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Moons in Our Bellies: A Collection of Earth Poetry

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Moons in Our Bellies

a collection of earth poetry

Alyssa Von Lehman

WWU Honors Senior Project
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For Mom

As women connected to the earth, we are nurturing and we are fierce, we are wicked and we are sublime. The full range is ours. We hold the moon in our bellies and fire in our hearts. We bleed. We give milk. We are the mothers of first words. These words grow. They are our children. They are our stories and our poems.

Terry Tempest Williams, An Unspoken Hunger
Stillborn

These poems do not live: it’s a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn’t for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot understand what happened to them!
The are proper in shape and number and every part.
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!
They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.
And still the lungs won’t fill and the heart won’t start.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air—
It would be better if they were alive, and that’s what they were.
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

Sylvia Plath
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Foreword

Women writers from Sylvia Plath to Terry Tempest Williams to Tori Amos have described the poetry and stories they create as their children. Creating poetry is an organic, natural process and the result, the living fruit of our labors, is always intimately connected to its creator. If it fails, stops short of fulfilling its purpose, we are disappointed, our pride bruised, our abilities as mothers questioned. We did not nurture this one enough and its heart stopped before it ever opened its eyes; a stillborn, as Plath says. Or we may say that this one somehow has that intangible breath blown into it and stands on its own, alive. We work on them as much as we can and then let them go, hoping for them to walk on two legs.

In writing this collection of poems, my role as mother to my words never left my mind. Indeed, the revision process was much like getting a two-year-old to eat cooked carrots. Switch two stanzas here to trick them into flowing together, squeeze words into a line that won’t budge its lips, trash this line altogether, recede from the highchair for a moment, and gather strength for the next ingenious attempt. It is all improvisation, stabbing at the unlikely. Whatever works. Perhaps this doesn’t sound too professional, but this project has taught me that the materials for writing are quite alive, often stubborn and difficult, thus requiring a creative and serendipitous approach to nurture them into proper poems.

In the first section, “Mapping,” I wanted to address the difficulties my own mother faced in her battle with breast cancer. The first person voice in this section is not necessarily intended to be my mother, but a woman in her position, struggling with a way to articulate her disease. During the last couple years, a great number of the poems or
essays I sat down to write evolved to concern cancer. I let these forces take my writing where they would rather than try to fight them and stay within a certain scope. It was the child with its own will kicking at the inside of my belly again. She would have her way.

Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, her memoir of her mother's struggle with breast cancer, was a major influence on my writing, as were her other essays in the collection *An Unspoken Hunger*. She explicitly draws connections between the sickness of the earth and the rising rate of breast cancer in industrial nations where the earth is being most heavily damaged. Our own practices have brought on the sicknesses of our planet and of our people, especially women. These ideas arise often in my poetry as well, particularly in "The Swimmer" and "The Longevity of Ice," where the female persona is compared to a whale and a bear, respectively. The title "Mapping" refers most obviously to its use in "woman, etymology of," where both mapping of genes and word origins take place. Mapping also refers to attempts to become more familiar with the body the way a geographical map allows us to memorize a landscape; discovering what heals us the best, pinpointing pains, whether physical or spiritual, to their precise causes. It is about a woman learning her own language; becoming intimately knowledgeable about herself and finding what heals, no matter how unconventional it may be in terms of the institution of modern Western medicine we have become so blindly dependent on.

"Mapping" ended up being a shorter section than I expected because as I revised, several poems of the first section seemed to fit better in the second. And given more time to revise and reorganize, I'm sure this collection will morph into many shapes before, if ever, it reaches a final stage.
In the second section, "Moons in our Bellies," I explore more fully the connections between the female body, spirit, memory, and the earth. I quote Williams again at the beginning, as her influence persisted through the writing of these poems as well, and in particular, the poems "Artemis" and "Nocturnal Contact." I also found inspiration in the poetry and prose of Canadian author Anne Michaels, especially her comparisons between human memory and the geologic structure of the earth. "Uniformitarianism," "Bog City," and "The Extraction of an Arrowhead" all deal with "reading" the earth and similar ideas sparked by Michaels. I relate to the childlike curiosity and love of the natural world held by the Canadian painter Emily Carr, and this simple admiration of the natural world shows through in "Invisible World," "Sauna," and of course "Emily's Screamers." In this section I celebrate the kind of small, observational eye that can recognize and appreciate our connections to the natural world; a spider weaving a web in your lap, deer in the dark, the mourning of forests, the desire inherent in water's unending movements.

