



Western Washington University  
Western CEDAR

---

WWU Honors Program Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

---

Winter 2019

## She Is: A Poetry Collection

Emma Braun

*Western Washington University*, [braune@wwu.edu](mailto:braune@wwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu\\_honors](https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors)



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Braun, Emma, "She Is: A Poetry Collection" (2019). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 115.  
[https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu\\_honors/115](https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/115)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors Program Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

# **SHE IS**

A Poetry Collection

Emma Braun

2019

## *Artist Statement*

The title of the collection, *She Is*, comes from a line which appears repeated in several of the poems. The repetition of “she is” emphasizes the centrality of the theme of identity to the collection as a whole. Grammatically, I like it because it feels like a fragment. She is what? What is she? We don’t know. But it’s not a fragment. It has a subject and a verb. It’s a complete sentence. *She is*. She just *is*. She exists and she is. This is, in a sense, the “meaning” of the collection. It is about identity — identity formation, loss of identity, and identity re-formation.

The collection moves in something of an arc. When I was organizing the poems, I put them into three categories:

1. anger, grief, and questions
2. processing
3. acceptance and softness

Some of the early poems are about trauma and are very angry. *Noname* was written in anger. The later poems, like *sweet* and *For you, my dear*, are soft and gentle. The prose poems like *Forest Spirit* and *Arrhythmia* are about love. It’s the most basic poetry topic of all, but those poems came from very a vulnerable and sincere place.

In compiling the collection, I noticed certain themes and motifs emerging in my writing. The themes of identity, the body, loss, trauma, and sexual assault figure heavily in this collection. Those are themes I am aware that I work with often in my writing, but seeing all these poems side-by-side, it was striking how interconnected they all were, though they were written over the span of more than a year.

As a warning, a lot of these poems do include references to sexual abuse, though there are no graphic depictions of sexual assault. A long-term partner sexually abused me over a period of time and, in the time since that relationship ended, I have used poetry to process what happened to me and the way the abuse affected me and my relationship to intimacy and my body. The later poems in the collection are about acceptance and, in a way, rebirth. They are about ending the cycle of trauma and coming out of it gentle, loving, and trusting.

Throughout the collection, I play with elements of craft like slant rhyme, enjambment, extended metaphor, and the format of prose poetry. I wrote these poems at various points in my poetry education when I was in different stages of confidence with my abilities. In revisiting and revising them, I have seen how my style and voice have developed and solidified. These are pieces I am proud of and into which I put a great deal of work, time, and emotion. I hope you enjoy them.

*Alarm*

rose thorns in briary abundance  
beat back bandits thieving marauding princes  
prick hands rough and gentle alike because  
softness is a weapon in its own right

sleep is not her curse her curse awaits  
beyond the walls of thorns more  
sinister the shadows pace seeking  
opportunity when invitation is inconvenient  
because chivalry is merely a disguise

do not be there when she wakes do not  
lean over her as she dreams do not  
watch her while she waits  
let her sleep in peace and she  
will wake when she  
is ready

*Noname*

You stole oceans from me  
Two years of devotions  
Eroding the cliff-face  
To dance beneath waves  
Graves for sea-foam  
De-form my body

Your charming alarming  
Words out of cans  
Take teeth to my flesh  
Mistake metal for bone  
Behind wind-chapped lips I forget  
Why I let this happen

Fear inconsistency  
Fear insincerity  
Relentless fingers  
Religion of the tides  
Stolen the rolling  
Of breath straight from my thighs

*At least he didn't hit you.*  
*At least you didn't hit me.*

Remember the dull burn as  
Salt-water drowns in my lungs  
In the wake of a hurricane  
Footprints wash from sands and

You earned this shame  
You earned your name  
When you stole mine from me.

*Last Will and Testament*

1. my father's bedtime stories and the feeling of water carrying me away
2. my grandmother's tissue paper hands and two gold wedding bands on a silver chain
3. my aunt's wrinkles like rivers digging through canyons

I am haunted by very particular ghosts.

Like Dickinson, I like to imagine that a fly buzzed, but it didn't. There was a silence when the breathing stopped. A hospital silence. The kind that lives in a soap bubble too beautiful to break, bordered by the bustle of the living and the shuffle of the dead. Had I blinked, I might have missed it. But as my uncle closed his father's eyes, I couldn't tear mine away. I had watched a soul leave that body, and when I kissed the forehead, the chill of bone beneath bloodless skin, I felt its absence.

