SITTING IN A STRANGER'S BATHTUB

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of
the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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December 15, 2022
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords:

Mother, waiting, grief, reach, addiction, withdrawals, dying, forgiveness, God, suspended, crepuscular, living, listen, exist, fear, therapy, memory.

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ABSTRACT

Sitting in a Stranger's Bathtub is a collection of poetry interested in the relationship between grief and time. It seems the more grief "happens" or rather, reiterates or transforms itself (a birth provoked by something unknown and can only be attributed to time and its maturing), the more grief splinters and splits off creating alternate dimensions in which things went a little bit differently, where something grand can be imagined like being present for a mother's death. These poems consider these worlds half by choice, in order to let those lives continue in their mundane yet miraculous ways, and half by possession. These poems seek to represent the horrible pang of deja vu that proves the existence of alternate happenings, and also justify deja vu as a sensation intended to fill the fragments of memory. In keeping with the tradition of the Confessional movement, these poems aim toward honesty, toward revealing the truth, only possible by showing the failures of memory, particularly in the presence of grief.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

SITTING IN A STRANGER'S BATHTUB is a poetry collection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the editors and staff of the following journals in which my work has appeared, often in other iterations:

Re-Side Zine: “Backyard EMDR Therapy”

Eunoia Review: “Withdrawals: Writing To You From The Bathroom Floor”

Lunch Ticket: “How I ensure nothing terrible ever happens to me again”

Yuzu: “Pleasures of the Informed”

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PART 1

“We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.”
— Louise Gluck

Happy Endings

After running barefoot over
the smooth rocks from a once under-
water state, I step,
into the cool thin grass, sweat
off the blades soothes like a slug's salve.

My arms steep to elbows in a sun-warmed washtub,
where water slips around with swollen knuckles
destination always belonging to the bottom,
or the edge.

Maybe today I will mother myself back to color,
invent a new word for grace and not tell anyone.
Line the baseboards with paint tape
to return it to white. To remind myself
not to kill myself until I am done.
Believe grief is not endless.
Find every corner until it is true.

Funeral Rituals

With a line from Charles Wright

Shortly after she died my dad would squeeze
his fist every time it rained, gargle through the threads
of tears and snot: what if she's cold?

It is possible for the weight of dirt to collapse a casket—
therefore the cold can no longer happen
to her, she happens with it.

On the day of her funeral some of us dropped
flowers down the fresh hole in the earth.
They smacked against the wood with no concern

for grace—thought it a game, refused
the misery we tried to inject into their stems.
When we walked away my dad asked

why his flower took so long to hit
the casket, I wanted to say I felt mine was still falling.
Conversations between the grieving

are no place for bad poetics
or a pissing contest.
People jog past us, their thin arms

Glisten from sweat and rain.
I tell my dad that rain during
burials means she will go to heaven—

the way out
is the way in
at last.

Withdrawals: Writing To You From The Bathroom Floor

I've seen a lot of beautiful things happen lately
I've had friends share their ETAs
some driving away
from me some toward
I've seen my kitten push his head against my cat's belly
my cat tuck his face between his paws
I saw my cat say thank you
I say thank you
I had a friend say you're in it
when I said I don't know how to keep on it
through the sliding glass I saw the groundhog
in the backyard look up at me
then move his head
to the ground again lift clovers
I saw two people share a caesar salad
with chopsticks I saw my own hands do the dishes
shake out rugs
water the Anthurium
Feel maggots move in the body
of a mouse I heard my own voice say
stay awake while walking through the yard
I saw the hole-punched stars
my mother asleep
among them I saw my own face
in the mirror I shook the water off my hands
drove past a woman looking through me
followed her eyes and saw the sunset
sink I saw my own hand reach into myself
find a strength aged and angry
heard the low music in the grocery store
and the cashier complaining to another cashier
I thought about a time
when I felt this bone-deep
ache groundless and expanding
two moths rest on the wall by my lamp
then I saw a lapse of every version
of myself lift those rocks and sling them
over my shoulder I saw a couple laughing
together in their car next to mine I saw

my legs wade in a deep puddle
slow through the storm arms squeeze
my bags close saw myself wake up
dressed in vomit I heard footsteps above
me counted them saw myself on a hospital
floor smelling bleach felt two fingers on my neck
pulse and hum I saw myself in my old bed reach
to the other side look for my mother
’s body saw a woman who looked
like her wait for the traffic to stop
to cross the road I saw a Mother’s Day card on the sidewalk
Mom, with love from your daughter
I saw a tissue in the road that looked like a white rose
see myself now on the bathroom floor
one day I’ll take the rain check
steep in the ugly but for the moment
let’s only talk of beauty
of an alarm clock blinking speaking softly
  (wake up rest wake up rest)

Considering the night my mother died

Sometimes I imagine I was there with her in the bathroom,
Flattened behind the mirror

The cat sneezing on my lap does not know.

Watching as she took the spoon
The cotton, the bag

The man kissing my stomach does not know.

The needle and lined it on the counter.
She uses the faucet to mix the water in,

The people waiting in line at the DMV do not know.

drops cotton into the dome.
The skin of her face is pulled tightly

The family plunging an umbrella into sand does not know.

over her cheekbones—reflecting light
like a balloon does.

She drags it up through the syringe

The preacher baptizing me does not know.

She spreads her toes, tightens the web between them,

There are days I do not know.

Sticks the needle in the blue skin.

The teenage cashier does not know.