Ideas of storytelling, story-listening, and re-telling surface frequently throughout this collection. Absorbing stories, like taking in water, refreshes and cleanses us. Tim O'Brien, who wrote mostly of Vietnam, said that "telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat," or like giving birth. O'Brien also said "a true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." I think that any good writing will make the body believe. Your mouth can take in the sounds of a poem like a foreign food; move them around with the tongue. They tiptoe or stomp across your eardrum, move liquidly or unexpectedly vibrant before your eyes. You may feel it everywhere, or in surprising places you never thought had anything to do with reading. And the muse for
this writing is equally alive, whether it is the memory of a sailing trip, a spider, cancer, the ocean, or a small arrowhead. My muses for this collection were also the authors I have read, beyond those I have already mentioned: Annie Dillard, Michael Ondaatje, and Daphne Marlatt, as well as the mentors and teachers I have learned so much from and to whom I am grateful for their guidance and support: Gary Geddes, Suzanne Paola, Brenda Miller, Nancy Pagh, and Kathleen Halme.

There is still much more to say of the earth, the body, and memory, and so much that has already been said by the women gone before me, that I cannot think of this collection as complete yet. There are so many more ends to tie, and entirely new threads to pick up. What I must do is hope that I have nurtured these poems enough that they stand on solid legs, supporting pillars to some of these complex cables our discourse runs through.
Mapping

the silence of trees
the silence of women

if they could speak
an unconditioned language
what would they say?

the sins of the mothers. hating our bodies as if they had betrayed us. but the words for our bodies betrayed us in the very language we learned at school. handed down from friend to friend, sister to sister, mother to daughter. hand-me-downs, too small for what i really felt.

Daphne Marlatt, Ana Historic
The Swimmer

I slipped into life gasping,
dangled skinless in cold, dry air.

I held the tides in my core,
the ocean's land-sisters, strong-willed rivers
in my veins. The skin restored,
floating anonymity,
stories gouging bedrock.

Dissolution of atoms through that free way
in which liquids fill their spaces.

*

He and I ease from the berth
between Cinnamon and Epiphany,
for the one thing we still enjoy.
We leave the elastic rainbow film of the marina
for the plastic shimmer of open saltwater,
the surface a window into a black room,
thirty feet from where our hull slits the surface
like a scalpels delicate unknitting of skin.
Scent of pickle on the tongue,
guffaws of gulls in protest or disbelief.
The jib pillows out and the sails
grumble their rough acquisition through my ears.
Him with his hat clipped to his jacket,
having lost too many to the sea's appetite,
his insistence on wearing white-soled shoes.

Notched hump of a gray whale, almost behind us,
surfaces in spray, dives back under glass,
ambivalent to the city embroidering
the rim of the bowl-shaped bay.
She is not here to perform,
she comes to this intersection
only for plankton swept up to midzone.

We tack to get closer, her slow back again.
This time I see the barnacles suckled to her skin
like open mouths, canker sores, leaching disease.
Motorboats with their own clicking and squawking
answer her fears, oscillate across her thick celluloid skin,
vibrate in her like the chemical rivers
pressing through my own veins
under the pretense of healing.
She is stuck in this net of machinery too,
lasers carving shapes in our breasts.

Our bodies blossoming with mouths
that speak a vulgar language of loss.

I am grateful, at least, to sit quietly
in the softest of his toys,
moving anciently with wind.

*

I sit in a breezy gown the chalk blue
of a drowned face.
Thirsty in the liquid glare of the pre-op room,
and not a drop to drink.

The dull landscapes of jigsaw puzzles
build themselves out of shattered glass
and crab claws. The pink of one chrysanthemum
indistinguishable from all others,
a node grooving into a cove,
homogenous lemon grass and camouflage fence.
Outlets and inlets form continents
and the image congregates
as we slowly turn to belief.
Nervous fingers create them
ten minutes at a time, each piece
anxious to feel complete.

*

He calls from his cell
to tell me about the beached whale.
*Do you want to walk down to the bay and see it?*
The cause of death was malnutrition
according to the newscast.
Perhaps, I seconded, plankton
filter-feeding toxic waters.
My own face in the morning mirror
in overcast dimness,
tepid clay skin patched with sand,
the gross curiosity
in the suffering of beautiful things.

Onlookers shoo away gulls
to get a clean shot.
Opportunists.

* 

I leave him in the house for the warm nothingness
of the dock, the real splinters of weathered wood
easier to handle, each carrying
the illnesses we are unable to see past.

