low spine high spine

narrowing line of rabbit scuttle snow spread snap.
Opulent stillness spreads the rabbit's neck, more landscape than closed form. Like
permafrost disengaging its hard to bubble the lake it bloated to sky sight.
Quietly frosting earth where light withdraws
raking sun into the black larch. Wavering rim of moon gripped in
saliva dropped my throat
time left alone in a single room to pull a glow
uttering mouth grasp the gap of hands closed to hold
vaguely familiar cold leaving blood behind my fingers
whiten at space beyond my body though pulled by my own grief
xylophoned sound cuts my nails to points I press into the moon
yearning to leave what marks I can in the sky. The rabbit stagnated to shape shadows.
Zoological is the longing I toss to catch gravity, not mine.

VI:

Words wild crawling
the duff of oaken wood,
sniffing. Frightened words
are bugs scattering to hide.
Meaning moves around the axis
of a bear shaking off water.
Animal hair lifts from language
to float and land again
on the paragraph,
settling as grown in fur.

Caught in the mouth of a grey wolf,
the rabbit's gaze
ungrips, spreading the gap
between words.

Santiam Canyon

In contemplating quick fish round stones the back
quietly browns in a migratory V.
Soft mounded boulders mossed fresh and damp,
such light spread at the heavy pull to sponge the heat.
I had known of this river before, my childhood friend returning summers
a forest canyon creaking low land.
She had lifted limply her small terrier in sun drop catching
and drowned, fur clumped around the nose in lines.
The weight of her dog familiar, and it's this weight which translates—
I feel myself there, too, though I wasn't, and this is no origin story of grief.
The many returns to legs outpacing scenes spread like a sheet
bleached stiff and straight.

My good, good friend speaks in a light on half her face,
still framed in thick hair she says swallows pencils,
horse dust, oil light on water. I had kissed her as girls
when the horse saddle pressed too hard against my bladder,
each rhythmic pull forward and back,
and I dismounted to piss right on the trail,
this pressure and release coinciding with longing
which rises against my knowledge of loss —
such tenderness as oat in hand, horse
nostril quickening to slow circular expanse and still steaming in the cold,
frantic sweat coating chest and drying.

There's a color to return to, soft gray, billowing bump of cloud, under-belly of a city bird, and I looked
up to stay alive. The heart grows brighter. It is not the fault of fire.
Canyons being like those wind socks, colorful, full and flapping snap.
and embers do ignite.
What is the wildness of the body?
My friend shelters in the cool river, a green wool blanket over her face, her hair. The woods in ash
silting the seats of bicycles. Horses pulled in a calming circle, hoof beating tin trailers and safety but not
to smell.
My own body more scar than smooth, though strong, having pushed death into the room, pine needles
pine cones, crackling, and ache.

When the sheet pulls back, my legs are deer jointed and fur.

Stillborn

I reach into pain where her image swells.
The nearly sleeping newborn I hold
to my face as heat and
from the unbearable
I turn. I keep turning.
This labor

I carry: Grief
in undulations
of muscle, sharp hips rising
the mass of absence, a horse whose
width of breath diminishes in speed,
rocking lift and drop.

Lifting my shirt, these stripes of rabbits in flight,
my stomach not hutch but open field.
Whose shattering fist and feet?
I fear stillness
where my daughter quiets:
Watching light heavy
wood grain and shadow.

Is this mothering?
Settle into the weight.
My head turned; my child again,
again my initiation into her dying
and there I am tender.

Part II

A melody played on a mat spread over a sidewalk with no distinctive keys. A tactile instrument, not visual. The tune was in G minor, the mat spread near pine trees and a river.

I have a question of which time is the solid time. Could choose a time to press a finger into and all other time would flow around it.

1970's. My grandparents closer to my age, alive, smooth faces and the water in the sea had not yet risen so high. In their East Bay home, the smell of resin on the blue carpet stagnates off the flow of bow my grandmother pulls over her cello. Her eyes closed. Outside, the creek floods and churns with mud. My grandfather walks six miles in the green hills, wrapped in blue-gray sky. The fog following him at dawn, sentience off the sea. Caught in the cracks of oak broken folds, the sun thins the thick and its bright.

My mother, a teenager, watches apples form on the golden delicious tree outside her window, hikes barefoot in mud at night to loud creeks. Those slippery frogs she catches, holds, puts back in cool water. Blustery nights she slips from her window. Wind rushes camelias off the stems, lengthened the sky dipped down to touch her.

She tells me about the word bluster. Blustery nights. The wind and words I slip into from my childhood window, and I run into the hills. How my feet enunciate time, smacking bare on the warm street, downhill slopes of grit I will never touch again.

The car was gunning down the private drive's steep grade. And the toddler was thrown wide. This happened when my mother was twelve. Or thirteen. He must have walked from his wooded yard into the street. Alone by the mailboxes, where he stood before with his parents —

By the oaks that in their spreading limbs, resembled a body opening for touch. It was a teenager driving the car. Perhaps chewing on a daydream like gum, still freshly flavored. Did not see the toddler. His brakes no good in the aftermath of a decision to propel past thought downward with wind he imagined himself weightless —

My mother seemed to be made out of moonlight. Or vapor. Standing in her white nightgown across the street. Her face watched the last of the child's life draining like residual water in a tub. A pulsing rhythm lurched into dwindling fullness until gone. My mother in her stillness warmed the concrete under her feet while the child cooled —

My mother hits her knee on one corner of my crib. The wound sends the wrong signal, makes more bone instead of bruise. She stiffens all the way to her eyes. Birds fly from my hands and bite holes into the calcium of my mother.

Already I had widened her ribs from the inside with my fists. Until the doctor cut across, pulled me out, I asked her to keep moving and I did not turn around.

One month old. I scream in my cradle. But instead of sound tunneling the hallway, my cry pummels downward. Glacial melt meeting limestone like cake. The added pressure increases tension on the San Andreas fault. All strike-slip, shelf snap and fall. The land resettles. Water shooshes from shore. Cars folded into a collapsed overpass make waves like limbs under a sheet. My father waits in his car in Oakland. My sister in the backyard stares at the concrete slab over her head. My mother must run to one of us first.

The four year drought prevents liquefaction in the hills. I was born into rain falling on my sister's blue duck umbrella, a rare late summer watering the hills to green — but not a soak, I'm learning.

My mother tapes foil to my t-shirt. She tapes foil to the giant turtles' shells. When I crouch with the turtles under the narrow wood deck, she finds us reflecting back at her. I look at my mother between two sets of darkness, holding a flashlight, kneeling and searching for her daughter. I blink when the beam touches my face. I crawl to her with cobwebs in my hair. The cats follow me out. The turtles take longer. I feel relief when I touch her torso. Crickets rise their sound upward in place of light.

The oaks of my childhood home. The mountain with light tan clay, sandstone wisping caves carved in wind. My mother brought me to the dipping trails at dusk, holding me up from the ground by one arm. I was bleeding from my face and between my legs. We played a guessing game to see if the lumpy shadows ahead of us were horse shit, rock, or nighthawk. Bugs hovered in layers of purpling light. Snakes whispered off the trail to hunt. Nighthawks ate the bugs in a swooping pattern I could predict and distinguish from bats' jilted flutters — although bat rhythms form a sonic syntax I cannot see.

Rocks in rivers pushed high-pitched grating in the slow blue.
Stiffness from the doe's ribs extends an exhale.

I am knocked off my bike in the dark by a bolting deer.
Her momentum pulled the air from me.