She sways clean as a sheet hanging from a clothesline
Her chin meets shoulder, head meets the edge
of the bathtub.

The cicadas clicking in the Summer do not know.

Dad breaks in and drags her to the center of the floor

The still silhouettes of heads in a theater do not know.

Sends fist into her chest, I fall out of her mouth.

Do not know that if her death
was on purpose
she wouldn't have bothered
to lock the door.

Okay, so,

say softer knees do not bring
softer grass say at night you imagine
one of your loved ones dying
and you feel your blood tickle
your neck as if lips inside you
are trying to kiss imagined grief.
Say you do this every night to fall
asleep. Okay, so, say you dream
you stand in front of a landline phone,
it doesn't ring but you pick it up anyway.
Say someone says "hello?" As if they knew you
would be there, and you say "yes"
as if you were supposed to be there. Okay, so,
say you're lying on the bathroom tile now
the rest of your body rushing to the parts
of your body that is against the cool floor
you think yes this is the same as when a cloud
covers the sun for a moment and you feel cold
from your own sweat. Say you feel your own sweat
you feel your hot body start to either cool against
the tile or heat it up you feel this transaction
you make with the bathroom tile and you feel
as if you should kiss the tile. Say now you feel
as if you should pray. Okay, so, say it doesn't matter
if the grass is green or brown it only matters
if it is cut say you want this so that when
you pray you will know when your knees
will land say you're still dreaming
say the person on the other end of the phone
is your grandmother and she says "I'm dying"
say "I know"
say "I'm sorry"
say "go back to sleep"
hang up the phone. Pick it up again
go to the bathroom lay down
then go outside fall to your knees
wince at the grass
say "okay"

I’m Sorry I Missed Your Call

And I'm sorry I’ve been away.
Last night I closed my eyes and still saw
my room. I looked around
behind my lids, slowly turned
the dial to light the room, slotting each
object in place as I panned toward it.

This was the first year
I had ever heard leaves falling—
a sound like glass shattering,
or someone walking toward me.
It’s grief, not the winds,
that hit me altogether at once—
voices, miles away, rising off a lake.

One morning I sat on the wet leaves,
felt my spirit lifted by a tower crane
and released from great height
back into my body, but it didn’t quite fit anymore.

Now I look at the world through the wrong end
of binoculars, moving through myself,
circling in search of an empty cabinet
to hold yet again,
yet again, more
of this grief.

To-do List

Needed to tell myself I dropped something / It's a check already deposited / Thank myself anyway / Needed to smack my ear until instruments, chairs, baseball bats fall out of the other / Needed to put money on myself / Needed to sink my cheek in the dirt of my mother's grave / Needed to scrunch my nose awake / Scratch the dried spit off the sides of my mouth / Needed to bleed out from my stomach / Needed to blame it on someone else / Needed to call everyone I know and tell them I'm sorry / Needed to say it happens / Needed to tell the man who used to love me / No I'm not mad at you I'm sick about you / Whenever something reminds me of you I feel a corkscrew trying to work its way in my belly button / not getting the right pressure / starting over / poking again / Needed to sit in a tub until it gets cold / Needed to hold my nose and go underwater / Needed to be able to tell my mother I hate her again / Needed to believe in someone living so much / I could say unforgivable things / Needed to throw a flat screen against a cement wall / Needed to not consider the aftermath / Needed to pay the parking ticket / Needed to differentiate between lately and what has always been / Needed to sweep eyes over a line of strangers until they all have the same face / Needed to squeeze my weepy heart in my hand / Ask myself why some things just happen

How I ensure nothing terrible ever happens to me again

I cut my life into small slices
And freeze them, to prevent them
From going bad, like bananas or bread.

I keep my hand hovered over my life's
Rail, close enough to grab,
Close enough to dip my fingers down
And glide across it, or write my name in it
When the condensation of tragedy allows.

I sleep with the my life's clothes
To keep them warm for the morning,
I do this instead of buying thicker
Curtains in the winter. See,
I am not preventing my life, I am insulating it.

I brew my life into cups. I bite my life's
Blue pills into halves, until life's
Bottle is pure powder, which I rub
Onto the gums of my life. I call in a refill.

I bathe in my life and remain in the tub of it
While it drains. I empty myself
into my life.
I empty out my life—
I start over.

Apophenia

The young buck moves
like a shadow breaking
through the crepuscular rays
of the morning, the fog not yet burned up,
dew outlines his antlers.

Yesterday, we lost our mother.
We were not there to fill the cups of our hands
When the color rinsed from her face,
which is to say she died alone.

When grief settles in,
We look to the clinging vines,
to the creek, folding over itself,
for evidence of her living—
A face or hand waiting
to be discovered in the cumulus.

The natural world will not share
our blame.
Will we be forgiven?
And if so, who will be there
to forgive us?

It has been nearly three years—
the fog rises with the sun,
the young buck pulls
a frosted apple from the tree,
and he keeps walking
easily through
the yellowed grass.

My mother makes a vision board in rehab

“Ghost elephant,
reach down,
cross me over—”
Jean valentine

She cuts out pictures from the same magazine.
Considers how sometimes the weight
of motherhood can be willed away, only
to be replaced by a shame found in the corner
of the corners in a mother’s tired soul.

