



Spring 2017

Permission

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PERMISSION

by

Fallon Sullivan

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Fallon Sullivan

May 9, 2017

PERMISSION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Fallon Sullivan
May 2017

Abstract

Permission is a collection of prose poems, letters, vignettes, and a video essay that cohere into a hybrid poetry memoir. Alone, each piece is a small autonomous unit. But when taken together, the pieces accrue into something far larger—a quilted memoir that amplifies the meaning of each of its component parts. The form and arrangement are meant to mimic the content; *viz.* each piece is rendered as true to memory, and *as memories are*: nonlinear, sporadic, and perhaps incomplete. Further, in an effort toward wholeness, *Permission* interacts with the distinction between emotional and experiential memory. The emotional memory pieces (in the text demarcated by italics) are often more dense, incongruous, metaphor-laden, and ambiguous than the experiential memory pieces. They are meant to evoke the emotional narrative that underlies the more obvious experiential narrative. The topics covered include: domestic abuse, sexual trauma, isolation, sexuality, the psychology of recovery, and the eventual development of a post-trauma adult identity. As a body of work, *Permission* resists the silencing of victims of domestic violence, thereby contributing a verse to the broader conversation surrounding women’s rights and rape culture.

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My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not in the future, not in the past, not for all eternity. Not only to endure what is necessary, still less to conceal it—all idealism is falseness in the face of necessity—but to love it.

Friedrich Nietzsche

What is healing, but a shift in perspective?

Mark Doty

Critical Preface

Serving as a foreword to the page-bound written component of my memoir, *Permission*, the video essay “Dear Missoula” (Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUGP_0WAVuU) opens on a rain-lashed window. I sit in my living room in Seattle, staring out at the churning gray ocean, and this setting organically invites reflection. The setting promptly shifts to Missoula, Montana, initiating the text’s transition to memory as its primary storytelling resource. As I pan over photos and video footage of Missoula, I speak directly to the place—sometimes wistfully, sometimes regretfully—ever trying to probe the dark, entangled core of my relationship with my time there. The body of the video essay meditates on my proclivity toward escapism, my tortured dependence on Missoula when comprehending my identity, my vulnerability, and the slow transformation of coming of age and loss of innocence.

This video essay sets up the content, theme, and form of the rest of my memoir, *Permission*. The memoir’s content is derived from the time I spent living in Missoula, and is meant to serve as a bittersweet homage to the place: concurrently grappling with my feelings about an abusive relationship I underwent while living there and the slow road back to personal wholeness thereafter. *Permission* has become a reclamation of self through storytelling. Bringing the tradition of mythology and epic poetry into a contemporary light, this memoir is a katabasis: undergoing a journey through the underworldly depths of personal trauma to come to better know the self. Thus, the memoir is also a written exorcism of this lingering trauma.

As a comprehensive work, *Permission* is highly imagistic. In an effort to mimic the experience of calling forth isolated memories, the writing exacts images and instances, preferring isolated moments to drawn-out explanations. The video essay is able to highlight this imagistic precision in the way it calls upon photographs and video footage to undergird the vocal overlay.

Further, in the manner of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* and Richard Hugo's poetry, among others, *Permission* contributes to Montana's literary tradition of writing about human lives inextricably bound to Montana's beloved and severe landscape. In doing so, *Permission* utilizes place as a thematic unifier. "Dear Missoula" foregrounds the place-based nature of the collective work by directing the text to the place itself: Missoula, the video essay's "you." The voiceover speaks directly to the place *as if it were a character*, because, as the work continues, Missoula indeed emerges as one of the work's central characters. More than merely a backdrop or piece of pretty scenery, Missoula, as a character, evolves into the work's foundation. Not only do I open my memoir with place, but I also routinely return to the landscape in the text to illustrate that Missoula had become the bedrock of my adult identity.

Additionally, the video essay's style of direct address prepares the viewer/reader for the missive style of the rest of the memoir. In *Permission*, I write to and about my trauma in an unashamed way. In the text, I often write directly to an unnamed "you," as I've found I relish the stark directness of addressing someone or something in my writing. Inherent in the direct address is vulnerability, intimacy, and voyeurism: a reader gains "exclusive" access to an otherwise private correspondence between the writer and another person.

In terms of chronology, I wrote *Permission* in a "chronology of healing." It is a loose temporal chronology, but more memory-based and dependent on emotional and psychological processes. Months are jumbled; the timeline is *not quite right*. *Permission* does start at "the beginning," but, temporally, I move through a distilled timeline of the relationship before I delve into the violence that occurred during the relationship. This mimics the psychological process of repression, reflection, understanding, and acceptance. Further, when ordering, I weave the emotional narrative pieces throughout the experiential narrative. These emotional narrative

pieces achieve subliminal connection instead of linear and logical connection, and are meant to be accessed from an emotional—rather than narrative—lens. For example, late in the text, I place “Winter Mariner,” an emotional narrative piece, between “Ode to the Abused Body” and “Why The Past Is, If It Is, Irrevocable.” “Winter Mariner” celebrates solitude and revels in its isolation. There is a feeling of comfort and assuredness of experiences shared with only the self. In placing this piece immediately after “Ode to the Abused Body,” which details an instance of rape, I compound the meaningfulness of solitude—because now it is in the wake of a vicious intimacy. Then, in placing both of these pieces immediately before “Why The Past Is, If It Is, Irrevocable,” which is a self-portrait, the self-reflection resonates with more acuity. The reader has been equipped with emotional and experiential context necessary to best understand the self-portrait. The order of each piece was chosen so that each would resonate most fully and come alive with the most clarity when read in the company of the surrounding poems.

For this project, I derived influence and creative instruction from numerous sources, including, most especially: the accrual method of Abigail Thomas’ multivocal, vignettted memoir, *Safekeeping*; the genre-bending experimentation with form and memory in Mark Doty’s memoir/extended meditation, *Still Life With Oysters and Lemon*; the vertebral interaction with time and place in M. Scott Momaday’s memoir, *The Names*; and the fragment-rich, elegiac prose poems of Karen Green’s *Bough Down*. From all four, I became engaged with nonlinearity and formal experimentation, and thus absorbed both techniques into my own writing.

Permission is comprised of numerous disparate parts that accrete into a unified whole. Taken in isolation, the pieces are fragments—impulses, emotional gusts, fractures of experience—but, when taken together, the pieces compile into a fully realized narrative. Abigail Thomas’ *Safekeeping* also works in accretion. A memoir composed of vignettes, *Safekeeping*

details Thomas' experiences in all her roles as a woman: daughter, wife, mother, sister, grandmother, and lover. A young mother, and ill-fated in marriage, Thomas writes a nonlinear map of her identity. Her pieces are pithy and resolved, composed with shrewd self-awareness, and the overall portrait is utterly realistic.