The air from me is the spider-webbed place between two fences. Ivy thick and narrow. Where I blanket down the spring of stem. A creek once filled into ditch, now framed in wood smells and rusty iron. Frogs are the rustling sweet. The neighborhood cats, damp toothed rubbing. Coyotes a sharper pitch in my chest's yelping. Raccoons waddle the line of sky, fur clumped and unclumping walking into open angles stars leak through. Eureka lemon, rosemary, and rue. A loquat tree.

Tugging the stuck sliding glass door to the inside. The trapped rhythm echoes in my shoulders. Pulling dough out of thick crust with my hands. I leave a hollow behind, an illusion my father finds. Shouts from the kitchen about bread miners.

A dough miner, a dough miner's daughter, a daughter. Bread crumb lung. Spider web lung white and dry spun in the cavities of my body. I cough up the old remedy for blood wounds.

Once, the rustling carried our neighbors run from the police lights and sound over fences. I pulled the trapped rhythm of the door into my shoulders. My mother's long pink nightgown against the dark cleared. There was a kind of hunger I found when I touched her torso, gripping her I found myself starving.

Our neighbors had separated bodies into bags, thrown into the nearby delta to settle at reeds and the softness of pussywillow. The news described their house as small, nondescript home on the fringes of a mountain —

Heat wave. The sidewalks purple from the sky pressing velvet to the ground. My mother pours water into a flower glass and gulps loud. Lightning strikes fires in the hills around us. Threatens the mountain, our house. She dips a butter knife into mayonnaise, scrapes a slice of white bread open trying to spread. One piece of orange cheese. A sliver of iceberg lettuce.

A scorpion off the desert floor wound its stinging tail to curve at my father's sternum. A moth already lives there, which the scorpion sees and tries to hunt from him. A glowing wasp hovering in his chest, batting against the sides of his ribs. A little boy, he stomps his feet, scaring the blue whip lizards he wanted to touch. He studies the red dirt for arrowheads and the horny toad lizards he flips over in his hands, rubbing their bellies until they fall asleep.

Inside, his mother mixes the last of the corn meal with water. The oven is outside. She turns on a hose and lies where the adobe meets the earth until the smell of smoke wakes her.

My father's father was in Egypt, uncovering *artifacts* along the Nile River, for some portion of his childhood. This made my granddad *important*.

In an El Nino year, my father tells me if I go to Egypt, I will be murdered because of something unspeakable my grandfather did there. He flickers his eyelids. The streets flood with mud. Hills overfull with rain drop gasps of stone and roots.

I am eight years old. My chest is full of fish swimming for the door where a new stream flows outside, is in the ditch. I will sit my skin in the cool gray.

My father gained his tongue crack from living in the desert. His tongue matched the ground, where the dryness traveled up his feet and broke even the wet muscle to welt. His hands were lizards, doing push ups on stones, wriggling into shadows to cool off what the sun did.

I dreamed last night, my mother tells me, that I wrapped my arms around you to protect you and your sister.

Am I made out of light leaving the room?
His hands switch on the light and I am gone,
outside, pissing on the deck which ruins the wood stain —

Though I am gripping her hands, it is not a holding. It is the stiff beating of a swan's wings as it takes off from the lake, the ripples I make on her hands with my fingernails. A flat drumming sound against her skin. I am beaked and hissing.

She makes me let go so she can lie on her bed. When I am dragged down the hall by my father, it is with the practiced motion of a hunter cutting open the belly of a bird.

My mother crying on the white bed. Like the ants to the cookies I left in the bushes, my mother's feelings started with so few and soon swarmed her body. The acidic-spice of an ant infestation I had tasted, the heat. I held my mother on her bed.

The cat jumped proud from the shrub, her teeth holding a stiff rat covered in ants.

Isn't *bite* also *touch*? My mother shakes my bite off her arm, where the picture of her emerges on her skin from the indentation of my teeth. *Wild animal*, she says, and I throw myself against the car door until she brakes and I run from her into the snow melt off the mountain.

Because my father held my body still until the tarantula crossing the road was scattered, shattered and squished, the space between legs and eyes flattened, very dead.

I think I am going to kill him.

He palms uncooked oats into his mouth from the pantry, gritting the green carpet. Stained white underwear. An old t-shirt. Hairy legs. The arm he's not using to scoop hangs at the hem of his shirt. He's slouching, glaring at me, hungry in the flickering kitchen where moths died and dried in a plastic light yolk.

I've watched memory wound him.

I'm named after his grandmother: A woman in the New Mexico high desert where magpies glittered the sound of their landing claws on metallic garbage cans.

Jack rabbits in the heft of their hind legs kicked the earth to bolt.

Lightening and heat. Rain wet relief.

I imagine my great-grandma's cornbread as honey-soaked and crumbling, her hands warm. There was a pond he could swim in, algae-thick and wonderful with toads.

Was it her mother who set fire in her own house, sat on the bed to wait for flame? Or was that her?

I've watched the habits of his neck's curve towards the ground. Still looking for snakes.

There was enough food for him to eat when he lived with his grandmother. Is that enough to say? He was safe. I used to tease him for loving New Mexico like he did. But safety for both of us is framed in landmark, in repetition, in the acts of few people who love us into being. We can store the sense of safety, of tenderness, in our bodies for years, like stores of water in desert life. This is my inheritance, like the muscular body when fed, olive skin, green eyes —

When he reached for me, I struggled. My nose broke against the sink. I held the bleeding with one hand, and with the other arm I swung around and elbowed him in the eye. I stood up. He sat on the floor, curled into himself. Blinking out water. I searched for the shapes in the bathroom tile I had formed into creatures. Obscured by his bent knees.

What was he trying to gain? What touch?

I walked away from him. Miles to the BART station. Fell asleep on the train going back and forth from the airport. Dipping under the salty bay where sound catches up to the rush. I can still remember the pace of proximity to land by the sense of tension on the rails under me.

“At first we lived in a van. The van smelled like mold and dust. We parked near water and the sound of crickets. We bathed in the river with a bar of soap. Greenness to willows. We slept under willows with our bars of soap and the back doors opened out so rain fell onto my face.

The van had only thirty percent of its brakes, so braking sounded like a waterfall and veered us strongly to the right. The gas gauge was broken. When we ran out of gas on the freeway, I stayed in the van with the windows down in the heat, named the hot wind Aunt Bertha. It couldn't be escaped — the heat couldn't be escaped, so I tried to form a relationship with it through a name I half liked because it made me laugh.

He was nearly forty. He drew a face on his knee and made it talk, and when the face turned I laughed. We ate fruit off trees. We ate cheese from the dumpsters of wealthy Berkeley neighborhoods.

We both lived by farming, ranching, working in exchange for room and board along the coast harvesting blueberries and oranges — smells of the sea and orange blossoms and dust and oak and sun — arriving at night at new homes and workplaces where I couldn't see anything yet but the small bits of grass in front of my feet, a glimmer of a snake gliding away from me — but I would hear horses, goats, sometimes human voices, talking quietly, crickets, an owl — and the smells, of grass, of manure, and the feel of fast feet and when he was with me, his warm hand, helping me not trip with my pregnant belly — “

When I walk in the sun, sparks or ash fall in front of my eyes and tingle my fingers, spine, until I stop moving and can't see around the noise. Moths laugh around the field mouse chewing in my chest. The chewing shuts down the wiring for the lights, so my vision darkens. A trout flashes in my throat —the thickness of its body filling my neck startles me. I exhale the fish into my hands and feed it to the bear sitting next to me —

I was a pregnant teenager in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. I wore the same cotton dress, stretched blue over my belly. The front hem shortened each week. My child's father brought me figs gleaned from yards, arranged like alien sacks of seeds on the bedspread still warm.