She finds a picture of two koi fish
curved together like a yin-yang circle
her face is pulled tight in a smile,
while her selves splinter
out, as they often do,

and rot. She cuts out the fish and wishes to hear
colors blurring together: a sound
of convergence—order and chaos,
something that would soothe her, but instead she sees
the surface of a pond, their hungry faces

rising to it, with their fat mouths like
suction cups, and their eyes fixed on
something behind her. She is now
disturbed. She is smiling. She smudges
the thick tube of glue onto the back

of the jagged gloss paper, presses it to
the corner of the poster board with the tips of her fingers,
then slides them outward—replaces the air bubbles beneath
the clipping with debris of herself.
Now there’s a woman doing yoga on the beach.

The woman is facing the ocean
with her arms stretched over her head,
her palms together. She begins to cut toward
the woman, for she likes the idea of being exact,
of winding herself up like a music box

then clicking out every joint. The thought
almost sends warmth throughout her own arms,
but she is reminded of the fluorescent lights
above her, the drooling man going gray beside her.
Still, she snips and hums.

Then she finds what she did not know
she was looking for, what will be
the centerpiece: a road with trees on both
sides, their limbs meeting each other above—
how they have grown bent to make way

for the living below, such polite trees.
She knows this is realistic,
this is in the cards for her. One day
she will be dead and her daughter will see
trees arch and know why they do this.

She'll say yes, look at their arms twisted up together,
look at them looking right at each other—
if I am reaching for my mother
she must be reaching for me
while the world goes on under us.

Language of the Afterlife (Apophenia)

I knew of a crepuscular ray
before I knew the word for it.
Imagine this: my mother wades the cold
depth of the ocean and I hang from her neck.
The sun makes a small incision
through a cloud and light puddles
on the ocean's surface.
My mother says *look, that's God*
taking the fish to heaven.

Here's what I know: I have not since found myself
under a slice of such salvation,
but because I cannot remember us
swimming to land, toweling off, or driving home,
that must mean we are still there, suspended in embrace.

That must mean that when I grieve her today,
alone in my room,
alone in this landlocked state,
somewhere else my mother
is licking the salt from my eyes.

Walking up the stairs to my apartment off Sleepy Hill road

I step over curves and slices
of sticky glass and dried peaches.

Here's my secret:
I see the woman, who I imagine a mother,
both hands and arms filled
with plastic grocery bags, eyes without sleep.

I walk past her– I say nothing– weightless.
When I click the lock I hear a jar hit
the textured concrete, a muffled shatter.

Here, I am listening for the glass to lift
from the concrete, but there was only the push of a door,
the creak of its threshold,
and her sigh being swept into AC.

How long will I stand
ears pressed to a door
with no one behind it?

> It takes a peach tree three to four years to produce fruit.
> Without these years, the tree would be too small to carry
> the weight of its own bloomings.

A blossom heavy enough to break
a limb landed on the steps of our apartment—
we share this secret.

When I see her again I will tell her
that her arms are like the limbs
of a young peach tree, and I share the same limbs.

I sit on the top step and I love her;
I love her for leaving me something
so I remember her:
the broken jar of peaches
and the silence that still, today, follows.

self-portrait at 19

at all times, even when running,
ants keep half their legs on the ground.
i watch as they move across a triangle of toast.

i am not sure of anything beyond
this minute, though i understand
the luxury of communion,

they know i am here, they invite
me to graze and swallow with them.
if this pain that visits me at night

must be, it will be mine. i will feed it
ballads, persimmons, walks, cuts
rubbing alcohol. and in the mornings

i will count its growing legs;
a pain will have never seen such hubris, you see,
i can accept anything

if it has been promised as my own.
little bodies of christ, unvexed
by my own body eclipsing the oven lamp,

find and carry this pain of mine.
i pick up the toast, feel them crawl
onto my fingers, test the edges of my mouth.

God, let your saints stay longer than the night
allows. i can make my suffering religious,
i can send it walking down my throat.

Choking on the pulp of it

With a line from Diane Seuss

Look: the person we love is shrinking
into themselves, knees almost touching their chest,
and then expanding, surrendering heart to pain—
the only transition a scream, weak
as it breaks through a throat full of bile.

We watch from the carpet,
sitting on our knees, trying to grab
God from the air—like a fist easing
into and becoming part of the wall:
the exact moment the atoms are separated.

Outside, it's the first sunny
day in months. How can you
leave him, walk through those
seventy degrees, when our father is dying?

We spend too much time with shame,
with guilt. They get caught in the throat
and burrow under teeth—hope
is more potent in shame's company.

There are still seven silver bullet points
of things you could do instead
of moving forward: squeeze
a piece of obsidian, scratch
wax off a lotto ticket, wipe a finger
across a layer of ash on the dashboard,
throw away the cans left by his bed,
postpone joy, make anything
a prayer, and then fall asleep.
Prove your loyalty to the dead
and dying by not living.
We are listening. There is no death.

good morning, i'm glad you're awake

what i mean is, i'm glad you're still here
asleep or not, but now it's even
better, i can see
you returning my seeing.

you've been sleepwalking for days,
i mean, years. please, don't be afraid.
i'm sorry, i have thought of ways to say
this to you, ways to tell you gently
that you are now awake.

good morning, the sun is out, for the first time,
in days. i'm sorry, again, i'm lying
to you, now. the sun has been out,
be still, you can feel it now. so, who
am i to say, that it has been out for days,
if you haven't been awake
yet to know its warmth?

good morning, i don't mean to say
the sun exists only for you, though
that would be a beautiful thing to say.
i have been sitting under
that sun for days, where i always am,
on the balcony, with a coffee gone cold. the light's for me,
too, and the Taro plant outside, i brought it back to life
i fed it coffee grounds and banana peels and i sang,
alone, to it. i wanted to wake you with life.