The majority of Thomas' pieces are written in vignette-style scene—quick, trenchant, standalone bolts of resonance—and there she leaves them, often without explanation, reflection, or context. Here is “To Keep Him Company” in its entirety:

The night my father fell and couldn't get up and my mother couldn't get him up not being strong enough and it was four in the morning, they didn't want to disturb anyone at that hour by telephoning for help. So she lay down beside him on the floor and stayed with him until morning. (102)

Two sentences, but they speak volumes about her mother. Two sentences are enough.

In an effort to diversify tone and voice, Thomas writes a multivocal narrative. Some of her pieces are written in third person past tense: “She¹ went to a psychiatrist because she wasn't feeling up to snuff and he recommended pills” (69). Some are in third person present tense: “She is such a harridan” (125). Some are in first person present tense: “This is my favorite weather” (124). Some are in first person past tense: “I lingered in the kitchen although I was no match for her” (68). And some simply transcribe conversations between Thomas and her sister, who functions as the literary voice of reason, a clever storytelling device: “My sister is upset about the money. / How much did he give you? Fifty dollars? Did you ask for that much? / It's what the skirt cost, I tell her” (47). Each voice represents one of her “selves,” one of the identities she has undertaken as a woman. Taken together, the voices reveal a multidimensional woman taking stock of her life.

¹ Referring to Thomas herself.

In her approach to memoir, Thomas proves that accrual can sidestep the need for chronology. She negotiates time by doing away with timeline altogether; her vignettes exist like photographs in a photo album: fragments, yes, but they slowly begin to piece together a true and nuanced story.

Like Thomas, in *Permission*, I, too, take a variety-of-selves approach. Most often, I utilized the first person present tense, as in “Anima”: “I can write this because you are in the other room with me. I’ve come to inhabit you so badly” (8). In the text, whether I was actually writing about the present or transporting myself back to a past present, I found this tense most effective in lending immediacy to the language. I also often used first person past tense, as in “Strange Animal”: “Nearly October: I drew a line from me that ended in you. I drew a tragedy with scissors” (12). This tense was most helpful when interacting with past actions. It lent a subtle, unextravagant distance for me as a writer to directly recall and navigate past experiences. Finally, I used third person past tense when I needed distance—and obvious distance—the most, as in “The Man Without Qualities”: “She met him in his dorm room” (30). I used third person past or present for the memories from which I feel most divorced, and the text thus conveys this cognitive distance of identity. Further, in using the third person in tandem with the first person, I ensconced the memoir’s protagonist (the I, the me, the she) in a subtle but nonetheless fully realized trajectory of personal growth and healing. In using the array of tenses and literary points of view at my disposal, I was able to present a more complete, nuanced self—of past, present, and, implicitly, even future.

In *Permission*, I direct much of my writing to an unnamed but often obvious “you.” In this way, in the manner of “a letter never sent,” the text can be taken as a missive—most often to a specific person, sometimes to place, and other times to self. Karen Green’s *Bough Down* is also

written mostly in this missive-style format. Even though Green deliberately decided not to name him in the text, Green's prose poems compose an elegy to her late husband, David Foster Wallace. The poems also simultaneously chronicle her own journey toward understanding and healing in the wake of his suicide. Her writing is raw and unadorned, organically profound and tender. In many of her pieces, she uses white space and unfinished, unpunctuated sentence fragments to signify the weight of the unmentioned—or the unmentionable. All that she cannot or will not say. In her refusal to finish these sentences, she embarks on a contract with the reader—entrusting them to recognize the intentionality of her negation, to acknowledge the words not present on the page, to fill in the blanks, or even to just respect the written silences. As her pieces are untitled, here is an excerpt from the poem on page 120, true to its original format:

September again and

I take your parents to the lighthouse, I do. There is
nothing but September fog to cover our shame, and
your father laughs just like you, at the opacity. I want to
eat the laugh, I want to rub it on my chest like camphor,
I want to make a sound tattoo. I also want to bash these
two small people together and see if a collision of DNA
will give me my life back.

The white space after “September again and” resonates loudly on the page. It is immediately clear that if Green had wanted an unambiguous first line, she would have done without the white space and connected the first line to the following stanza. As readers, we cannot help but wonder: *What is the significance of September for Green?* A little research reveals that David Foster Wallace committed suicide in the month of September. There is the weight. The flood of associations that accompany September momentarily immobilizes her pen. Because of the significance of this month for her, she perhaps feels overwhelmed, perhaps needs space, perhaps just needs a moment to herself—and so she takes it *on the page*.

Further, the content of this poem demonstrates her desperation and grief in her trademark understated way, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of melodrama. Rather than forcing every emotion into a clearly defined container, Green keeps her tone calm, and handles her emotions in nuanced and often indirect ways. She writes: “I also want to bash these two small people together and see if a collision of DNA will give me my life back.” This image, of a child (assumedly) colliding two dolls together in a naive attempt at sex, communicates much: in placing herself within such a childlike image, Green suggests her adult identity has come undone in the wake of her husband’s suicide. She is back at square one, a child once again, playing with dolls, facing the world helpless and alone. Further, in not overtly stating that the “my life” in this line is synonymous with the “you,” her deceased husband, Green avoids sounding overwrought or melodramatic. This subtlety and subdued melancholia enables her emotions to come alive more fully on the page.

After reading *Bough Down*, I felt empowered to begin working on what is now *Permission*. I feel confident leaving silences via white space on the page. I also adopted Green’s pithy prose poem format as *Permission*’s predominant form. Here is an excerpt from “U-haul,” a piece that appears early in the text:

We both agreed that I should be the one to pay for groceries, as you weren’t going to have a job. My mom had paid for that mattress with her bonus check. I remember

Now: I keep weight on to keep men like you away from me. (16)

In leaving white space in lieu of description, I allow the emotional weight of the remembered content to exist on the page while still protecting its privacy, *my* privacy, then so vital and protected. I acknowledge my then unreadiness to delve into the memories. The shame burns, as I

had not yet written my way to the other side—toward frank acceptance. This white space is loaded. I trust the reader to realize this—and honor it.

When a poet ventures into prose, the attention to word-level precision becomes paramount. Such is the case with Mark Doty's 2001 *Still Life With Oysters and Lemon*, which blends memoir, ekphrastic reflection, and philosophy into a short text that is part memoir, part extended meditation. To Doty, paying attention is the highest form of being. In the opening pages, Doty informs the reader about the nature of the text before them. He describes walking into an art museum and standing before a painting he loves, a still life (the book's presiding motif), and is soon transported into a state of reverie. He feels such intimacy in the exchange: the implication of reflection, seeing the world as a mirror for himself, imbuing objects with personal meaning—he cannot help but plunge into meditation. From this initial meditation, he writes from the physics of the mind—a physics unbound by temporal constraints or the formal limitations of storytelling.

How, then, does this text cohere? Doty always roots his meditations in a memory, using the scenes from each memory as launchpads for his philosophical musings. Second, as seen with *Safekeeping*, cohesion emerges after many pages, from accretion, like hundreds of brush strokes compiling to create a single painting.