The Yuba river pushed sand— flecks of fool's gold lifted from the river bed glinted in the water. I sat in a shallow current to cool off. Water pushed against my back, rushed shivers of bubbling to my ears. Or I took off my dress and lay in the dirt, turned on the hose. Like a toad overheating in the desert I swallowed myself in wet. I walked into the house dripping mud. Her father wiped it from me with a rough towel. I stood very still.

What I have is how my hand reached for him while he beat me. A muscular scrunch in my low back. A caterpillar reaching for a leaf, shortening again. He squeezed my neck and I closed myself to his eyes.

I struggle to translate now what drops from the ceiling. Spiders on slow, thinned threads land on my skin with legs the texture of a loose hem in breeze.

I made a fragment to have the contractions instead of me. A long cape of trembling pink nerves carried by my shadow. My child had my mouth and I watched her blue. She breathed but I didn't think to count them until she finished. Her father wrapped her in a white cloth. I remember he was careful with the binding. There was a pattern to it.

For a year after her death I couldn't speak. Like a stick in a river too quick to swim after. The stick also lived in my throat. The stick was my throat. I couldn't say what was close or far away or a part of me. So I dropped under water, churned, the body passive to float at movement and a kind of rest where the vision darkened.

When heat on the old oak leaves scorched a line of crisp to sway the sky. I moved a mattress to the porch and slept in sound: Crickets, wind, gunshots.

I relearned language watching sunlight leave the wood grain of a telephone pole.
Words congealed like lady bugs swarmed on a branch. Wings clicking air, light, and color.

The first letter I wrote includes a drawing of a scarfed crab, doing a sad and sideways traditional dance. Also, a fox. *I cannot be still. I'm like a frog or newt and I have no filters for things that hurt. I am leaving for a rainy area.*

(Which saved my life, not hers).

My child's father: The body of rain-drenched trees. Wrinkled and slick. That below the window darkens further. Skin slip. The hand fidgets. Number of steps to the river. The hand reaches out and the river passes its larger ache into the body. Number of steps past thought. The body past thought in rain-drenched trees. Wrinkled and slick. That below the lightning darkens crisp. Skin clip. The hand fidgets. Number of steps to the river. The hand reaches out and the river seeks a sharper ache in the body. That below the water darkens further. Wrinkled and slick. Skin flip. The hand fidgets. Number of steps to the river. The river past thought of trees drenched in body. The river reaches out and the hand slips past fidget.

My child's father: A scatter of brown seeds pulled on wind from white flowers. A possum brushes against the height, rustles loose seeds sharp-ridged in gray. In dusk light, seeds cut into bare feet. The soles of feet are rich damp soil. Germinated, upward growth hollows the body reed. The top of the head looks like wild parsnip, easily mistaken.

My child's father: I still use the method he showed me to chop garlic. Cut off the pointy tips first, then use the flat side of the knife and a fist to smack down, which loosens the papery skin.

My child's father: Squats by the river with his hands open waiting to catch the childhood. The childhood is strong and difficult to catch from the water. The childhood has fish teeth poking through its skin — like a scabby rash, which the childhood will pick at, making triangular wounds. *The teeth are only trying to help you heal*, but the childhood bites for touch and stays lonely. Thrashes like a weapon made of flesh. My child's father drops the childhood back into the river. His skin is open.

My child's father: Is a whooshing sound in the heart on a routine exam.

An acoustic ecologist registers layers of sound for forest health — like surveying the wooded understory, snags, leaves decay in a stream, breaks for sunlight in canopy shading damp soil where fungal threads pass minerals as touch to the trees' reach — there's an interdependency of decibels.

A press of the stethoscope: Pileated woodpecker, wood thrush, frogs — nurselogs to song. Coyote, wolf, elk cry, cracking branch fall, and the higher-pitched chickadee when the sun breaks bright to green what is glow.

Then silent layers: Splotches of untouched air, with the slowed texture of a dead ocean folding its own emptiness.

What decibels do I occupy with the birds calling back to the trees? Big soprano voice calling for her dog to return, crashing through the brush —

My child's father: A bullfrog. A dry leaf in wind. A door slamming in orange and black pulses reaching the horizon. A slap. Chopping garlic. Sizzling fish. Glistening stick. Metallic click.

My child's father: Quiet in the wake of woodsmoke's sting.

My child's father: The whole packed in
warmth of June
focused and set free. The light
that slides like struck sand down.
As light behaves in water,
warming a transient surface only so much.

My child's father: *Is he still alive?*

When sick with a fever, he rambled out stories without form, language gliding with texture, bubbling, stirring shapes without repetition or ending — my mute self carried him into the tub, to breathe in steam, but it made him vomit out a sparkling fish — whether it was my touch or the steam, I couldn't say.

My child's father: *Is he still alive? I can't remember what he smelled like.*

I dreamed again of being firmly pregnant in a car. Dreamed in ways that unsettled the present tense, so that in my half-awake moments I was pleased to see I didn't have to worry about a baby in my body, because other, probably violent concerns were present, like continuous flight from harm. But I think one thread between dream and waking-life was late spring. Maybe my pregnancy had the same sensation as the rosebud by the porch — firm, curling, pink — but it is the texture of rosebud, the firmness, with delicate lacey edges, which is somehow akin to the body of spiders and the circular orientation of their legs, is so similar to a rose's unfurling —

To check the fullness of a baby goat's belly: Press gently for the consistency of a full water balloon. A supple firmness is when to release the mouth latch the goat knows to pull from.

One hand on the bottle. One hand on the belly.

Utilize the support of the elbow to hold the squirm in place.

To check the fullness of sound: My mother pauses under the liquid ambers in the front yard during a storm. My father ceases to trim the lemon tree dropping its sour blooms, his hands scratched open by thorns. The dogs tilt their heads and whine when they detect an aural opening to move through. It's too quiet. Even rain on the leaves cannot navigate a thickness in the air. I lie on the floor, moving my hands over the carpet, which eats sound — the teeth are right there in the weave— and wait to be bitten apart.

To check for fullness of labor: Wash skin all the way to the elbow. Reach into where the mother goat is paused in her pushing, dropping fluids onto the ground. Look in her eyes for the glaze of too much. Continue talking to her. Tell her what you're doing, despite the language barrier. Maintain a touch on her body with your other hand. Locate the hooves, the head, the slick placental sack marbling its way out, and gently massage into a slimmer shape —

To check for fullness of smell: Dive into a river carved through sandstone. Stay under until the lungs burn. Re-emerge in a rainstorm, inhaling big right at the surface break. Watch the dog sniff something to the light warming. Note how the the air shifts around color, under an orange-red sunrise — the dog runs three laps, his body low to the ground, short ecstatic breaths.

To check for fullness of mother: Provoke the father against the child.

The pilot weighs me before I step into the bush plane. Grief is suspended on a bubble in my throat, won't show on the scale. *Fight or flight response.*

Every ounce of weight matters when taking off, when looking down. At sitka spruce, at sea where the humpback whales slap their algae smells to wave. Sparks of blown spray, the distance expanded from force. I am not weightless or unafraid. Of falling. My palms turned over the land, hovering. Not growing like the golden light angling the trees.

You look like a child, the pilot says when I hand him my ID. It's true. I want to joke about malnourishment and the glow of constant near-death experiences, but don't.