good morning, yes, i know,
i wasn't alone, you were there, too,
sitting beside me, you were
whispering to it. i know, i need to
make my voice softer, i know,
i don't want to frighten the plant,
or you, or me, you know.

good morning, did you dream?
tell me the one, you know,
where we were in a car,
flying off the road? i'm sorry,
i shouldn't have said that, i know,
it frightens you, too, but look,
here is my hand, hold it.

you’re awake, now, too.

good morning, can i hear
your voice? listen to me,
i’ve missed your laugh the most.
one night, i tried to hear it,
i tried to laugh myself,
in three different ways, but i cried,
and i thought, could the sound
of weeping, be the sound of your
laugh, if i pretend long enough?

good morning, i promise you, i’ve been
happy, too. i’ve been so happy, sometimes
when i’m walking, i start running,
and sometimes i feel my own skin, as if
for the first time. i’ve been so happy,
that i can lay down beside you, almost
every night, and fall asleep, yes!
but, please, remind me, what your eyes look
like when they move, squint them
as if your laughing, or looking at me
like the sun is burning up behind me.

“Feeling Good” by Nina Simone

Every morning, I break my heart.
I wake in the same position and think:

I’ve just got to cross this fuck.
I open my nightstand and find a best friend:

a crossing guard who blows me a kiss.
Another one, under my bedroom rug:

a man named Toni at the post office tells me his pet alpacas know his name.
And there, in my bottle of lithium:

a woman carrying an eight pack of diet coke through the rain.
Another one, underneath my jacket thrown over the recliner:

a wasp who turned out to be a dragonfly.
Under my stack of bills:

a farm dog named Ellie who chases chickens back into their coop.
A best friend, beneath the throw up on my t-shirt:

an *Oh* that comes when I hear an old friend's voice on the phone.
The *Oh* from remembering that old *Oh*.

My best friends say: say *yes* to your past, affirm it.
They say: say no to the world, refuse it.

I’ve said both. Now, between my fingers and my forehead:
a woman who says “it’s okay, baby”

but never asks what's the matter.
There is no matter, there are too many.

I am both circling the drain and rising from it,
my best friends keep me from the pipes.

I take them in my arms, hold them up
with my thigh, balance them back to our bed.

They push warmth into me, burrow
into my skin under my cotton sheet.

I roll over and face my mother.
I ask: *Where are you hiding?*

A psychic once told me the quickest way to summon
the dead is to hum their favorite song.

Becoming My Mother

My mother walked two miles to the ballpark in the middle / of the night / to take toilet paper / from the public bathrooms / I was five / I sat in front / of the garage door / sharing a creamsicle with a stray cat / I began to turn the clocks forward / when I found / there was no strength / in stillness / when I found / there is no difference / between surviving / and stealing / that to bite your tongue / will only leave you with a mouth full / of your own blood / when 25 / my sister / sat on the bathroom floor / crying / when I told her / I would figure it out / get through the withdrawals / never see a pill / again / she said / you're just like her / I walk to the ballpark / sit in the middle of a field / with the lights still on / reveal myself / to the empty stadium / show my face / in the places I have been banned from / I am my mother's child / I am heroin / I am mania / I am the shovel thrown / against a sliding glass door / patches stuck to a ribcage / a blade hidden between handcuffs / the blood running down her wrist / pooling on the plastic seats / a mouth of cotton / the skin between her toes / her tired veins / I am the smell / of hot grease / poured on top / of her head / I am the mother / who never stopped / feeding us / even when / there was no food / the mother / who made me / ask to be excused / from dinner table / she was not / sitting at / I am the closet door / locked with her inside / I am her overdosing / while holding / a kitchen knife / I am no longer / the child / on the phone with the operator / I am now / the emergency / the narcan / the healer / the abuser / the one / with a clean nose / clean wrist / the one / the mother / that God / will still / not reward

At the Harvard Museum of Natural History

There were 342 hummingbirds
frozen behind the glass.
Each bird positioned with its wings out
and its head pointed forward.
You walked to the glass,
as if turning yourself in.
They flew out the back
of you, and kept going.

We have loved long enough.
We have looked through the waters,
found the line of grief and walked
along its edge—
we are still walking.
We step over
the tree roots that have broken
through the pavement, make space
for the wreckage
amongst the calm,
until we can long no longer
see a difference, until we, too,
break through that which contains us.

I hold those truths
and this one:
I am not ready to go yet.
Know this, if anything:
I will be your echo
in a room with only walls.
I will cut us a door.
Head forward,
arms out,
we have arrived together.
We will leave together.
Until then, our living
is the difference.

You Have 15 Minutes

At the river, the sun is almost above John and me
As we sit on the wet dirt mixed with splinters of glass.

At home, in central Florida, it is raining
And my family is planning a funeral.

And you, too, yes. Someone you love
Is bent over their knees, head between their hands.

Someone we love is under their covers,
Shivering. A dark blanket tacked over their blinds.

Someone detoxes. Someone relapses.
We are calling an ambulance.

I am them, too. There's a small apartment
At the bottom of my throat

Where they live.
The lake bubbles onto the shore

And spits its froth. When the foam
Pops away bits of cardboard and metal are revealed:

Look how the Summer heat turns us on our head,
Shoves fingers in our throat to purge old selves.

Moccasins slip over the water weightlessly,
Are they ashamed of what they must do to survive,

The way Winter asks us to be? Asks us to split
And put away who we once were and who we will be.