Doty navigates time freely, providing temporal cues when necessary, often using rhetorical questions to move his sequences along. For example, after a lovely structuralist musing on the affectionate interplay between observer and observed, there is white space to indicate a topical jump (also to allow the reader a pause), and then: “My first resonant, instructive thing?”—a quick, effective transition into a scene about his grandmother and the peppermints she often carried in her purse (10). He uses present tense while writing many of his

memories, thereby snapping the reader to attention. His cues—“We’re in the backseat of the green Studebaker” (12)—keep the reader present as he dips in and out of his memories. Doty writes this way because, in our minds, memories are ever in the present tense—even though we know they happened in the past. Grief, nostalgia, and joy are all felt in the present tense, and Doty highlights this: “Not that grief vanishes—far from it—but that it begins in time to coexist with pleasure” (47). Doty writes *Still Life* in light of the idea that all experience accumulates and blends with emotion in the shared space of the mind. And the mind is anything but linear. Thus, as Doty composes this text-bound accrual of his “I,” he navigates time the way a brain navigates memory: errantly, in a constant zig zag, ever encountered in the now.

Doty’s fluid negotiations with time in *Still Life* directed my own. By telling my story in *Permission*, I resist the culturally-imposed silencing of victims of rape and domestic violence. While crafting this story from my memories, rather than feeling constrained by strict chronology, I felt free to move about and write my memories as they are in my mind: often jumbled and unbound by the physics of time. In *Permission*, I also sought to convey my emotional memories, and those memories are *especially* unregulated. From Doty’s *Still Life*, I felt armed with enough literary precedent to try my hand at writing an I unbound by formal convention, an I of memories. Here an excerpt from “Latex”:

Fricative dialtone. Each time the sun enters me, I transform into who I am. I re-don my skin, stretch it on like latex. *I can’t wait for something better.* I say this every day. When the U-Haul door shucked shut, I mouthed: *This is not your orchard.* (11)

Temporally, as demonstrated in this selection, I felt liberated to move about quite freely. I connected images and instances that, in my mind, already are organically conjoined—but perhaps might not be so immediately obvious to the reader. The images and memories combine

to form an emotional memory: the constant urge to flee, to reinvent; perpetual, pathological dissatisfaction with normalcy in the wake of extremes. And time becomes ever-fluid: no longer staunchly linear.

While Doty interacts primarily with time in *Still Life*, in his memoir, *The Names*, Momaday spotlights place. In this work, place functions less as a storytelling device and more as a character. Momaday makes it clear from the opening pages that place will be of tantamount importance to any human character in the text. He spends the majority of the first three pages of Chapter 1 describing Rainy Mountain, the place where he spent much of his youth. He begins his first-person narrative [“Some of my earliest memories...” (5)] only once he’s adequately established a sense of the landscape: what it looked like, sounded like, felt like:

The light there is of a certain kind. In the mornings and evenings it is soft and pervasive, and the earth seems to absorb it, to become enlarged with light. About the noons there are edges and angles—and a brightness that is hard and thin like a glaze. (4)

It is obvious that Momaday has come to know this landscape as intimately as one would know a family member, lover, or close friend. As the text proceeds, Momaday endeavors to describe—with tenderness and great detail—the diversity of his landscape and the changes it undergoes, thereby characterizing this place as fully as any character. Thus, the text, which blends traditional fable, imagination, poetry, photography, and memoir, is a quilt of Momaday’s upbringing, a written album of his family’s Kiowa heritage and legacy—and place emerges as one of the account’s primary characters, the string that sustains his array of narrative beads.

Like Momaday, in *Permission*, I write Montana’s landscape as the text’s stronghold character. Unwavering in its dependability, and so tender with my vulnerability, Montana’s landscape cradles and guides the protagonist (the “I”) throughout the text. Further, in the text, landscape is often synonymous with emotional landscape. In “Eureka,” I recall the night I fled

from an abusive relationship. It was winter, cold. In the poem's opening image, I describe the sky as "a black felt blanket pocked with rhinestones that sparkle in certain lighting" (44). This sky is oppressive, deceptive, infrequently lovely. The sky reflects the emotional state of the relationship. As the poem develops, the attitude shifts: I feel liberated, but not healed. The landscape mirrors this: "Not a fence in sight: the fields stood open and stark like an invitation." There is a raw potential, layered in coldness, sadness, and blandness. Everything is still dark. The wound stands open. In the majority of these pieces, landscape is a mirror for the state of my own blistering humanity: conflating ego and landscape, self and environment.

As my video essay "Dear Missoula" comes to a close, the voiceover discusses the Missoula character at its most catalytic and the exposure to place at its most severe:

Dear Missoula, I left my innocence inside your cupboard, next to all those other fragile things I couldn't help but touch. I liked to run my nascent fingers along edges and seams that were never meant for me. I liked the feeling of flames hot against my skin and always wanted to be two inches too close to dangerous. Under your eyes, I charted my own novice course through impulse and restraint, the windfalls of fragility, of violence, learning guile with how-to guides and wrongdoing. You watched the unfold. The ignorance, the blind need, the willfulness, the desire, my at last undoing. How patient you were, all those months, seasons sheafing seasons, waiting for my mouth to learn the shape and taste of the word "no."

These final moments represent the zenith of Missoula's impact on my character, the sweep of the changes—and the consequences—incurred, and suffered, and suffered further. The arc of the video essay foreshadows the trajectory of the memoir in its entirety: at first, there is suffering, shame, and resistance brought upon by naiveté. At the close, there is acceptance, a more mature voice, and fresh, invigorated eyes that shift forward instead of dwelling on the past. The conclusion: reaching the threshold of healing, shifting perspective, and accepting all suffering as necessary and even important.

Foreword | Dear Missoula

I came to this place, and it was more feeling than place, more familiar than strange.

Dear Missoula,

Where do I begin? I don't know how to do this. How to say what I want to say to you. Right now, outside my rain-lashed, Pacific Northwest window, the Pacific Ocean looms against an ever-graying horizon, churns wild and smacks hard against the breakwall. It's relentless. But I've never really been one for oceans. That's why I chose you in the first place.

Missoula, you made me. I gave you four years, the finality of my adolescence, some piece of clay, raw for your hands, and you fashioned this person. You must realize by now, I'd have done whatever you wanted.

I hadn't realized, then, the scale of your influence on who I've become. Your weight. The way you'd carve out a piece of my brain and soul and pour in your own precious metals, torched, hot from the furnace, quick to harden, become rigid, become so unbearably rigid. These days, all I have to do is look into any middle distance, out any window, drive down any country road, and there you appear. I've come to realize: I go looking for you. It's so often I find myself wanting out or away or gone. That's you for me: out, away, gone. I have to force myself back to today sometimes, too often, this room, this building and its city. It's not you. You've come to mean true north for me, like you're my mother and father, like you're the womb, and I miss the way I was so vulnerable with you and you found a way to ruin the parts of me that needed ruining.

The day I drove away, I wrote on a paper torn from my notebook: "These mountains feel like walls sometimes." I rolled that paper up and wrapped it around the rusted fence at the foot of Mount Sentinel. How many times had I gone to that trailhead, needing something I didn't quite understand? How many times did the trail and distance and altitude calm my nerves, direct me to knowing? You must know. The answers were always there when I went looking for them.