It's coastal Alaska. I'm looking after livestock. Five soft tempered draft horses lower their noses down and breathe. Large hairy dogs run into my legs. No bears in long quiet snow. My breaths get longer inside than out, holding back from the cold.

I am running in shoes without much traction.

Losing my keys in snow.

The Colorado friend with a child and a gun wants to die.

He lets me intervene.

He picks me up at the Greyhound Station in Denver.

I send the child to her mother's.

Red rocks and dry. Pale sky. The snow late and thin, he drives the close angles of highway dropping into canyon. We pass the same two donkeys in a brown field, and he asks me again to remember when I used to like him.

In his home, he turns the gun from his face to my mouth. A trout fin slaps my molars. I exhale and slip into the Colorado River from the bathroom window, feeding myself to the bears sitting where the ice breaks.

Two months kept by two men in the Colorado cellar rise from my feet into the shadows.

The memory belongs to no one.

The memory belongs to no one:

It stays. Next to a fawn in the grass nosing the damp dark shade. I watch from the slipping grass on a hill, feet pressing on the wind.

Pileated woodpeckers pull two months kept by two men in the Colorado cellar from the soles of my feet. Beavers arrive for my legs, gnaw, pull my detached limbs into the river for their dam. *Keystone species, pivotal for the health of riparian ecosystems*, I say. Watching two months kept by two men in the Colorado cellar swirl from my legs into an offshoot of the current. A mountain lion finds me unable to move. Feeds the rest of me to her cubs. She licks the blood from their fur. The swirling cowlicks on their heads the two months kept by two men in the Colorado cellar.

The ocean blowing and waving into my body, pulling back. Coastal grasses, green shrubs, swooping birds of prey. The sponge thickness of the soil empties, remains carved by sea.

Maybe I have water in place of memory or self —

I worked with horses again in the South. I communicated in weight, pull, taps and rhythm. I slept in sun porches and the bugs sounding green, I drank green, heard green and the dripping of moss where the snakes curved from me.

Somewhere there were wild dogs. The tall horses in their stalls turned their ears to the howls and stomped. *I stare at the word stomp until it turns to solid wood to kick against. I add sand and wind to soften the word, driftwood pulled from the beach in a dog's mouth.*

Working with horses again in Idaho. The barn I sleep in is haunted. I learn the first night from a sunburned man. *The barn is haunted*, he tells me and sits down to watch me sleep. Flies hover at my face and hands. I touch my knife. Outside, stars sharpen on coming cold.

I clean and oil the tack instead of sleep. Barefoot, I stub my toe on my mother, trying to sleep — *please don't wake him up*, she whispers. I am little, looking up from the space between my parents' bed and the long window where the flowering crabapple caught the moon glow. Carpeted dark-green stiff wool with a hissing sound the doors closed over. I lie on the floor and pull a heat from her dangling hand.

Tufts of looped carpet outgrow their form and branch
cinnamon-barked ponderosa pine in rising sunlight.

We used to meet along one stone wall marked in moss.

I am one corner; an apple tree flowering white.

This is where memory will position itself;

admiring as preening juncos and jays.

Yet from the woodlands

my soul asks for a body to drag belly down

through duff as tied by string to only

true owls gliding.

My navel hurts and gathers dirt.

My back scrapes to whispers.

I change position for the sky glance.

There I am, lifting,

in my lifetime, encased in clean bark.

Having drifted home

my voice took up space

in the room in a way that startled my dog.

How many Gwens does it take to change a light bulb?

The lightbulb in my room has been out for months. I schedule my reading for daylight. Hiding the scars on my feet. How can I run barefoot from a car in a snowstorm at night — beaten, burned, and emaciated, running until I found a light —

Was given a self that is hundreds of birds flying off a tree — and now to move two hands to open a single drawer, a slipping glide catches jagged and drops from the frame, remove a sweater to cover a singular form—

What am I adapted to?

My longing for touch
breaks free like a cluster
of root in a flash flood.

An old woman stops me in the grocery store.

You are so serene, so calm. she tells me.

Never lose that innocence.

I look at my body in the mirror. *Grief and terror have made an athlete of me*, which is funny, so I laugh and turn off the light, listen to the faucet leaking heat into the tub and step in. *I carry the kind of adrenaline that lifts cars off babies.*

Running through rain uphill with stars burning in my calves pulled down from the nights I can't sleep. Humidity smells of the South, of the New England summers bitten by flies, hot ants, cardinals flecking fire onto the yellow grass.

I lift my chin in the dining room mirror, stroke the coarse brown fur moving up my face. Did I gain this body through bolting? The years of evasion and run catching me in stillness to deer my form, where the cats chatter at birds from the window.

I lie on the floor and check my abdominal muscles for pregnancy induced separation, again study my stretch marks where the fur grows in like tilled soil, the soft bones of my feet curving upward to hoof and changing my smell to damp earth.

Biking over the Hawthorne bridge, I look down at the river where officials are looking for my thrown body. I check myself. The body is squinting at the river, warm and chilled at once from a climb uphill then down where the wind lifts from the water onto my sweat. The body is not dead. I throw my sense of witness into the cars on the bridge, *that young woman looks like she wants to die*. But these thoughts are indulgent, beside the point, and my own. This bridge isn't even high enough to offer near fatal certainty over water. It is someone else who jumped, another body being searched for.

I couldn't tell if I had grief or a virus
killing millions of people around the
world. Either one can cause fevers,
flushing skin, aching muscles,
congestion, vomiting, swollen lymph
nodes, headache, exhaustion, chest
pain, delirium. The sense that the skin
is both nonexistent and brittle. The dry
cough clued me in — and the test line
went bold.

My dog finds a round wasp nest, holds the stinging mass in his mouth
and whines — the wasps buzz in the cavity of his chest. I hear
humming in a hollow, but do not recognize its origin, so I turn away.

Vibrating hillsides hover pollen where light is carried to the brink of my
awareness. I look down not at sparkling water, but at the grieving body
that is me at my feet. We trade places. Who is looking down now?
Grieving mother on the floor, bent over. I pause for her in the sun
while sweeping dust and fur off the wood.

Will we flashback to a stable climate? As when I lie down to doze and my body switches to a time when I wasn't afraid of summer. Eight years old, doe-eyed and damp; having slept in wet meadows, the skin a sheen of grassy smells. Frames of fern, moss, an archway of alder over a trail to a pond. A little fog. In the water, I remember, there was hardly room for the silt-soil of decaying leaves to stir around the giant salamanders, glowing at the bottom — each creature a different color, a brightness emulating autumn. The pulse of their massive bodies straining at skin drummed small waves to the shore stones.

In the car with a friend, I flashback to labor: The sensation
not just of giving birth, but of my sense of self filling with a wave, touching
the edges of my skin in pulses forward and back.

I roll down my window for the early stars
glowing faintly by the mountain.

I wake up too early in April. White on the roof glowing. Still in a sleep state, in spring understanding of light, I convince myself the softness is flowers — but it is snow on the new leaves, freshness of green, dogwood weighed down to drip, lilac split a branch over my car. The sky carries snow in clouds lit with the April amount of sunlight. In mid-morning, I pass my older neighbors explaining seasons to each other —, *first it's hot, then it's cold again*, and I notice I keep looking away from how many of the pink flowering plums broke and fell. *Maybe they were all rotten inside*, my neighbors say. *All planted the same year, in the 1980's. Another hundred year storm.*

My daughter would be thirteen now — a teenager, perhaps also shy. Fidgeting her legs in the lawn chair under the plum tree, warm with sun and lanky. Her hair almost certainly curly, eyes likely green.