The sun is reaching its highest point,
And when it does my shadow will be entirely

Beneath me. John says the naked eye can measure
The sun's movement in fifteen-minute increments.

I look at the front of my hand, my index finger
Below the sun, my pinky aligned with the horizon.

Here we love the ones who are suffering,
Become them through the erasure of light,

While for a moment, the shadows
Are indistinguishable from ourselves.

Man on the side of the interstate

I’m not going to ask you to take the things I’m carrying right now, unknown to you. I can’t slow down fast enough to help you, anyway, it’s not just the speed, but I also don’t know how to help. But I want to—I also want to tell you about my old life and how I wish to burn it while still holding it, are you listening? I want you to hold me too. Would you help me while I pretend, in the only sincere way I know, to help you? Would you let me be ugly with desire for only a moment to tell a stranger to listen, a stranger who cannot go anywhere, while everyone else blurs past us absorbed in themselves and their destinations? Can you tell me what to do when you run out of destinations? I want to tell you about the time on my 22nd birthday when my tire blew and my friend changed it in the rain, the whole time telling me how to do it, and I want to tell you I wasn't paying attention. I want you to give me the attention I withheld from him, that I withhold from my family and my friends. I want to tell you I do not miss them the way they miss me. Look at me the way you’d look at your newborn daughter. I am coming to you as if I only just took my first breath. I need to tell you all the things I’ve been thinking about while driving through the mountains, driving now, after living here for less than a year. I want to talk to you about these things while you change your tire on the side of the interstate, alone, in the middle of June. At night I get this homesick feeling in my stomach like a child awake at a sleepover when everyone else is asleep. I have it still, you can see how scraped out I’ve gotten since she died, my mom, but even before that. I was homesick at home with her too. She’d fall asleep in the living room in front of the TV and I’d stack cushions and pillows to be closer to her. I was born into this sickness. I have not told anyone this, my birth is the reason she started taking opioids. It was never going to shake out. It was predetermined, this scraped-out pit in me. Oh, don’t tell me not to blame myself. I don’t, I’m here to blame you. Will you carry that for me? Yes, I know I said I wouldn’t ask that of you, but what have you got to lose? We will never have to see each other again. What a gift, we can go on believing that both of us lived forever. I don’t know where I’m going. I know you're doing quite alright, but do you want me to grab that camping bag? Red, blue, and yellow duffle bags, where are you going? What do you say when someone asks where you're from?

There is No Home

We tried to make a home for ourselves.
We poured cement to extend our home,
bought a dog and invited people to come
see our home. We laid our cheeks against
the tile of our home. Splashed soapy
water against the floors of our home
and pushed the dirt and skin into corners
of the home. We left the front door open
to our home, we let the police in,
we let them take our mother out.
Mother overdoses on the side
of our home. Her face in the gray Florida dirt,
vicodin patches stuck jaggedly on her stomach.
Mother is the home. Dead now, she comes to me
in dreams—I am on my knees, I am asking her
To come home. She is laughing at me.

Lines from Letters my Mother Wrote in Prison

Hey baby girl,

How come you can't write more?

I am hoping against hope I'll be home for Christmas

To feel your hair against my cheek & know you are really there with me

I will be hugging you every night in my dreams until they come true

I know soon we'll be celebrating my homecoming &

The start of a new life together soon

I want you to be very good to daddy Help him as much as possible

You are our daughter after all

I'm

Sorry

I'm so so-

rry

Please visit

I will

Be a better mother

Know that no matter what You are poetry to me

A list of everything I hear in order of distance (farthest to closest) outside of your apartment

An airplane, a bird, a child yelling,
and the metronomic drop of water coming from
the mop hanging upside down, or right side up.

I wanted to leave the destruction inside, wanted
it to be enough for you too know of the aftermath
instead of only the war. It wasn't just the glass:
a thousand black and clear cubes
from the TV stand. Or the plate,

in a dozen pieces now, that I made for Father's
day. It wasn't the missing pieces to everything,
Or the wires thrown across the couch,
It was you.

I wanted you to know the dogs, the sirens,
the melting faces, the sea animals falling
inside from the sliding glass door,
were never here, your head was protecting itself.

Evidence is always too much and too little.
It only complicates your healing,
the airplane and child are gone. It was you:

the bird, the metronomic drops of water coming
from the mop, and a cry muffled from your hand.
You that I hear years later, states away.

Whatever is in front of me

The first night at my father's house I woke to him demanding
a refund over the phone.
Listening to only his side of the line,
my arms up over my pillow,
I know he'd been scammed
and that my door was open now
when it was closed before–
he let in the cat.
Entirely unimpressed by his anger,
I only think that I need to get up to pee,
later in the week, I will use my hands first
then a broom and an old manual to clean up sharp
arrows of mirror from the road,
from the once whole glass, my father put
in the garbage can the night before,
where he first dropped it on his foot,
pooling and steeping blood into the carpet.
I will think about them in the landfill.
I will imagine their reflections being so plentiful
it is the cause of this heat,
the hottest summer I have ever lived.
I will imagine too, the trailer catching on fire
with him inside. Arms resting on my head
in the middle of the street, I think: I should cut my hair off.

my therapist asks what is the opposite of fear

two green dots swing from left to right
my hands squeeze a controller the shape of my eyes test
the borders of them as i pretend
i wasn't spending the first thirty minutes falling
asleep in midair

i told her when i was asked
to think of my mom
blue

in the bathroom i could only think
of her alive turning
around a corner from somewhere else

what did you feel that night?

i adjust my eyes
to blend the two holes of light
respond ordinarily

and what would the opposite of that be?

my mother
opening my bedroom door asking

are you hungry?