At eighteen, I was not very good with words. You taught me that. I just liked them is all. I liked the stories they told. I liked the people I could pretend to be within them. When I told you I wanted to be a writer, you told me that all mountains need climbing and left it at that.

When I see you now, I see you in seasons. Mostly, you're cloaked in an austere winter, each morning an ache of too cold: too cold to breathe, too cold to speak, a cold that sealed my eyelids shut with frostbitten glue, but I loved you best then. You feel so much like Montana then—the real Montana, the one less advertised. In winter, you made me so aware of my body, my muscles and my skin, my beating heart. Going outdoors then was an expedition. Walking down Higgins, crossing the bridge over the river, Norman Maclean's river, the one that runs through it. Nighttime coming on early and earlier still, the cold, winter sun setting behind the smaller and smaller towns to the west, and the Bitterroot Mountains, Lolo Forest, Frenchtown. On those cold nights, I took to the bars and warmed up with whiskey and the local bluegrass band looking to make it big. I danced until I was too hot and sweat was everywhere. I fell asleep in motion.

Or it's September and you're in the embers of summer's smolder. Nights growing colder and colder, the press of autumn forcing blankets every time I drove up to the lookout in the south hills, black coffee in a thermos. Do you remember me then? I was wide open, raw, unlimited, sitting on top of my jeep, writing poems in my notebook, watching the sky change colors. I never wanted to come down. You had a way of making stillness feel so natural. I still ache for you every October. My skin misses the frozen, cockcrow mornings, those college streets, bleeding maples. And the space, the roads with no end: whenever I needed to run, I always could.

Your springs were short and late. I remember the thaw. The exposure of what had died in the cold. The sobering clarity of sunlight, and linens hanging out on clotheslines while ice floes still slid down the river.

Summers were a drawn out laze, a panorama of mountain air and high grasses, hammocks, frisbees, midnight bonfires, and somehow I always found myself by cold water, plunging my body into rivers until everything came out wet and free. I remember, too, how your summers

taught me about loneliness for the first time. With University over, everybody but the dog had gone. Do you remember that one week in August, years ago? I filled my backpack, walked out my front door, brought the dog. We walked straight into the mountains that circumference Hellgate Canyon. That was the first time I'd spent more than one night in the mountains. The first time I'd ever experienced solitude in a way that mattered: a cerebral way, a way that intoxicated every synapse. For so long, I feared what being alone would feel like, all those hours in my head, the cruel notion of self-dependence. But now, I long for it.

Dear Missoula, I left my innocence inside your cupboard, next to all those other fragile things I couldn't help but touch. I liked to run my nascent fingers along edges and seams that were never meant for me. I liked the feeling of flames hot against my skin and always wanted to be two inches too close to dangerous. Under your eyes, I charted my own novice course through impulse and restraint, the windfalls of fragility, of violence, learning guile with how-to guides and wrongdoing. You watched the unfold. The ignorance, the blind need, the willfulness, the desire, my at last undoing. How patient you were, all those months, seasons sheafing seasons, waiting for my mouth to learn the shape and taste of the word "no."

Dear Missoula, I am no longer dazzled by ferocity.

Part I

Fulcrum

It has been awhile since we.

At the doctor's office, I leave. I spend all morning talking to the dog. Remember when I put your last name on her collar tag to make you happy? Possession was so important to you. In my dreams, I hear your voice and see your face and

I wake up digging my fingernails hard into the veins in my neck. I want to stop it at the source. I don't drink anymore.

I said your name aloud yesterday for the first time in three years. In my living room, facing the picture of the black and white horse. I read in *Psychology Today* that it's important to take ownership. The sound felt like not enough air and

I still hear your voice when I look at myself in the mirror. At night, I lock all the doors in my apartment twice because you're still alive.

The Man Without Qualities

She met him in his dorm room. He: playing a computer game at his desk in the corner, headphones on, black jeans on, slight hunch in his back, hair perfectly coiffed, high and tight pre era of the hipster high and tight. He filled the room. The door had been open. Two or three inches. She had been looking for a bike pump. She wanted to bike to a coffee shop downtown, did not have a car. And the door had been open, two or three inches, and she had pushed it, and then there he was: back corner, glasses on, hair brown and gelled, with headphones, seen for the first time.

He didn't hear her ask about the bike pump. He had his headphones on. She had to had to had to enter the room, for the first time alone with him. For who was he. It was November, of course. Everything had been so frozen and gray. Missoula then a snow globe, the smallest unit of earth, isolated between mountains and mountains, icy highway crosshairs, spider legs of road. Black ice, always. Shattered cars and shards of window pane covered with snow by morning. Too dangerous. In winter, X marks this town. Nights dark and supple and people stayed inside with their fires and dogs, woolen sweaters over so much country skin.

She touched his shoulder, his striped sweater. He started, turned his head, his eyes seeing her for the first time. This first time, it was a boy, a maybe man, seeing a girl. He did not smile, his pointer finger hovered over the mouse, he'd been clicking so long. He was annoyed, did not like to be interrupted while he played this game. He wanted to resume. He rubbed his hands on his black jeans, on his thighs. Squinted, raised his eyebrows, waited.

I see them now and want to stop them then. Sew her mouth shut with my thickest needle, puncture everything she was about to tell him, deflate all their as yet balloons. Close his eyes forever, casket him. Remind her of the bike pump downstairs, veer her. He, ax into log, splinters, splinters. Together, they will become smaller, make the world smaller, zipper the sky. Ruin the ellipses. Cauterize her innocence, miscast men ever after. But she touched his shoulder, and he turned and saw her, and she wanted him to love her.

The Amateur

Amid lilies, he becomes aware of the opposite wall and rests his elbows on his knees to look. And the white horse blind in the antique cabinet. When he laid his hand upon her neck, she would wilt and look away. This is only a neglect of what goes unmentioned. I am happiest when I am furthest from the ones I love and need the distance to continue loving them. Like after a tree is felled and the surrounding trees inch to fill the empty space over time, proof that illusion is the craft of the human heart. A cork board overrun by pinned scraps of fabric because he cannot see beyond the colors. Afterward, he let his beard grow out, and kept her in a drawer by the window. In the morning, if he clears the papers from the desk, it will seem as if he never sat in the room at all.

U-Haul

Cotton, foot powder, porn, the Foo Fighters.

There was a book about happiness, a lengthy scientific thing about how to quote be happy unquote. And once I hid in my bathroom for six hours while you were sleeping in my bed because I wanted to exist in a space without you in it. We both agreed that I should be the one to pay for groceries, as you weren't going to have a job. My mom had paid for that mattress with her bonus check. I remember

Now: I keep weight on to keep men like you away from me. The x-rays of my aunt's lungs and intestines look like a blizzard but I haven't cried yet. I remember the next morning, you made me apologize for calling it rape.