The plum tree whitens and hums. Broadening of branches by bloom shrinks the sharp I knew all winter. Despite mass extinction, songbirds are still audible in spring this year, and I grab the feeling for later, palming the vibration like patting down my wiggling dog. Still, there's more space between the notes — and absence fruits the air between my hands into a feathered softness.

What would she smell like?

The air under the tree smells like steam rising from the damp wood chips.

The weight of her gets mixed with sound. Rather than the feel of her body on my chest, the arrival of memory drops a hole of wind. The kind of hail I won't bike through, because it impedes my vision. Something to do with one low chord on the piano I still can't find, the conjuring of which would relocate a membrane of thin skin to spread across the sky, ripping.

When I remembered she had my mouth, I hid from my face —mirrors, dark windows with the lights on, touch — it sounds strange, to say I remembered. When really, my awareness of motherhood wove again into my body. Stars rammed into the gaps between my ribs, swirled in my lungs, and I kneeled on my floor blinking at the sensation of my body containing sky — it burned, expanding outward until I couldn't be sure what I was — air, light, or color.

Until I got the notion my hands were deep sea fish carrying lights in front of their mouths, so the blinking of my eyes transferred to my fists clenching and unclenching.

Which was enough movement to stop me from freezing in place. Got me walking the block at sunset, in unseasonable warmth. The tropical colors pierced by the bare branches, as though self-conscious and wishing to pop on the sharp and shrink the uncanny summer layering itself.

The glint of the silver bowl registers the metallic clatter of a folding chair falling in memory. While scooping dog kibble, I explain death to the child not there, place the bowl on the ground. The dog eats with the clammer of a brook well watered by rain.

If I crawl, it is propelled by a howling popped from my mouth
and burst to the ground.

I am trying to find it so I can put it back inside.

I can't remember my child today —

The texture of the word “my” is the broccoli sprawl of an oak tree at a distance.

“Woke up a little too early, needing to pee. What did I dream? Now the light is a gentle yellow and I feel lonely. My life feels both ecstatic and terrible. I eat a bagel, drink coffee. The dog when he sits at my side feels somehow intangible, unless I reach out with my hand and a perception which seems to carry spring along with it — the sensation of damp new green and youth, which might not quite be of the body in its adult state.

Time is a sponge. The material of lungs sticking together with white fluid on the contraction. What is the slickness in a body that causes any expansion?

Did I experience time on my bike? I didn't plan on taking a bike through snow, but class puts the bones in water and there is a hand on one side to move the fingers from. The bus didn't arrive. An older man, retired, who didn't have an app on his phone to check for the bus had read forty-two pages in his book while waiting for the bus. I spoke with him about writing and ate chocolate covered almonds, wanting, a hot coffee while the snow dripped around us. The snow. Of course it's historic. My perception of time is a click click click turn.

I am tired. Tree branches still in bloom are cracked and on the ground. I realized I wasn't paying attention.”

I woke up dreaming of my mother. Took five steps from my bed to my bed sized kitchen. Drank two glasses of water. Cold stayed in my torso. I wiped my mouth. The streetlight outside changed from red to green, headlights pushed light over my hands.

The dream stayed on my hands. She had a hollow neck like a river reed, or hemlock root, I squeezed and squeezed until her neck opened. She looked afraid of me. Her head a bloom snapped backwards.

The cars stopped humming. Light left my hands.

Abiqua Falls

Sound flapping like a wing-storm.
Numbness in the cold movement I kick.
Under the shelf of motion bubbles green and rise.
I cannot breathe where the force drops a hole of wind,
pushes me back, churning waves into my mouth:
Its own weather.

Underwater, the whitened pulse of impact
swarms deep to dark. The body sleeked
to sink: If I want to live
like fish, effortful to switch on the fly
gasp in air where float drips off
flaking sunlight onto the pool.

Hunger hovers pigeons beating
water to ripple.

This pulse of wings
is all the body knows of land.

Interview with a Friend:

What is your favorite sound?

“The slicking squeak of the low-back cloth of a speedo hitting the water slide at a moment of dryness to wetness to splash —“

Least favorite sound?

“A person screaming in terror.”

I kiss a friend near a window, which cracks in a webbing of shock from a bullet over our heads. He is framed in the absence of glass as though crowned.

The same friend needs a place to sleep. I offer up my childhood home, the brown dotted sofa under the big window where fat square spiders spun webs in the rosemary outside and jiggled at the wind. What fear I feel is a current in rivers beyond me, as though I'm aware of the local geography, but not swimming, at this moment, in the rivers. I just have a map.

I cannot quite account for walking up my own driveway, thinking, this is what it was like when I used to live on my own in Portland. Yet the name on the mail is mine. The address is for Portland. The Oregon White Oak is again sonically rapturous overhead, and I am again the person who lives where there are deciduous leaves swaying in full.

My friend walks with me in a drizzling rain to a big beech tree. We stand under the tree, then stand where the open sky soaks us.

While at work, I suddenly felt myself again fully pregnant. And I loved the feeling, which was memory — I wanted to spend time with my child. The heavy desk I sat before shortened what would have been the fullness of her arch into the room, so I walked up and down the stairs with my hands on my stomach, feeling my weight with her weight in the strength of my legs.

The youth I work for scooped ice cream onto a sugar cone, licked the spoon. He can only have one scoop, after dinner — he can have more tomorrow, another scoop tomorrow, it's a saying I repeat and repeat as a task of retrieving the idea of excess from the youth. The routines we navigate for care — setting out legos on the kitchen table, the voices he repeats out loud in shouts that are mitigated for the night time shifts I turn the lights off for the time of inside voices. So the passerby unfamiliar with the kid aren't alarmed by an autistic youth screaming for help, don't know it's just characters on a loop.

One bath at night. Get ready for school in the morning. Make sure he doesn't miss the bus. Feed the cats. Settle into a dark room.

His father passed away in the last year — the house remains, the cats he named, his fleece vests, shirts, jeans, hang in the closet upstairs by the toilet which runs water continuously. I sleep in his bed and tip-toe into the room when the light is out, understanding I am within an extended absence static-sparking the floor.

How Do I Touch A Void?

I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't even be sure what I was. I sat on my stairs, unsure of everything but humidity and a light heat. Green and grey and blue, and an inability to be inside or make a decision. So I biked to the Sellwood docks. Young people in the humid heat, dogs, a great variety of cloud textures. I was imagining solitude and an empty dock, but there was none of that. I sat while the wake of a large boat I missed seeing waved into the upside crack of wood. The people down the way stood up to avoid getting their butts wet.

A young girl paddle boarding and swimming with significant self-harm scars on her upper arms and thighs. She was there with her dad and little brother. Her scars are still purple, but deep enough to keloid and whiten. Like mine are now.

All around me was green, grey, blue, and red like clay. Not much else. A yellow house, purple sudden bloom. I didn't know who I was.

It wasn't until I ate a pita outside New Seasons that I realized again in me the memory I slip from and I began again to cry while paramedics revived an overdose victim in the parking lot.

Around the block. The dog walk. When rhododendrons sway over poppies. A rainy June in which heat rises the smell of damp quick to my face.

Now the leaves fully fleshed confuse me — I struggle to think in completely deciduous terms, in snow and inaccessible hiking trails — despite having lived outside of California for years.

As though a place stagnates with or without leaves, does not change, is snow or isn't snow. As though California doesn't also change, loses leaves and sunlight, gains mud and a wild wet green on the hills. There's snow on the mountains.