Backyard EMDR Therapy

I gave up my large plastic yellow, or possibly orange, chair for a wasp about five minutes ago. Now, about four feet away from him, I watch as it inspects the belly of the arm, rubbing its legs together. My eyes follow his rhythmic bobs instinctually and soon, almost hypnotically. It is May, and it is the second warmest day of this year so far. I don't know this for certain, but I am almost sure. It is May and I have lived here for ten months. Here, being the very west part of Virgina, less than two hours from West Virginia. My backyard, where I am now, is partially outlined by bamboo trees. They make an L shape around the left hand side, if you look at them from the inside of the sliding glass door of the basement, where I am living. It's an invasive species, bamboo. I know this because I am told this, and also because whenever I mow the lawn, the blades slice and throw loose bamboo, which soon bring new shoots that appear incredibly pointed but are kicked over easily. I can not tell you what kind of bamboo it is, I haven't looked into it. Truthfully, in these ten months of living here, the only interest I take in the bamboo are the roosting starlings or maybe bats that stir around, almost violently, at night when someone, a friend, or sometimes myself, shines a flashlight near them. The existence of the starlings, or bats, unseen but heard, brings me back to this wasp. I can see it clearly, I am surrendering my attention to his metronomic sways, but the only noise I hear right now is, if I had to identify every sound present to me: leaves rolling within the wind, and a few birds in the distance. The wasp rubbing its legs together reminds me of my own hand, six years ago, reaching into the cash register in front of me at Winn-Dixie. I was lifting the till to retrieve the stamps underneath it for an older woman. When I moved my right hand to pass over the sheet of stamps she didn't immediately lift her arm to grab them, instead, she looked up at me from under the folds of her

eyelids and said: “do you know what they say when it’s raining and the sun is shining?” I looked through the glass automatic doors to see if her question was

relevant, and it was bright outside, and it was drizzling. “No,” I was sort of smiling here, I think, that sounds like something I would do. “It means the devil is beating his wife.” I don’t know what I did then. Knowing myself, knowing how I was at 17, I probably said “oh” and then waited a beat, ripped her receipt from the printer, and said: “have a nice day,” or something normal like that. I’m not going to lie and say it sent chills down my spine, but it was certainly odd to me and I knew that then, recognized the oddity of it and maybe discussed it with myself, shallowly, of course; it didn’t demand, right then, large dissection. 17, I had long hair then, probably tied up. It had to be worn up, so it was. This is in Florida, and I lived right across the street from Winn-Dixie. I didn’t need to drive to work, but I did. I had a Honda Accord, green, it was a coupe. It wasn’t necessarily nice, but it was cool, or rather, it would become cool when I looked back on it. I would drive home later that day and I would probably sit on the couch, still in my uniform, and my mom would probably make me dinner. This was a normal thing, though I don’t remember much of it. I remember the green carpet, and the stairs, it was a townhome. There was a lake right outside the sliding glass door. That lake would smell awful around dog days, and large pleco fish would reach the banks, dead. I think they were plecos, they were sucker fish nonetheless. Larger than my foot, which is a size 8. Upstairs was my room. There, I remember hearing my mom fall down the stairs. I remember staring at her from the top of the stairs. Actually, I didn’t remember this until I started writing this, thinking hard about the green stairs. She was high, at this time I didn’t know on what–she would tell me years from then. Years meaning less than three, as she would die in two years from this memory of being 17 and working at Winn-dixie on the day a woman told me what they say about sun showers. I

remember walking up the stairs, too, around the fourth of July, to my dad's girlfriend walking out of his room and telling me there was an accident. When I pushed by her he had a gauze covering his left eye, blood seeping through it. He lost his eye, a firework. I wasn't there, but a lot of people in the apartment complex were. One girl was hit by his blood, or so I was told. Another time, my mother now, in my father's room, laid on the bed while a paramedic rubbed his knuckles on her sternum to wake her up from the overdose, and she did, and she looked pissed. I guess I would be too, with a daughter always calling 911. Downstairs now, she has locked herself in the bathroom with a knife. This was after she split her wrist open in front of me. I remember facing the other side of the bathroom door, and calling the police, again. I remember her white knuckles choking the handle of the knife as she slammed the door, and then the flatline silence. Right before the cops arrived she walked out, blood growing and gripping her arms, with a hand towel and a face that implied something of normalcy, as if my bewilderment rested in the soiling of a hand towel. Two years after being outside of that bathroom, I'm walking into a new apartment, we're still in Florida, and my dad is running out of the bathroom, and he is the one this time telling me to call 911. I went to the bathroom first, I think my mom was in between the toilet and tub, or passed out on the toilet seat, I only really remember her on the center of the bathroom floor, after my dad lifted and dragged her to it, and pressed his fist into her chest, pausing only to scoop his fingers inside her throat. I remember this part, I do. I remember how blue she was. I remember my friend Summer calling 911 next to me, I don't remember what she said. I remember moving away from them and laying down in the laundry room. I remember the cool floor, and I remember thinking: I might die, I could die with the way my heart is working. When the paramedics came, or maybe it was the cops first, it's usually the cops first, they asked me how old she was. "45." I don't know where my dad is here, but I know they, whoever, are