Bitterroot

If I had my way, I wouldn't speak at all. Not at first, not for a long time, not unless I wanted to. Not that I have nothing to say. In the room, the walls were only partially painted. Carmine over daffodil in jagged strokes. It smelled like paint until it didn't anymore, proof that we can get used to poison. Onlooker

Me: not speaking, not speaking. Becoming an expert on the room's periphery. Absorbing the sensory, taking it home in a Tupperware to eat later. My hands, covered in books and pens, a dog, the locked side of a door, and nothing. Ever since he

His father had given him the special hatchet. He used it on the inner lining of my throat.

Latex

From every one of your body's rivers: brackish summer, chum salmon, cold water, some nostalgic Alaska, some holy boat, some other plastic. Before we left, we swallowed pieces of charcoal. As medicine.

Fricative dialtone. Each time the sun enters me, I transform into who I am. I re-don my skin, stretch it on like latex. "I can't wait for something better." I say this every day. When the U-Haul door shucked shut, I mouthed: "This is not your orchard." The sound was deafening.

Groom

I remember the day you started, because it had been my birthday. A thin brunette walked by our picnic table, and you said *Wow. Now, that is my type.* You watched her for hours. Eventually

you looked back at me and I apologized. I'd paid for lunch because you couldn't find your wallet that day.

Shards

The night my dad called me and asked me to come home. I regretted telling him that it felt like you had ownership over the relationship. That I was just the smallest piece of furniture in it.

I walked outside our apartment bare-footed while you sat on my couch and watched porn. Still the Victorian house on the corner with the large, fenced-in yard and my bipolar housemate who never much liked her pills. The elderly landlord's dog had been run over by a silver Ford pickup the week before. *There are other people with problems* I kept telling myself. You had been *so sorry*.

Hellgate Canyon

Famous for its screaming winds that peel off the mountains and tear through town. I wasn't eating because I was trying to look like someone you might like: some frail amnesiac. February and to the world, I wasn't so far from happiness. You kept all my login information on a post-it in your pocket. I kept crying during sex, so you'd turn my face away with the sweaty palm of your hand, pushing my face against the pillow or wall or floor. We were thawing then. Everything was thawing. A tree branch fell through my bedroom window, but it was a welcome distraction.

Anima

Have we ever been this alone tonight? Outside: night grasses, a midnight hummingbird, some forgotten finch, something warm ebbing up earlier earth. It's all black from here. All dusky shudders, all silkwet skin. I can write this because you are in the other room with me. I've come to inhabit you so badly.

Tonight makes you permeable, a membrane, an other. Cunning, linked echo: you, (t)here. I watch you pick away the corners of the sky tapestry, watch you string the stars with your fingerneedle, watch you slide your fingerquills into the blackest inks. At dawn's crackle, I see: I've come to love you, I think. I've come to love you because no one else would.

You on Your Knees

It was after I'd gotten the dog. After Polson, slow town.

Young summer in Kalispell: as I held the gas pump, trying so hard to practice feeling without you, like taking off a soaking wet shirt buttoned to the collar, fingers pulling, fabric clinging

Forest fires turning the mountain sunset orange and bleary. I heard you cough before I heard your car door slam. The air was so smoky. As the pump clicked, gas overflowed. The corrosive liquid poured down the paint of my car and fumes plumed around me.

I held the soaking shirt in my hands, drip drip on the station platform, finally, my bare pink skin raw and prickling: and you slammed your door hard and hugged me.

Special Handling

*I hold my hand in my hand. I am so many people. Ought we
dive into the water before it reaches our feet? What isn't
inevitable?*

*A pair of lips, alone, gasping. Why not? Overture the sea
and sky for me. Murmur your own silhouette once more.
Trade with me.*

*Give me your foot so I can take your day away. An oar
slices the water as easily as any knife. Throw away all your
knives. Round your shelves. Take your blood back.*

*Recycled bonemeal gets \$0.05 per pound. What is special
handling? The trees are already waving their anchored
farewell. Hello, something else. I take all your goodbyes
away. I carry you in pieces.*

Inez Gulch

I remember the time we tried to run away from Monday: Sunday in late January, snow-silenced night, country cold. *Let's go for a drive.*

I was due to open the coffee shop in the morning, come home stinking of coffee grounds and sour milk and ten different kinds of sugar. Something you liked to bring up to your friends. Hours later: my Jeep lodged in a snowbank halfway up an old logging road near Miller Creek.

You: cursing my name into the thick black forest. Your eyes harpooning mine. I laughed then. I'd never seen you in a real emergency before. You clung so hard to the upper hand. The dog buried her nose in a snowdrift and sneezed snowflakes into the pitch darkness, her yaps echoing into the canyon sprawling below. I left you

with the car. Set off on foot with the dog to find help. I read the deep snow like an invitation. Nine miles and frostbitten toes, paws, nose later: it was the first time I'd ever walked away from you. Emergency rooms can treat damaged flesh.

On Our Best Night

pinky bent sideways

shit

shit

It took me a few songs to locate the pain. Eventually, I held it up my hand up before my face, staring, amazed. My hand. I sat on the edge of my bed. Where'd you gone? Pinky sideways. Eric Clapton in the white room black curtains. Toilet flushed. *What happened?* I saw you see the wall and my hand. My hand. My eyes floating in vodka. Pain churning up my arm, cannibalizing synapses, the sharpest teeth. My whole hand shaking. *Here, let's* you took my hand and we were outside, in the front yard, cotton socks clumsy in snow. You plunged my forearm into what had once been my garden turnips and zucchinis and, blanketed now. The snow, frozen so solid. It was sub fifteen, January, February. My broken finger broken crunched broken against ice, splintered, I felt the bones go wrong becoming numb, brokener. Delirium of angry gunshot knifewound splicing. Stars stars

I woke up in my bed the next morning. You were gone, but my hand folded into my salad bowl you'd filled with snow, a little melted.

On Deviant Behavior

Each second you did not touch me, my skin crawled, a beggar. New solar, *so deviant*, inverse habit(at): each second made me understand, a bit more, the oblong ratio I've been halt-stepping toward all these longer years: a softer skin, a nourishment. I keep cradling my own hands as infants, pulling them from that thin paper, not ready to sign, stanching inkwell, tremblepen, to mark myself: so long, *so wrong*. I cannot unknow all that's bled into me: emblem on my family crest, nuclear, tossed around the evening table, the fresh greens quick to rot and sour. I've become so regarded because of all I do not do, all I stifle, all I encage. But when you closed the two inches between us, my skin—suffered awake. Blue flames licked and shuddered and I could not breathe (I cannot breathe). You made me realize how I was hungry.

Run Home

Once, I begged you to hit me. Give me a good black eye. I remember whimpering, holding your knees. Take this baseball bat. Hit a homerun against my body. Find your constellations. Then there would be something to show, for everything.