Still, I am startled each year by the sonic arrival of green leaves on the wind, by narrative and personality formed in their movement. Like gesture drawings, these quick shapes of animals made by the leaves. Returning, swirling, calling, pulling —

Is it that I have a child's understanding of time? Caught between the adult's fear of the afternoon flooded with thought and doings sliding down, the basis of self uprooted again, and mud folds at the bottom.

Then the child's understanding. That light under the deck awning is a solid mass to move towards. That afternoon is the texture of reach and hot splintering wood.

It is in this thought that the eight year old self arrives in me. Settling like a bird landing, puffing its feathers out to relax.

I don't recognize my surroundings — my red dog, the flowers, how the heat interacts with grey sky. I want my mother. I want the three liquid ambers' lean reach, the mud puddle I moisten and dry to the right texture of slap.

“Cats think it’s funny when you crawl with them, like this. They think it’s a joke.” My father says. The cats rub on my arms and my father’s arms, my mother joins us, my sister — we crawl along the carpeted floor, spines long and reaching, and I can’t tell if the cats are laughing or if they feel heard.

A canyon in Northern California. Oak valley slopes, the smell of Bay Laurel. Fog. Mid-summer. The dust lifted towards the sun and settled back down, heaved by the dew. Ground squirrels run through the root beds, hunted by young and sunning rattlesnakes. Quail top-notched on the low oak branches, hover their alarm —

My friend: Watches words catch the golden grasses of my childhood home — glowing the smell to an easy wheat, rustling where the ticks wait.

If memory is a rake or a light, the effect is still a stirring of the ground at dusk. Evening colors still shift the mice to scuttling from owls in the fields, who rake their talons through the grass.

My friend: Has scratchy seeds caught in his socks.

When I hold him in memory: He is the orphaned coyote cub I found nuzzling the grass, hungry, tired, and I'm unsure if I should take him from this place.

When I hold him in memory: He is more like me than I realized.

I wipe down his naked skin with his shirt,
as though trying to clean a window.

The words I use to reach him instead draws the
brightness away from his skin in pulses.

Taking glassy stones from around the fire, he places them, warm, on my hands.

Now I am still. Weighted down with flickering light from flame and sky.

A shadow creature — not a shadow, and not a shadow from a creature,
but a blanket-shaped or coyote or wolf streaked mass of dark crossing
the road in folds of itself quick. Watching light.

Watching breath.

Watching daydreams. The shape of them across the road, coming from
the smell of roses I walk by and pause and sniff in my cliché of
sensitivity. The rosemary sprig I tuck behind my ear.

I dreamed again of the search
for a safe place to sleep. Water,
the wetlands of my dreams has
water rising still. I know my
mother was in the dream. The
dream is in me, like the long
echo of a clap, and the shadows
of bats over the ground.

A disjointed flock of coots, small, dark birds with white bills, are
paddling against the current, foraging in the rushes.

*I squeeze the tannic acid out of the acorns of my
childhood home — the bitterness tensing of it, like shame,*

and shame is still walking in the dusk. I hear the cry of coyotes. My feet on the warm ground are
meeting summer nights I picked out from the archives of memory I glow with —

The first mistake I made was forgetting the taco bell my roommate left in the kitchen garbage. The second mistake I made was leaving a small plate with turkey burger juice on my desk. The third mistake I made was leaving the house.

So that when I return, the garbage strewn wide across the kitchen, the can tipped over — the dog takes a shoe in his mouth and runs around the house. I pick up the mess. Upstairs, the shattered white plate scattered seeds of shards across the floor— and kneeling down to pick up the larger pieces, my foot is cut open —

And the blood on the sole and top of my foot ran to the floor. So I sat on the floor.

I watched memory grow between my feet. A flickering, pumping movement of men cutting my feet with slim pocket knives, giving my skin the serrations of feathers —

until memory flew towards my head, flew as birds fly back to the tree where their offspring cry for food —

Part III

In the mornings I bike over the river to campus, I swim. After I swim, I shower. Blue tiles in the locker room. Membraned white curtains fluttering away from steam. I count how much blue I can find. Blue on the soap bottle, unscented. To imply calm gentleness.

I am not sure what to hope for from a moment – to count color, to breathe, is to ground in a sense of the present tense. Heat from the shower. Breath expanding my low back.

If my own daughter arrives again into the room, from my body – who am I to turn from my child and call her past? So she arrives in the shower from between my soaped up legs, and I again watch her mouth blue. I count her mouth as one of the blues to ground in the present tense.

A woman older than me, smaller than me, stood very close when I hesitated at the edge of the pool one morning. Don't even need a cap, huh, and I remembered, again my scarred body and bald head is news.

I look like the midwife in this show on network television lauded for featuring a strong female lead. I made up the show, but also, it exists. Middle aged people watch it, eat dry cookies after work. It's a twist on a typical period drama, with some of the lighting and visual motifs of a bordertown Western. Except I travel through time wearing long sanitary gloves. Also, I don't quite deliver babies, either. Every episode I help deliver some apocalypse.

Mass extinction, genocide, colonization, nuclear warfare, you name it!

I coach each woman through labor – inside, over and through their bodies,
I coax each revelation to release.

Numerous fluids co-star, but win no awards for supporting cast.

Supporting sounds are both what's expected from birth labor and an ending world, and not. And because I believe in the attentive assurances of constancy and repetition, the level of drama and volume I bring into each birth is consistent.

(After all, despite whatever difficulty and ease arise from obvious variations in vessel, the transition from containment to breath is always one of equal stakes).

Supporting gestures include quick glances at some crowning burst of heat to say, keep going, you're doing great, in predicted rhythmic returns to the laboring woman's face, tight hands and the moon spaces slowly filled in the palms her fingernails left.

I end up holding a gap of silence in my arms – like a cut of dead ocean, empty folds of motion. Every episode ending in silence held just like this.

I promise to be very tender with it.

The swimmer's body was perfect – meaning, the murdered child's face remained in-tact, recognizable. The motions of his life present in the muscular structure of his body's growing stop-gapped and still.

I repeat, *oh, the swimmer? He's perfect*, to the folds of water petaling blue in front of my face. By this I mean, *oh my body? It's perfect.*

Poor forever having to act like this.

Forever a fish extended in body
 by a parasite draping
 its understanding of grace.

 Sheets of consequence
 mime fins
wavering from her muscled push:

(That white float drifting
after her, like some
imitation of a Victorian
bridal haunt, is
actually the body's attempts
to heal in overdrive creating an echo-body
more belch of rejected toilet paper than mass)

(by what containment?),

This is parasitic choreography;
 performed
not by the white-tissue quivering
 light
 filled fin
 flicks held

but water, and wounds

the fish feels opening her scale:

Itching,
she rubs on stones, opens
herself to leak.

(Parasite: *Ichthyophthirius multifiliis* ,
translates directly to louse
with many children).

I confess I am still not treating forever very kindly –
the steady drip
off my horizon of dead girls,
its weak round yolk I keep
trembling – .

with the rolling shock of cars
shaking the bridge
I stand on, staring
at the skin of water
my body could wound.

Time looped a muscled pull
off the drain of beginning

(That was me: *Drain!*
And beginning: *Daughter.*
Our only portrait together?)

and still
netted and flushed –

I said I would never do this to time, but, here
I am, a scroll of
transparency, passive
off the pull, still sitting
in front of my bed with my
collective of ghost girls, teenagers
of full bodied
grief
braiding each
other's
long brown
hair.

I am again taking several hours to get dressed.

The shirt still opened
overhead.