working on her in the bathroom. I don't remember standing up and walking, but I did, to the dining room, where I laid down again, underneath the table. I am 19 now. I am 19 and I am praying, I remember that, because I was doing it aloud. Maybe it wasn't praying, I was telling myself: "she's going to be okay." I don't remember her being taken out of the apartment, I think someone told me to close my eyes. I don't remember walking down the outdoor flight of stairs to get to Summer's mom's car, who would take us to the hospital. I remember being in the car. I remember looking at my dad from the backseat, how he was trying to be normal. I don't remember walking through the hospital, but I do remember the young doctor who said "are you the Cook family?" to which I said, stupidly, "no, that's her maiden name, but I'm her daughter." There were stutters and pauses in this, I remember. He said, and I remember this well, "Miss Cook didn't make it." I remember being on the ground next, I remember smelling bleach from the tile. I remember screaming: "my mom is dead," as if to assure myself, as if to make it more true and less true, like how saying a word over and over makes it lose its meaning. I remember the nurse, I remember yelling at her. I remember her telling me to calm down. I don't remember how I got to a hospital bed, but I remember being thirsty lying in it. I remember a different nurse walking up to me and saying: "my mom died too." I remember looking at her and hanging onto that last word. I often think I am still left there. I remember my sister, sobbing outside of the room I was in. I remember this because I had never heard her like that, and I really would never hear it again. The wasp is bobbing up and down in the air occasionally grazing the yellow, or possibly orange, chair and I am remembering. I suppose I am proving my existence this way, tracing back to times when I knew my existence meant something, meant something as in, I was in proximity to someone else, someone who moved me. Affected. Someone who, possibly, gave

me the ruins I carry. No, she was only an older woman. No, he was only my father. She was only my mother. I am only here, existing, too far from them all.

II

"There is hope in the past.
I'm writing to you
all the time, I am writing
with both hands,
day and night."
—Franz Wright

Sonnet for Healing

So much of what I require of a love
is what I required of my mother:
nurturing, then: a sense of independence.
For my love to tell me the hand that held hers

during visitation at the psychiatric ward
is still my hand, though in the mornings I believe
my body to be fragmented, a tree
freshly cut to make way for a power line—

Say: this body, not a wound nor a weapon,
will still be recognizable to your mother,
even if her eyes have been closed for three
years—maybe, you were the last human she saw.

And after all of this say you forgive me, tell me I must do well
to remember, that I have made good with talking to myself.

In August, When the Smoke is Thicker

I wake up and sing to you,
but I have these dreams of violence:
my hands wet and wrapped around your throat,
fingers hot with knowing all that I'll never finish
telling you—how the way you move: less like dust
specks swimming inside sun rays;
more like bats flocking, unseen,
in the branches
of bamboo trees, and how easily I force my reflection
Into your eyes, always looking
someplace else.

Inside you're still sleeping, it's 11 in the morning.
We met in August.
I am sitting in the storm outside, snowflakes land
on my jacket and do not melt.

Looking Out the Window From His Bed

in a town a day-long drive away
from home. I must learn to love the wet
days as much as I loved the dry heat. Become
a baseball fan. Love commercials.
Love his cool aged pillow beneath me
and the view through the window: a long yard
with nothing in it. Learn to love the man who
now loves me. And one day, once
I have learned to love his office,
where I cannot so much as turn a pencil,
(for I promised to love his order,)
I will look out a window to see the snow has turned
the long yard into a flat picture of what it once was.
The lack of dimension will scare me steel.
I'll force my legs to take me back to his bed,
where I learn to love the way he climbs
over me, abords tears with his fingers,
tells me I am where I am supposed
to be. This will be true, until the day I will
follow him to his car moments before the sun rises.
The fog will hold its breath up to our knees, and he
will drive away. I'll walk back to my apartment,
arrive in my bed, and stay there
for days. Try to imagine myself an island,
myself not at the place I'm supposed
to be but the place itself.
This learning is not for nothing.
It is, in fact, the searching of what to do with it,
that keeps me transient.

In A Backyard,

Somewhere in Florida I am counting the hums
Of birds I have not yet met.

For the time I looked at you,
Walking out of your bathroom,

Habit pulled me in before remembering
It has been years since we last loved—

There must have been hundreds of hums sounding
in my arms and in my mouth how possible

That the vibration of wanting to wrap hands
Around someone's warm throat

Is the same as wanting to fold them up
Inside you.

Of Jealousy

Your lover will grow tired of you
threatening the inch between the blade & your throat.
Of your wet hands slapping the glass.
Your lover will be called someplace else,
when they're supposed to fill up the space
between the car door and its latch.
Now, your skin beats hot against the plastic snow,
They did not follow you.
Your eyes tighten and release.
Eve Babitz says for a moment jealousy can
Touch you in such a remarkable way
that suicide or murder is the only alleviant.
But relief will come,
before bed or in the middle of the day:
clutching the sides of the bed,
forcing words into the wall,
emptying yourself of all texture,
you are entirely smooth.

A friend asked what “acute” meant in terms of pain

Morning cracks over his face like a blink.
How easily a man can become unrecognizable:
A stem shuddering among a million other stems.