Foraging

Atop the timeworn, thincarpet
of bedroom floor—
within your voice as you read
Sonnevi, Rumi, Ferlinghetti—

and quietly, the minute hand
no longer significant.
Or the way lilies can linger:
imbroglio, brackish pollen
sweet against honeycombed linen—
permanent, and stitched,
and restitched—
like language, dust-hewn, you grew

excellent. A vine
and tangled, too.
Tapestries woven across ceilings,
one ceiling—medium:
pointed finger and air,
piano finger in unrestricted September—
prisms alight. Prism: a light,
glittering skin in calm color,
so much of Sunday, and ochre, spasms.

>>Stage direction: *Stand still, stand right where you are—*
>>Your line, remember: *But how can I describe want without running straight toward you?*

I, arrested, so much the wrong kind.
The foster of spring lilacs
when daffodils would do just fine.
And—speaking of hunger: your mouth,
so peculiar, a lilt—

when it rained all day, we tossed
pebbles into the lake as ransom,
so clattergray and slick:
flotsam from another marriage,
the gallery prior, all watercolors
of one mountain range in particular—

trying too hard, maybe. Torsoed incline—
you hand-fed me raspberries
and I forgot to forget.

Katabasis

I must tell you about a scene from my favorite childhood book series, *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman. A girl, the heroine, is called upon to complete a task of global importance: she must venture down to the world of the dead, where all the ghosts live, to change the nature of the afterlife. The stakes are immense. She cannot refuse. She is the heroine, after all. This is her story. What sort of Bildungsroman would it be if she refused her call to adventure?

In order to reach the world of the dead, she must cross the waterway between earth and the land beyond. There is a man in a rowboat ready to take her. She and her dæmon prepare to step aboard, but the man says she must leave her dæmon on shore. In this fictional world, a person's dæmon is an external manifestation of their soul in animal form—like a pet who mirrors the characteristics of and can telepathically converse with their owner. In the story, her dæmon cannot come with her to the world of the dead. He is too vital to her living self. He must stay while she goes. The distance may sever their tie, will likely cause them both anguish, may even kill them—though they wouldn't know for certain; they've never tried being apart.

Ultimately, the pain is titanic. The initial separation causes them both to convulse in psychic and emotional agony. They suffer. And yet, they survive. The girl succeeds with her task, and the earth spins on.

As a child, I often wondered if I would ever experience a relationship like this—one wrought of such intensity and habit that the thought of separation would be unbearable. To me then, the notion sounded particularly romantic. What would it be to need someone so much? What would it be to have someone need me?

Periphery

The girl looks ready to push on. The austere trees stand in prickled rows behind her. This is not a calm wilderness. Beyond the cedar copse, in eerie silence: an oil refinery on 100,000 acres. This photograph was taken in Anywhere, America. I've heard it's lovely there this time of year.

Now: close your eyes hard and listen. Can you tell the difference between horse hooves and thunder? Deception comes dirt cheap when you're looking into that mirror. You know those eyes so well. Remembering now, as I stare into a bowl of carrot soup, as I'm eating alone: his intonation made it all sound so much less *bad*. Tell me: do they yet sell hard drives for human memories? I'd fill one and grind it in my garbage disposal, dance with kerosene around my kitchen. Every year, I tell myself I still have time.

Consider the subject. What you don't see is the wind seething through her cotton stitching. What you don't feel are the trees emerging on the count of two: one, two, one, two. A canter. Resume the periphery. Be once more a blur of carmine and anonymity. Remind me later to thank depth of field in my gratitude journal. I'm already on page ten. At the restaurant, your fortune cookie said *Try not to think so hard*, and you looked up, quizzical. The tree boughs still creak in the October light, and sometimes I think I'm the only person in the world to hear it.

Part II

Dear Whistleblower—can I call you Whistleblower?—,

I'm not sure how to begin. Yours was so publicized. It's painted all over you. You've become a local celebrity. Your face all over the papers, in and out of the five-o'clock broadcast. And the internet, once the Krakauer book came out. The internet became a battlefield. You were Joan of Arc.

People recognize you now. Can you go anywhere in town without people knowing you on sight, knowing what's happened to you? And blaming you? When you were young, playing with your sister in your back yard, Montana's big sky far and flung above you. Do you remember? Summer's end: cicadas humming in the high grasses, the nearby river glissading over warmer earth. And every jump—higher and higher on your trampoline, both of you dressed in homemade tulle skirts and your dad's oblong sweaters, imagining the trajectory of your lives: you shouted that you wanted this town to know your name.

But not like this. In this backwards place, people resent you for coming forward. In this football town, the population doubles during home games. You challenged their religion. You claimed their hero was a villain. Don't you see? Some people need a champion. He was theirs. And loyalty looks a lot like Janus come game day.

I wonder if he foresaw any of this—but no. The way his frenzy would change you, would strangle the sweetest parts of you. All at once. A swept broom. A flood on your pilot light. I wonder if he ever looked at your face. You know what they say prison is like for rapists.

I feel the need, now, to apologize. My experience at the University of Montana was so different from yours. Class of 2013, just like you. But my traumas were never headline fodder. I still own their rights. My privacy is still sacred.

Do you remember those texts we'd get from the university, every weekend, always in the middle of the night? Another rape. Women: stay inside, stay inside. Women: don't walk alone at night. There are fiends in the bushes. Women: stay away from the river. The noise is like insulation. Women: don't drink too much at parties. Boys will be boys. Fear became part of being a lady Griz. And every directive was issued to us, to women. It was our problem. Eventually, I blocked that number. Didn't you?

Signed,

Anonymous

Strange Animal

So female: a trainwreck of pretty, an anti-climax of falling down always. So sky and so water, so cancer blue. Ebbing heartwater from some chuffing factory: How can I best poison my interstices today? Sell me your sovereign robotics. I have the coupons somewhere in my purse.

Nearly October: I drew a line from me that ended in you. I drew a tragedy with scissors. The only lamppost on our street has at last closed its hurricane eye. At last, at last. [You], come help me name this ambiguous thing. I bought free weights so I could lift you off my chest.

This morning, I tasted violins, cellos. This morning, I relearned mourning. When the doctor called, he sounded gray and pierian. I asked him: "What is it this time?" He diagnosed me with being alive.

Dwelling

You live inside
me now. It
makes you alive
twice. And me
only half.
Halved.

Hallelujah

The body is a blade that sharpens by cutting.

- Ocean Vuong

Before him, I thought that when love came it would come so perfectly. I'd fall into it. Filling and surrounding our together. A glow. A power. Full absorption and completeness and want. Ninety-nine cloudless days from the first, the day we met. But

he carried the lack of his father like a crucifix. Some false candle, and he was only gasoline. *You wouldn't believe what weaponry.*

Then, I inhabited such simpler skin. Did not understand then the armory in his bedroom, the way he'd drag a knife slow across silences. Sharpest point clawing against some grainy antique, something made un-new, the sound like echoed cell and child foregone and shut and locked.

Or the way a person can feel so much larger when they hurt another person. Took it out. I did not understand the ablutions of the already damaged. And I wondered I wonder: who's to blame from one hour to the next? Or ought we understand

instead how the tributaries of someone's unmet and married into a thrashing river, *really something to look at*, shaping boulders to fit its need, but not not ever was it love. It's funny how ungood damaged goods can be.