The dock over the silent water is my doorway home.
Mud between my toes
when I touch bottom, a ring of disturbance
peels up, settles back. Weeds wrap
like silk scarves loose around ankles.
Life moves slower than the dry buzzing above.
The tiniest trout flutters in front of my eyes.

* 

As I am becoming water.
A highway of spices, perfume.
Worthless and salty.

Water keeps its secrets impossibly deep,
so dark the water creatures have invented their own
means of seeing, of being seen.
They swim without sails, sail without profit.

I am not a discoverer:
as he, outside eyes honing a point of shore
through circles of convex glass.
Seeing mirror-glass walls erect and flat within
the cedar trees, a sleek motorboat bobbing on reflections.
Oil-stained asphalt and dead whales.

I hold the lake's nuances in my watery limbs,
roll into eddies, naked and weightless,
my swimmer's spine curls around
the arcs of current.
Disintegration of fin, skin, tail, heart, breast
into bare elements, stark architecture of body.
A fine map sketched by scars over my skin
is the map of the ocean floor.
This foreign man in his own machine-netted skin, transparent,
braces his ribs against the shore, unable to swim.
The whale and the woman opaque with our sicknesses
and our anticipation. We are everywhere,

uncharted, exploding like larvae
within the sea, a body whose arms dissolve our deaths.
The Dead and the Living of Home

To assuage a body from its cure
I turn from broken bones
of the coast, a crumpled landscape
of upheavals, and go to where
the earth’s cragginess is covered
like sleeping bodies curving under quilts.

The Kentucky hills roll like hips
stitched with mulberry, sycamore,
cucumber magnolia.

Women I shared youth with transport voices
strung and swaying through phone wires,
fading distant into crackle as if from a hard wind.
Four gone the way of cancer already.
I turn to my sister, grateful that in this bloodline,
I am the unlucky anomaly.

Linda elicits existential forces,
grasping long pull strings to stars like light bulbs,
appeals protection from bad cells
and the efficient cleansing
of her older sister’s breast ducts.

I am as dedicated to hospital wards
as a farmer to his fields
eyeing the mercurial aging of beans.
Ingratiated by lasers day by day,
my vacation a quick reprieve, (knowledgeable fingers
ruminating the soil).

She stops me, opens a cabinet, thin brown bottles
line the inside panel in a homemade wire rack.
Nature, she says, is much less intrusive.
Herbals work, like so many things,
when you believe they will.

A two-inch-thin lead sheet
with keyholes the shapes and positions
of my tumors a sturdy door to my heart.
I tell her the holes,
and so my scars,
form an elongated pear, a peanut shell,
a cat’s paw print in relief.
The Longevity of Ice

The irony of the freezing is lost on me,
blighted eyes at a kitchen window.
The hardness of water, obelisk stubbornness,
moves in like a cancer.

I noticed the chilling, the nearing solstice,
deciduous stripping, evergreen resting,
being taken indoors and dressed up
like a gaudy lady at the opera.
Now I feel its locked knuckles underfoot,
the whole lake is unfeeling and impenetrable.

The bear who rests on haunches beside the lake,
mocked by fish safe under feet of glass
pulls close her new fur, separating the turgid warmth
of her body from the sinuous chaffing of winter wind.

She turns into the coated forest, hunkers within
the abdomen of a deep cave
and sleeps within her body until spring.

I am boiling egg whites.
I have strung lights like silverfish gleaming
along the angles of the roof. I have wrapped presents
I will later return, thawed a robust grocery bird,
and will fill tin pie pans with custard.

I dream of a swim, the familiar summer motion
buoyant within my spirit, outstretched arms and legs.

The bear birthing from the cave, dusty-eyed,
thin and ravenous amidst abundance.

She rubs her back against the bark of an alder,
strips layers to an essential core,
releasing heat like song loosening from the throat.

I fall away by pounds, too soon, amidst the chill.
My fur tufted in the teeth of my comb,
wastrels silent and limp on my pillow,
fish slipping in figure eights through fidgeting fingers.
Left bare, grasping at whatever, loose notes, frozen leaves.
How would the bear survive winter in a body like mine,
leaving the cave mid-freeze?

Wasted too fast and ready to be filled,
in a body that mistakes her dying for rebirth.
woman, etymology of

Mapping the bloom back
to the precise chromosomal glitch,

my derivations and deviations
begin to define me in strange ways.

To a metropolis circled in red
on the skin's topography,
a too-rigorous life like urban sprawl.

Cells pile like skyscrapers,
they come from inside, the materials we build with,
the cast iron frames, double helix blueprint.

Cities poke their too-large phalli to the sky.
Perverse, contrived, yet like everything, natural
if the elements are traced back far enough.