My inheritance comes in many forms:

4. my green thumb
5. my hair
6. my depression
7. my nose

But whose eyes?

*Of Silence Without Answers*

Into the warmth of his body, I ask it. Into the chill of the window I leave open an inch at night to chase away dreams and stale air. Into the space in between. I ask it.

"Are we lovers?"

I don't know what he would say, if I asked aloud instead of through closed lips, pressed to the endless skin of the place where his shoulder meets his neck.

*Are we lovers?*

*The Boiling Frog*

Everyone knows that if  
you put a frog into a pot  
of boiling water she  
will hop right back out and into  
her safe cool bog but if  
you put a frog into a pot  
and bring the water to a boil the frog  
will not notice until  
it is  
too  
late

The Frog lay back and thought of grocery shopping  
onions potatoes curry powder olive oil  
so she could pretend to be bored instead of  
eggs spinach bell pepper (if on sale) garlic  
hurting and once this frog fell asleep  
with your hand between her legs and  
she felt guilty embarrassed but now  
she wishes she could be that far  
removed from her body because she  
didn't notice she was being boiled until  
it was  
too  
late

The Frog lowered herself into a hot bath and hoped  
the water and bath salts would boil away the  
outer layer of slimy dirty skin but  
it only hurt and she waited and waited until the  
bubbles melted until  
she melted until  
it was  
too  
late

*A Small Reminder*

I stopped mattering when you started thinking of *no* as an obstacle to circumnavigate.  
And you were tricky about it. A modern day Odysseus.

Remember: he was a pirate at best.

You used persistence instead of force. Crafty fingers instead of fists. Which is why the  
bruises only began to blossom months later.

You're quick to dodge the blame, but remember: I gave you years, and in the end, you  
left me only with an empty bed and the space to stretch my cramped legs.

*Song of the Fat Girl*

Fat round chickadee perches on a tree  
against cloudless spring singing  
two notes *fee bee fee bee*  
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede  
black cap mad cap because  
who listens to the fat girl singing?

Fat round chickadee waits to see  
who will see me  
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede  
singing *fee bee fee bee*  
and who will ever listen who will  
listen to the fat girl singing?

Fat round chickadee wait for me  
shout *fee bee fee bee*  
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede  
just wait little bird just wait because  
because I will listen  
I will listen to the fat girl singing!



## *Dark Room*

*Thank God Mama doesn't know what a slut I am*, I write in my journal that night. I wear the dress she says is too short, the one she didn't let me wear to Christmas two years ago. I wear the makeup she says I don't need and the heels she doesn't know I own. I drunkenly cling to the arm of a man I have not (yet) slept with. Someone hands me a cigarette and I take a drag without thinking.

The first Thanksgiving my mother spent away from home, she spent with strangers. They passed around a joint in the back of a VW bus and my mother said *no thank you* each time and passed it along. Last Thanksgiving, she watched me with narrowed eyes as I poured myself a conservative glass of white wine.

I am immortalized in the strip of photobooth snapshots. I barely recognize myself on the glossy paper, smiling in the moments before I black out and, I am told, cry for an hour at the bar. This is the night I text a boy too many times, step in a pothole and sprain my ankle, and am given a great deal of advice I will not follow.

Each photo is a cigarette my mother never smoked and each is more incriminating than the last.

*scratch*

body itches for its former form  
 scar tissue marks where skin stretched  
 to hide where insides grew  
 the inside of it  
 itching  
 tearing at itself desperate  
 ghosts of calluses on fingertips  
 ghost of muscle memory built over years  
 they itch  
 longing to feel steelbound strings  
 just

once

more

face peeling pulled taught scraped  
 beneath fingernails  
 molting into molten

bathwater

reveal expanses of self  
 revel in the tearing

*Lady Moonlight*

Skin as delicate as a late summer blackberry, the blood beneath as midnight black — I  
 am awake. Give me the questions to the answers I carry. Empty my mind of meaningless  
 fears. Illuminate the scars on my knees and thighs. The hand I hold is icy but mine is  
 warm. Give his heart a reason to beat harder. His blood is black like mine.

*No More*

Sun warms  
my neck, the world  
breathes and  
caresses my skin.

The chickadees and juncos  
chirp, morningsoft,  
to one another, crowding  
at the feeder, stuffing  
their round bodies full  
of seeds.

Sprouts peek through  
dead leaf matter, gravel,  
soon to be bright  
trumpeting daffodils, shouting  
yellow, growing  
green, proud  
ruffled collars.