In Complete

Imagine me running away, running through an October field, early dawn, moon still on the horizon, the Montana ground hardened with cold. The fog hugging the homefields. The coyotes still out, lamenting winter.

Imagine me breathing hard, hair a shock of wind, frozen and undone: I've come undone. Imagine me without you.

Imagine me now: my hair against my white pillowcase. Would you recognize it? Cotton, like a hundred others. My hair a melee against the fabric—filigree, a mandala changing by the breath. See me there: sideways, child-like, clutching the fabric in my hands, my knees stacked and naked. The dog's head rests on my bare feet.

Amor Fati

Still winter. I remember the piano room. Meeting her there. She had asked me to meet her there. Her long-fingered hands fluttering over the black-and-white keys. Hummingbirds, finches. *Did he do this to you, too?* The soft velvet friendship bloomed from our shared shadow: you. Piano music filled all our long silences with something easy to hold in one hand.

We sight-read the rest.

She had three birds flying up the skin of her neck because she, too, longed to escape her skeleton.

Flavor Country

You cannot die here. Last night was just another blood-stained pretending: cross that trauma off your bucket list. Clothes your eyes. Cast away. Leave the lure. It wasn't working anyway, not in this river, not in this [creek]bed.

I found God in the garbage bins behind the Stop-'n'-Shop last Wednesday. The assistant manager said he'd stopped hitting his weekly margins, said the new model was much thinner, more streamlined, acrylic. His tie clip gleamed in the aftermarket fluorescence. I asked if I could put a rainbow—a dream, something truly devastating—on layaway. He asked, in legible confetti: “How soon do you want it?”

Every evening, another fringe militia. The dream was something else entirely. I snagged my gender on some hypnagogic zipper, a seamstress dethreading asleep and awake. I qualify for no contest. Epistemological me, aggressive you. Is this what science looks like? Pay me in narcissism. I'll be here all week.

Missoula, Mid-March

I remember Missoula's slow thaw into spring. After a winter that became *too* of everything, its own superlative. Coldest. Darkest. Longest. A blanket. *This is an oppression*, I heard one girl say. Maybe she was right. But

here and now water pearled on branch-ends and pooled atop ice floes, sloughed off rafters and shingles. The streets slushed. There was no longer such blaring silence. Days in Missoula became an overture in D-major, a greatest hits playlist of Lucinda Williams, Beats Antique, Fleet Foxes, The Grateful Dead. The sunshine no longer accompanied only the frozen days, and so we came to trust it a bit more. I realized people still had form, skin, bones and bodies, beyond the parkas and Carharts. The air, at last, blended in human once more.

Kintsugi

There are rhythms and there are rhythms. Five piano keys pressed and pressed and ^{pressed}. Something lifted. The muffled percussions hammered against felt. Typewriters, pianos, soundproof rooms, holding everything. It was all so inevitable to me, somehow. And I adopted her, like oxygen.

The Japanese have a tradition with broken pottery called *Kintsugi*. Instead of discarding the broken pieces, they seal them back together, using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold. So the brokenness becomes beautiful and precious. Something one-of-a-kind, *valuable*. As a philosophy: repair not something to disguise.

Those mild, sweet Montana days. Thawing, thawing, thawed. We couldn't help but lean in, like trees or high grasses. Toward gentleness, the ease of black and white, and gold, too, after such a rollercoaster in technicolor. That much brightness overwhelms, soon dulls the synapses. When—after him, her. A stability. I remember telling her *I understand completely*, and it was the first time I'd ever really meant it.

Tattoo

She and I, no history with needles,

so when the black ink sobbed against
me, a cactus in a black-lit backroom,
a hornet stinger, hellbent, slow
serration, fire through the quick: eyes
pooled. And blood, wiped away.
What do I know of permanence? The
man's forearms coiled with serpents
flicking cunning tongues, sluices: an
erratic breakwall, a lesser mercury.
The gun like an abacus counting 100
years against my ribcage: *Amor fati*,
but slowly. She sat in the chair beside
me, holding my hand, waiting her
turn. Something to share.

I whispered: *Just this.*

Eureka

Imagine my hands on the steering wheel of a car with black leather interior, the sky pitch dark above, an infinite black felt blanket pocked with rhinestones that sparkle in certain lighting.

Imagine me driving. The occasional highway light indicating another country mile, another county, another level of leaving: now Missoula, now Sanders, Lake, Flathead. *Leaving. I'm leaving.* Ten and two. Eleven and lap when tired, which is far too often these days. The dog noiseless the entire way, front paws pressed against the seat, eyes glossy with highway, her small heart beating and beating. Only once I'd reached Eureka did I depress the brake pedal, pull the car off the road. The skidding crunch of gravelly asphalt. Elevated utopia: the crest of a hill.

Not a fence in sight: the fields stood open and stark like an invitation. At last, the distance sighed *enough*. I slammed the door, stood beside the car, opened my mouth to shout. My voice visible, the cold blooming in my lungs. The dog howled, too. The two of us, then: nascent, using our mouths, picking at the pieces of shell still clinging to our feathers. We stood together in Eureka, on the crest of a long hill, in lambent darkness, howling and howling at an empty harvest moon.

After the Dog

These lines are afterthoughts. Sluggish harpoon. Indecisive bullet. I'll take my cyanide with cream and sugar. A spoonful of each, yes. Every languid mouthful of my enervated nerve. The dropper never stopped at one.

The sign told me to tread lightly, so I lightly treaded on your hip bones with my ambivalent mouth. I was never so young. While reading your skin, my vision is always 20/20. What is blindness if you are so much sight?

Sometimes I wonder what this roof means, what these walls and doors delimit. The lease said for the time being. When will time stop being? Next time, I will compartmentalize newer air. So the sunshine flavors every freckle. So the raindrops alight upon toenails and sand. So the wind breathes in stanzas. I no longer take my delight in capsule form.

Yesterday's eviction: I packed only the dog. Give my emotion a body. Give it fur and legs. Slobber and panting. Coarse, black hairs to eviscerate my bloodstream. Yes, yes. Give it all. Whenever I close my eyes, I pull my eyelids down with flame-quicken needles: you infiltrate my capillaries, you saturate my glands.

Permission

I

Per- (Latin): *Through*

Like any good lover, I wrapped red cellophane around my fingertips, tied them off with raffia, sold to the highest bidder. I became so much sweet candy. When collarbones were in season, ships capsized against every one of my body's locks. And keys. The keels always rubbing pink skin against pinker things, bloody things, red-soaked maraschino juice cherry Kool-Aid red pre-plastic *I love you* nail polish liquid valentine things. These days, the light is always half-mast. It's so symbolic. The flamingos in the yard poured over in the storm, their pretty necks still so straight, even now. In the afternoon glow, dirty, dirty windows. The dog gnawed her bone marrow. Always tethered on her invisible leash to my ankle, gnawing the bone. We were never so wrong.

II

Mittere (Latin): *Let go*

Today, I said your name aloud in my stairwell and it felt like just another shitty noun taking up space in my lungs and mouth.