Sharp angles my elbow's
sterned stiff.

The touch I pay for needles both palms, the soles of my feet. Needles crown my head, drive lines of contact along my inner thighs, curves of my ears, my chest. The acupuncturist here is quick in her placements– she felt the pulse in my wrist, listened when I listed *dissociation, depression, insomnia, clogged grief, these piano wires, wrapped around my guts, tightening but still sounding off some chord of quiet coming off the dead*– then began her hummingbird-like jolts of sting into my skin.

Suffering is present with or without the story behind it. The needles, or touch, seems to help. But is this not also grandiose? To have my body made image; a constellated form believed to render release, like forgiveness –

I am thirty-three years old, with a past marketable enough to feel the rise of Oprah’s expensive sofa merging under me, like the revelation of a wet boulder still lashed with water off the receding tide. Yet the tide is out. The smell of salt is clustered on the hem of my shirt, dried stiff. Story can be outsourced off the body walking, picking up stones in a better-bright off the sea –

I struggle with sitting still for very long.

Do I speak my past plain, in a summary rhythm familiar to the astonished? I tried out the language, just now– the spacing of phrasing, breath, I tried moving my eyebrows with assurance, lines of confidence for the words to follow, as though I know every blistered break in the sidewalk I run on at night, because, it’s true, I still struggle to sleep– but the summary is a hot light on cement, the shadows, unmoving, and the pre-verbal leak from language dried out – and yes, it smelled like rain.

My body is mostly fluid.

Once I googled “kidnapped and tortured for two months”, because of the union between kidnapped and tortured I had yet to try, and I wanted a span of time specific enough to locate – perhaps, a language in another person like me – but what I found instead was a language of particular witness –

remnants of court documents, statements from perpetrators describing bodies that eventually stopped responding, to touch, due to saturation of suffering –

Maybe the body stood up, like in descriptions I've read of wildfires taking on sudden aspects of the human.

When I pass my roommates watching a loud slasher film featuring screaming women, tortured in a windowless basement or something, I think, but do not say, *they couldn't get it right, because it's the silence that moves you*– I refill my dog's water bowl, he slurps, drips, his wet chin on my hands. I walk upstairs to the bedroom I chose for its many windows because I still have to show myself where I am.

The language of the cellar is pre-verbal – and so it is, perhaps, also uncontainable. I have felt it staring at me from behind a chair. Wanted me to look. I didn't look; I stood up and put a mint in my mouth, ran my wrists in cool water. The chord of quiet stringing my guts fell into the room, textured like the movement of stones rubbed along a river bed, a slow chew rendered by current, and it acted like a drain of sound in my left ear gritting a grind high pitched.

Followed me outside, to where I had parked my bike. I biked and I breathed and I stopped in the starry cold in a wealthy neighborhood to call a close friend, becoming a beloved and confidant, and when he asked, how I was, I said, *permission to get really heavy?* And he said, *if you think it might help to tell me, so I expressed, I thought maybe it was me, as a teenager, or my daughter, the age she would be now, but it's the girl I watched bleed to death in the cellar, and I don't think I can do this alone* –

Which is to say, I was reached for and held (containment?).

Care became an act of translation (containment?).

While memory witnessed me in return.

Once, while sitting in a classroom, I again felt the girl who didn't make it scratching me from fear – it's true, I tried to hold her, before she was killed, and there is some relief in the tenderness of this particular knowledge – but, being in class, it was my job, as it often is, to not reply.

The cellar can evade syntax – because to have syntax, language must adhere to itself in a structure involving time accruing to form a line of thought. Is that advantageous? I'm not sure. I wasn't there to decide.

Like looking too closely at my own feet. The scar lines wrapping, holding them in place, like baskets, have faded, yes, I must still send my feet out in their baskets to hang and sway in the trees, wild storms soaking and dripping off my toes. Because I cannot contain the screaming. My feet join the branches scratching windows, toenails, wiping the glass, trying to erase the rain. Wind piling hail into the gutters to later melt and drain onto the pavement.

The act of the basket making had two phases:

Phase one, occurred in the cellar – and though the lines are woven onto my feet, as though time had consequence and form, I struggle to translate what is cuts and drains continuous, in part because without containment men cutting my feet open is still happening, and, is simultaneously also erased by the lack of containment.

Phase two! During my escape I ran barefoot in a snowstorm. I accrued time and phrasing through the form of departure and destination. I ran until I saw a light, which became *place*, and then storm when lit formed flurries of snow into a bearded face with eyes and mouth, swirling into human position and breaking apart, like sounding out words – and the footprints I made in snow, and ice, were action points indicating an undeniable past and intention from the body forming the language of fleet.

It isn't a voluntary fluency. It might be my mother tongue.

I am not sure what I can speak to.

Body of Evidence

I:

If I may begin again, gently. Repeating pressure on the palms from a cold hand pressing a thumb into the soft of you. Mud creek the gesture of frogs hopping from the body grown in spring. To apply a moderate amount of heat, the magnolia meat whitens to the blush point. And saturation. Is the pulsing press of my feet hitting memory and spring at once in run to bind the cold of the cellar into the self. A creek I run on barefoot, splashing water up the form. My body of evidence pressed from stream to crotch to hands to eyes. Soaked. The outline out-lived by admittance, filled.

Though I run on a sidewalk with my big red dog in spring. He pauses at the sniff – the play, at sunlight even dimming or bright. The verbal cue for a continuation of running pace is: *Sled Dog Rules*. His open mouth. The joy I pace into. And the repeated motion of my feet making contact, impact with ground binds me with a filling of my past – as though the shadow I stepped in gains a darker and deeper height inside my body. Rising up my calves. My neck. The past pounded into a mass grown through the accumulation of run.

It is spring, and I ran through it with my dog. The cellar a muddy trail of sensation, the pulsing pace of fleet splashes entire evidence up my body – it is confession, a signature of lines made by steps rendered a stitching together of the selves. *This body is marked by torture, was raped repeated.* I gasp the sentence into place. Blooms and blooms and green – longer grass bright at the wind where the sun was. It's there. *The same body, the same body.*

II: *Trauma-Integration is a Love Poem*

Rhythm entered like light. Warm, and the rocking chair a loose blinking over the floor.

When Wendy stitched Peter's feral shadow to bind his forms, she initiated a call and response between gesture and light, made couplets of the body. Precise repetition of needle she learned in years of practicing childhood. Doll's work – this injuring. Loops of thread pulled through the longing for cohesion.

It is like this, I tell you who holds me rocking and warm.

It is sometimes like this: Again, these seizures.

Language falls on its side: Its edged

shadow drops into my body.

We understand seizures are par for the cellar course:

Feral movements belonging me.

:

*Too rawly tender for this poem? Is complexity unrendered in hold, in my reverence to how you love? Or maybe the poem needs your hands on my back. You lift me onto the bed. I hear you breathe. You turn on the electric blanket, the process you have learned from me warms the freezing girl from the cellar. *For cellar flashbacks and seizures, apply heat!* This fragment of self, isolated from the present tense, is stitched into place to swell a smooth glide inside the outline of my fed body. Not cellar thin, but movement thick, and warmed

:

*Like a mother who planned conception: I need her with me, am emptied without her primal crawling. She is continuous, arriving, swelling into the outline of my skin like some smooth rise in the river's chopping, the violence of her embodiment and my need for it – I hadn't understood touch, I am

touch-exhausted mothering cellar, I am ravenous holding her
hunger, her howl to my cellar-carved breasts.