The sky is bluer than  
pods of whales,  
seaweed grasping ankles,  
the feeling of floating  
on dry land, the clouds  
like seafoam cresting  
the mountaintops, raindrops  
are teardrops are leaves.

A bug trundles  
up the slope, disappearing  
into the breach.

My mother speaks through tears  
and fear, a soft  
fear of a loss  
not yet lost.

A hundred miles away,  
my grandmother loses her  
memory— mind — body

— life.

*I don't need help.*

She needs electrolytes  
and supervision, someone  
to find her slippers, to  
make her eat, someone  
to pick her up when she falls.

What she needs  
is my grandfather returned  
from the dead to accompany  
her through these days.

She wears the wedding rings  
on a chain around  
her neck, hers  
fitting concentric inside his, his  
body curled around hers, hers  
wasting away, slowly,  
slowly  
until she is —

*For you, my dear*

Tonight, we dine on soup and wine and only the finest salad greens.  
 I'll make you daisy chains and paper airplanes and play a sweet, sweet tune.  
 The forest spirits are dirty liars, the trees all eaten up by fires —  
 Those smoky ghosts, they shout, they boast of 'better times' and 'smarter rhymes.'  
 As they search the embers, remember, December is not the coldest month.  
 April's winds blow away the ash where Springtime gates await,  
 Among pomegranate groves and October snows and our quiet, private home.  
 But you, my dear, are warm right here, in the gentle grasp of the Earth.  
 Hell hath no fury quite like me in the event of supper, interrupted.

*Forest Spirit*

There is earth in my fingerprints, soaked into my skin. I taste it on my lips. She has left her mark on me, in the mud she smeared on my face, my neck. Where her hands touched me, she left her mark. Long after I have washed the dirt from my skin, I will feel it there. And long after I have begun missing her, I will leave my mark, the earth still living in my fingerprints, on someone else.

*Bear and Unbear*

Psalm of acceptance,  
 my body is a cathedral  
 in which I must learn to pray.  
 Blush the yellow lemons  
 and the green of an apple  
 while I re-learn which hymns to sing.  
 My blood is not wine,  
 my flesh will not rise,  
 there is no yeast in these fingers of mine.  
     Why, after such failed loves as I have loved,  
     Why can't I love this unbearable thing?

*Arrhythmia*

Cold concrete under bare feet, he beckons me towards him. The cinder on the end of his cigarette quavers in the breeze. There are no stars. I remain at arm's length. Inside, the music is muffled by the sliding glass door, slid shut. The grass is damp under my feet as I step forward under the clouds, illuminated from below by streetlights. I hear his breathing behind me. I hear his heartbeat. I know the way it stutters and thumps sometimes. I know the way it races. "Come back inside." Smoke coats his voice like a cough waiting in his throat. I turn. He holds out a hand. I know it will be warm. I know the creases and the softness of the scar tissue on his index finger. I go to him.

*sweet*

kiss the moon goodnight  
 send me into sleep  
 so I can dream  
 — on my bed of pineneedles  
 and licorice ferns —  
 of rifleshots  
 the snapping neck  
 of a falling tree —  
 the birds like tears in the sky  
 watch winter inhale the forest  
 watch bears sleep in their beds  
 lavender in twilight  
 sticky snouts sugar encrusted  
 honeybees smelling of foxgloves  
 fauns on quaking legs uncertain knees  
 watch squirrels bury nuts  
 they are sure to forget —  
 handfuls of huckleberries  
 stain bloodblack lips  
 stomachfull of questions  
 like caterpillars they hunger  
 for answers which grow on trees

but no trees which grow here

*Life Cycle, or the Space Between Birth and the End*

leathery baby grows in the ground —  
skin stretches over fibrous flesh  
roots reach for water  
and, when leathery hands pluck,  
fresh and wailing  
from sunwarmed dirt  
she finds herself

— bloated  
heavy —  
grown full of lost potential — before  
she can produce leathery hands of her own, she is  
chosen for consumption by  
those louder and lovelier  
than she

and is, instead, lovingly and lavishly  
scrubbed  
— raw and naked —  
she will not be fooled by  
fingernails like trowels digging —  
and cleansing, and shedding  
her leathery skin as she is

bathed and boiled slowly, she is  
paralyzed, she is  
pliable, she is  
allowed to cry until she is  
smooth and softening and  
so  
so soft