III

Antonym: *Refusal*

Remember the night with the shopping cart? I closed my eyes as street lights painted filaments into my skin, your hands pushing, pushing. I had vodka blood and everything was okay because it was all so blurry. There were only colors. A smear of colors. Blurry ribbons and crinkled cellophane unrighting my inner ear. Remember the snowbank? I'm writing you out of memories. I'm making room for something different. In the dream, there was a door. A copse of trees surrounding the door. There were two men. Maybe it seemed more rotten, or maybe less. In the dream, I was never fast enough to get away, my legs heavy heavy heavy. Then I'd wake up, and there was a door, and only one man. What did it mean that I preferred the dream?

Ode to the Abused Body

I

Tell me about that night. How the city's pockets were empty, turned out. How the sky stood hollow and pitted, looking away. If cars were running, it wasn't on our street. A rodeo was on, but I wonder if anybody was there. Thursday night, but still—*a city of 70,000 people*. The mountains a stark shadow serrating the blackness, but it wasn't anything like glory.

II

Tell me about the room. Ceilings tall enough to hang a body from.

III

Oh, Poseidon. What about the bed? It had been mine, but no longer. Cotton sheets, dampened by your sweat, shoved around like some errant ocean. *A city of 70,000 people, and I chose you*. Your serpent smile playing a game of cops and robbers, cops and robbers.

IV

[The day my mother dropped me off in the dorms, she took me to Target and bought me all the things I might need. She spent all afternoon helping me arrange my dorm room. She made my bed in the perfect way she always did. Hospital corners. Smoothed and resmoothed by her hands. Eventually, she stepped back, stood akimbo near the window, surveyed the bed, appraising her work. I wonder what she thought then. I wonder if she had any idea. The cotton sheets lay pristine before us. The windows, clean. Beyond, Mount Sentinel stood majestic against a turquoise Montana sky. My mother wept against my shoulder as she hugged me goodbye.]

V

Remember the night squirrels outside the window. The neon signs spitting in the rain. That I had just rubbed lotion onto my hands. Tell me about my body. Colonized. Clandestine. I wish I could be one of those people whose minds cannot remember. I remember. The way my skin knew it was you. The way it felt like knives. The way my blood tasted brassy as your shoulder shoved against my mouth. A reminder: I still had blood inside

me. It was not permission. But what was left to conquer? I remember when you came, you forced me to look into your eyes. You held my jaw so hard it swelled up later, angry red. I wish I could be one of those people who cannot remember. But my body

VI

VII

remembers. A war horse when I wanted to be a mare. Wanted my hooves shooed and my mane brushed and brushed. Room for ribbons. Taken out. Did you know it took me two years to look at myself naked in a mirror? Tell me: How do you wear your skin now? How do you give your skin to lovers? It took me six months to not want to kill us both. My mother kept telling me it shouldn't be so difficult to get over someone.

VIII

A life made of clocks. I've become so friendly with the minute hand. I used to watch its slow pointed progress for hours. Now so interested in taking my time. Lately, it is so clear to me: this, my body. Sometimes we need a forest fire.

Winter Mariner

Music comes later, after your perimeter—light, light, light through night: alone is a lighthouse. The hollow wick of winter's argand lamp, crustacean bedfellows, the bullseye, the bell. A cliff-edge, but chipped viridian skin and placemats with breakfast, dry toast and nectarine marmalade, two eggs, sure-petalled clementine and dandelion. Here, I can outlast—did not have this breakwall before, this concrete, though erosion still slides on Wednesdays and some Sundays—prickly, jagged, it slumps and tumbles, but—

this is not prison. This I, these eyes, compressed air and slotted pistons and sometimes fog. Daybreak cockcrow mornings, I walk these salty rooms: lantern room, watchroom, gallery, cellar, cedar—strip verdigris from my painted diaphragm—percolate and pulse—call for the first gulls.

Sea-wash, crab skeletons, anemones. I can dip my skin into any sandy sediment and won't be wrong or dirty—here, ships aren't meant to moor. This was never a destination. The copper patina oxidized on my hands held before me as if for the first time—bronze—buff and furbish, corrode and undress, still, and be light. Only two eyes this afternoon: rain-salted poncho slick-dipped rake and shovel: razor clams today: a harvest. You wanted amnesiac or widowed, but I choose poetry: this lighthouse.

Why The Past Is, If It Is, Irrevocable

To breathe, needing windows.

Childhood of motherfather, father, motherfather. I learned leaving from her. I learned stroganoff, aggressive aggression, constant cotton, lotion slather, softness, sleazy gardenia, go and leave.

The drop-off is soon, like water or something melting. Nonstop cadence and so much almost black.

Defenestrate every metronome. Do not pass go. Give away all your pleasure. Until.

Brother so punch-cruel and straight. No time for anything but lines and green. Not even arrows. All those sweated apologies.

Men. Men. *Read this, will you?*

She keeps the ash-dog in the underwear drawer like a sachet of lavender or soap. Safe-keeping, her treasure. Stop leaving me. Stop leaving, me. Stop, leaving me.

Xenization in love after so much *for one, just one*. Restaurant and hotel room. Television. The alleyway more comfortable in mind, per se. Venice is shockingly okay alone.

To be surprised by kindness or something gentle. Cannot unshock.

Is this alright? When Montana became more feeling than place. When we.

Paint this watercolor of my shy bank account. Finger the braille of my meager ambition. High stakes poetry. I wrote an ode to a butterfly, but it flew away.

Rinsed blueberries on finest china, passed down the female line. The water gurgled from the faucet. Summer, filigree, plump sugar, chaste and pink and no returns. Eat this dandelion raw.

A door so shut it's a wall.

I've lost the keys to another bulldozer. Tuesday's forecast: somnolent trajectory. Common, common. I still have the punchline buckled against my mouth. Later, a whisper and no one heard.

Threshold

A girl, blushing, holds delicacy in one hand and waves the world down to join her. A practiced movement. I can see it in her wrists and forearms, her strained tendons, the exposed white apple of flesh in her elbow's pocket, soft and pulsing. I could take a bite. Her left foot hovers in undecided movement. The creased 5x7 photograph above my writing desk. She, I, long doomed by threshold moments such as this. Ever looking askance at her negative, the dropped bullet proof of her duplicity. You cannot help but ask: *Did she ever take that forward step? At last set foot to grass?* Looking at her now, I wonder just how much in life is about balance.

Wherever the lonely walk: concrete, saliva, chainmail graffiti to accompany the train ride home. Shouldered burdens the color of oxblood, strung to so many bindle sticks. Not all armor is obvious. I want so badly to see their faces, to know their eyes as they stare tilt-headed into the sometimes ocean of sky. A teeter-totter on a knife-edge horizon: not your mother's playground. Here, another sulky balloon in wrested tourniquet, a piecemeal pendulum of *five years ago, I wasn't myself*. We're all so redeemed now. Look closely at these tenements. It's BOGO on today's sedation. The advertisement said *Immediate release*.

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