I tried to slice my longing, cut right through
To see what would be inside.
Maybe there would be music

The kind you make breakfast to.
Maybe it would look similar to a still life
A bowl of oranges, rather than me

With my stomach cut open, both hands full of my guts.
He turns over onto his back
To get a better look at his dreams.

in another world, we begin or continue

in your small apartment tub
where the paint chips around the tiles,
i turned off the water by wrapping

my toes around the knob. you walked in
with a pair of headphones
and placed them on my ears.

the song began with several strings,
a single piano key tapped softly,
then it sounded
as if there was an airplane in the bathroom
with us, though it wasn't startling,
only a gentle swell of flight.

to name something a memory
is to call it dead—
while i know the past is passing us,
i do hope it goes on breathing.

when the song ended, i lifted the plug
to let the water drain and myself with it:
melting paint bubbling into the holes. underwater,
your face stretched and shaken from form.

with each retrieval, a particular memory

grows more distorted. which is to say
in some world, you will always

be opening the bathroom door,
my eyes always meeting yours
immediately.

or, in some world, you came
into the bathroom, turned
to the mirror, & began
to floss your teeth.

Pleasures of The Informed

I've recently learned wind turbines slice open
birds as easily as a finger placed
on a spinning top—a cessation of movement,
instant and noiseless.

I've recently learned, too, that I loved you much more
than I believed I did. The news came to me like light
intruding in flashes: tiny people opening their plane
shutters row by row.

I have recently learned another thing:
I have an eyesore of the heart sort,
a bad omen. Instant and noiseless—
someone's left a light on in my chest,
and no one around would believe me.

Introduction to the Backyard after a Hurricane

If the word echo were a back porch I stepped
Out onto it the morning after the hurricane.
The walls, stripped ordinary, imitate each other.
In front of me the screen, tattered
Around the edges now, projects a diluted
Version of the abandoned golf course.

The sky is still wringing itself out
In its tired way. My two cats inspect
Artifacts flown in by the storm:
Crickets and leaves and mulch
All the color of wetness.
Occasionally the cats turn
At the same time, make their way
To each other and touch noses.

They are looking for familiarity.
They are holding up a mirror
To prove they are here, then
They look at me, blankly
As if for the first time.

Sonnet for the Yellow House.

On the night of the full moon I visit the house now empty
Of you, remark how discipline has changed the texture of life,
How the memory of your skin through a t-shirt is kept under
The soles of my feet—the mud beneath them could be cement
Between blades of grass. From outside the window that reveals
The kitchen table I can see your posture straight and still,
Hand scratching on your legal pad. Paint around the frame
Peels itself free and floats down—the vision of you
Wilts and dissolves. I learn here what myself means:
A cushion on a hard chair. Once there was a tree here,
Before your kitchen window. The city sliced
Through it evenly. Someone thought up a hazard
Where you used to see hummingbirds. I touched the sap of it
Felt the skin of you: rough & moving away.

Something Beautiful Happened in This Dress

I am in Asheville, North Carolina. The July humidity is inseparable from my sweat. I am with a man I love more than I know how to, and he is moving away to the midwest next week. We drove here from the southwestern side of Virginia yesterday. Since then, there has been a lot of walking, sometimes we walk on opposite sides of the road.

In this walking, we pass a house somehow standing on its own. Washed over yellow, the door opened, and it appeared to be idling. Uncensored in its independence, possessed only by the colony of young cats. Here's that familiar nausea now, as I turn around to look back at the house one more time.

I have been having waves of deja vu. You know it too, not quite painful or uncomfortable, only a twinge, a tug of yourself from some other self somewhere else. Maybe it is always there, like a nose, catching sight of it only when you look at your feet. When it happens, it brings a small wave of vertigo or air in the throat. Now I'm walking and aware that all that is being seen by me now is already somewhere stored in the past. Already turning around and looking at it while I walk through it. Why does it all matter?

Because I know you, too, have walked over a bridge with a highway going forward under you. Have supported the back of your neck with your hand as you look up to the roof of a church. Have spit into a canyon. Have noted the quiet of a street you've never walked on before.

Have memories of it all, too. I know there are some things too beautiful, too surreal, too unfamiliar, to put anywhere. So to smoke out the stuplimity you put it in your pocket before it hits your stomach.

I'm getting ahead of myself here. The street the yellow house leans off of is called Roberts. I note it as we turn off the street corner to get downtown. I say it in my head ten times so as not to forget. As I'm repeating the street name, the man I love turns to me and I do not hear what he says. It becomes all together perfectly understandable to me here that I have spent much of the past year looking over and considering him, which is another way of saying holding, seizing, and grasping about him to keep as many offshoots of his existence I can before he leaves. It is one thing to recognize deja vu and another to cross its threshold and stay inside of it until it reveals motivation.

With a canyon, a quaint house, a cathedral, a love such as this one, comes a burdening sense of unpreparedness. As if to witness such remarkableness means surrendering to it, and becoming entirely unremarkable in transference of recognition, though, these encounters are not exchanges, you are not being recognized. I begin throwing up on the side of the road and become entirely too warm in my body. The man I love goes into an antique mall and comes out with a light blue cotton nightgown and I pull it over before taking off the inseparable sweat and humidity steeped shirt and pants underneath. Wiping the bile from the sides of my mouth I begin to surrender in an entirely different manner, a surrender to the "oh" that comes with recognizing these feelings of deja vu is my own body's way of preparing for the unknown, by pretending it is not only already

known but has been, for some time. I almost grow excruciatingly bored. I surrender here, on the side of the road, in front of the man I love, in a light blue cotton nightgown and think of Sebald:

"It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time."

So it is and was all together swallowed after departing from the yellow house and turning back toward it–swallowed and heaved and kept down, this acceptance or rather, peace, of facing such sublimes. I take my two hands, my pointers, and my thumbs, and create a frame containing the man I love's face, slide the Ls toward each other to mimic a shutter, and we laugh.