*Like any mother: Embody many people at once. Keep them
all fed. Understand signs of satiety differentiating from self to
self: The cellar is hollow-fill, her hunger cues mapped out are
wider than the state of Colorado.

Her hunger is a sonic call in the ocean interrupted by
underwater industry. Unmet, cut from contact solo hum
vibrating edges of light. What is language without another
speaker? She would eat the ocean, uncooked, and full of its
cold, its dead-life, coloring the shimmer off her vision, she
wants more.

* And so:

To offer translation into English for the cellar:

Do I embody translation, or instruction, when

I open the screen door to the porch and
the dog shudders his loose fur into the sunlight?

To request a translator: Press nine.

The body made abstraction
through distance and assigned role
is carried into a car by two men.

Taken into cellar:

((The translator arrives in milky
understanding of child
constellated by star
apertured in her chest
to drain:

The child bleeds to death:

The translator tries to hold the
child but is pulled from

the ground

from the child:

:: Please,

though I cannot linger

long

From where I

am pulled the child was

a child and I'm still

trying to soothe her ::

Much of the rhythms rendered could
be foreseen and foreclosed by the availability of
violence pulled into an accent lilted on the
body's sprain across the running field or
dropped into the periphery made by the
suggestion of leaf churning individual
folds of green to shape pulse
in the neck speaking-

For the translator: The lengthened
continuation of sensory deprivation
and sensory overload breaks down
barriers of distinction to render
sensation a singular spread of totality.))

*

*

After two months, the request for a translator
was still not met – and
for true fluency,
the translator had no phone.

The translator lives
on cartons of milk.

She drinks what she's given:

Three points of opening;
a kind of tercet.

In the motion of peeling
edges, the beginning of access
to resonance made by expansion
is cold, hollow, and glowing
by dark: And the triangular
shapes sustained sustenance
is a narrative form she engages
repeatedly by hunger unfolding
some physics she understands as
much as the grass darkened by

total eclipse the
smell of heat
languished to
chill and yet
this language

of her hands recall of desire is a slip over a glide
into an opening as much as the moon pulling
into place across the sun for the birds are silent.

**Darkness and sunlight are distinct, cannot be smelled but seen and felt, not tasted...*

If instruction is brought to where experience is fractured, exchanged, given value.

Excerpt from a Long-Ass Love Letter for Two Beloveds

“...I sometimes talk with Jay about cellar time. He got to witness my flashbacks and whatnot when I stayed with him – mostly the quiet kind, where my body slows down and I have to drop to the ground for a bit and turn off. Or, I throw up.

Anyway, I was having flashbacks in the field by Jay’s house, while we were looking for his dropped house key. It fell out of his pocket sometime while we were on the swings, or the jungle gym, or lying in the field talking and looking at the trees.

I was having flashbacks to the cellar, and the sky didn’t feel far away enough – one of the weird features of the cellar flashbacks is I feel trapped even when outside. So I was going to throw up, but I wanted to look for Jay’s key.

Jay is attentive. He notices when I’m not feeling well. I told him to just let me do my thing, and that I wanted to keep looking for his key. We never did find that dang key.

But we were talking, too, at one point – maybe in the field, looking for his key, or maybe in the car. I was talking about how I don’t know if the girl who didn’t make it out had a family – and while no one was looking for me, she might have been loved, she was so young, and maybe her parents are still wondering what happened, and continue to search for her. I feel helpless. I know what it is to love a murdered child, and to continue loving, and parenting, their absence.

Perhaps Jay believed there is a hurt in no one having looked for me. I don't feel a real hurt there. I feel practical, although maybe this is because the hurt is too deep to feel. (It's also likely he understands the hurt is present, but too deep to feel – or he believes anyone missing should be wanted).

Or maybe Jay believed in some truth in what he stated. This is extremely likely. Anyway, Jay told me that even though no one was looking for me when I went missing, he was looking for me – and that you were looking for me, too.

He didn't mean anything in a literal sense. Or he's entirely literal. He also tends to trouble language and meaning, constantly, like me, so there's a bed of asterisks sprouting flowers from the decay and breakdown of his use of language as well.

I have an image of you two as teenagers (you would have been a teenager at the time I was in the cellar), woken by hunger. Maybe you stood from bed and walked to your garage pantry. Maybe you shined a flashlight through a glass jar of apricot jam. Maybe you felt fear, or simply hunger you summed up as growing pains. Maybe you felt a dark, extremely cold, and small place. Maybe I somehow felt the warm shine of the flashlight glowing the sugary jam jar into a beacon while I kneeled in the cellar dark drinking white milk. Maybe you sent me the satiation of hunger that is longing filled with sweetness, and maybe that light and that sweetness is survival. Maybe the cellar is when the love letter began.

More likely, it began in early childhood. The love letter is a pre-verbal understanding of the body, of warmth, of light, of the need for and response to touch. The love letter has very little to do with each other, or everything to do with each other. We just moved our young bodies into the sunlight or into the rain out of longing for the touch –

To be changed by the porousness of encounter.”

A small sampling of some of the books and writers I am in conversation with:

Poetry:

Forest Gander, *Be With*
Jake Skeets, *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*
Brenda Hillman, *Cascadia, Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*
Robert Hass, *The Apple Trees at Olema*
Rosemarie Waldrop, *The Nick of Time*
Joanna Klink, *The Nightfields*
Stacie Cassarino, *Zero at the Bone*
Robyn Schiff, *A Woman of Property*
Natalie Diaz, *Post Colonial Love Poems*
Evie Shockley, *semiautomatic*
CD Wright, *Collected Works*
Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow*
Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*
CA Conrad, *Amanda Paradise Extinct Resurrect Vibration*
Gerard Manley Hopkins
Jorie Graham, *Runaway*

Theory-ish:

Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*
Renee Gladman, *Calamities*
Between the Covers Interviews with David Naimon
CA Conrad's blurbs on *Somatic Poetry*
Robert Hass, *Little Book on Form*

Annotated Bibliography, Close Reading Notes on *Evie Shockley, semiautomatic*

In *Evie Shockley's semiautomatic*, Shockley uses vernacular speech, phrases, and concepts in a stew of associations, forming connections between racial, gender, and environmental violences and language. "language struck me as wooden, battered. the words became weeds, meaning I couldn't see any use for them." There's a strong clarity to these images, even the stranger ones like "in the temper-temper zone, the birds were back and i hadn't slept — had it been a night or a season?" Shockley is articulating not just how white heteronormative patriarchy, capitalism and the narratives/language which perpetuate these harms also cause eco-collapse, but she's using how climate change also messes with our rhythms and understandings of time as the form of her poem. "time was on its side, its upside down. it was a new error." There's a slight narrative formed in this distortion, which is perhaps part of how the

word play in the poem can make a semblance of clearer sense. My poems, although using some different methods, are working around some similar themes and thoughts — including reflections around rhythms in seasons with regards to eco collapse.

Annotated Bibliography, or, Close Reading Notes on Jake Skeets, *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*

Skeets, Jake. *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2019. Print.

Skeets, is a Dene poet who writes poems which centers eco-collapse, landscape, desire, systemic racist/personal violence with an intention to reposition the context of lived Native American experiences back into the environment and body. Jake Skeets work creates an association between language and land, language and desire. The poems open up a way of breaking down the barriers between the actual and analogy, the word and the body. I'm interested in poets/poems who identify the ineffable, and in breaking the fourth wall of language by stitching these associations between the tangible and the word, further fuse the two at the same time as dissolving language/pushing at the limits of such. His poetry correlates to my thesis in his themes and in his experimentation with language.