I come from an Old English word without sex: Wif-mann.

Facing a machine, not a plain,
field, meadow, or forest,
my derivation, a sex I acquired
sometime in the eighteenth century,
flicks on a flat computer screen,

"Woman" itself has a curious
history, which may be of some
consolation to female readers,
since it shows that they are not,
linguistically at least,
derivatives of the other sex.

Not necessarily wife plus man,
man plus object, skin plus armor.

"Wolf + man," a sidebar utters,
and I find myself thinking,
in angst with my skyscrapers,
that's more like it.
Moons in Our Bellies

I was the flood, bursting through grief. I was the rainbow at night, dancing in darkness. Hands on the earth, I closed my eyes and remembered where the source of my power lies. My connection to the natural world is my connection to self — erotic, mysterious, and whole.

Terry Tempest Williams, An Unspoken Hunger
**Uniformitarianism**

(def.) 1. The concept that the processes that have shaped Earth in the geologic past are essentially the same as those operating today (e.g. plate tectonics, the water cycle, the laws of stratification.)
2. Concept that present is key to the past

*We do not descend, but rise from our histories.*
*If cut open, memory would resemble*
*a cross-section of the earth's core,*
a table of geographical time.

Anne Michaels, “Lake of Two Rivers”

Rocks read top to bottom under the skin of earth
our oldest collective story.
Along the cross-sectioned, gutted rock
our most innocent layers lie closest to the core,
and this chronology is all we are sure of.

The downcutting arms of rivers
uncover horizons of shale and dolomite.
Prehistory’s inscriptions, our known methods
assume life from fossils that echo death,
memory of body the bone of time,
a record of our small forces.

Earth tells time without minuitiae.
The way ants haul seeds to peaks,
and we translate empires to small blemishes
on the comfortable rubric of patios.
The way we say **remember this moment**
as if **right now** was not a lie,
was more than wind circling atmospheres,
when this moment is the memory of hundreds,
but could slip away, lost as our own,
but for the permanence stored in pens.

A long monologue of rhythms:
striations in riverbeds like script across obsidian pages
echo in unaltering instinct,
the clip of gravity, hardness of quartz,
water’s obsessive drive for anonymity in the ocean.
Our rivers of storytelling are constant yet ever-changing,
like rain drumming the river, sounding clipped in the shallows,
short of breath along the rapids,
metallic as it shudders against rocks on shore,
long and desirous at the mouth, in anticipation of salt.

A river-rubbed rock is a story well told,
the most knee-bending force on earth.

There is a certain comfort in formula,
in what is always true and recoverable.
There is no place we have not been,
no story not heard,
and all we have forgotten of rivers
is stored in the canyons of our palms for quick retrieval.
Artemis

I sleep under stars
that pull me back into orbit
from a jettison of spirit.
There is a great silver bear,
the moon above her head
like a word bubble
calling to the water,
rousing tides.

All these goddesses
of the wild, reminders
of my own spherical
movements,
the tidal oscillations,
the moon,
that magnetic star,
shining silver on the back
of Artemis.

Lying on the transient space
between granite and salt
the tides tug
on the sand,
lure chattering rocks
back into motion,
sew a salt film
over my pores,
wash against
my shell-shaped ears.
Invisible World

As I lie in grass,
knees up soles pressed
to earth, an unnoticed spider
tethers from knee to knee
the small, strong threads
of her invisible world.

My usual footsteps are falling
bricks spitting thin wisps
in fluted glass. The heaving
of my brain-bags and water-logged
physiology sends shock waves
through a spider’s reticence.

I am big with excess, swollen
to useless.
I break all surfaces I tread on,
I am earthquake, mudslide,
careless creator,
ungrateful destroyer.

Stumbling web wrecker.
Rebuilding, rebuilding,
a spider’s persistence.

When I am finally still,
the spider is relieved,
I am briefly redeemed.

She makes use of me
(of anything still or
with roots)
mistakes my limbs
for those of alderwood
or salmonberry,
my scent the lure
of oblivious prisoners,
their sticky, thrashing wings.

She spindles in spirals
mid-air across my lap,
legs twitching with instinct.

My thighs are the pilings
of her delicate architecture,
solid ground

at each end of her bridge
where she may touch
down between crossings to rest.
Time Zones of a Rare Place

I sit in the locks among boats
that sink and rise at whims of engineers.
Water split salt from fresh,
hydrogen from oxygen, mathematical miracles.

Salmon churn before fish ladders
leaping from gray water like glistening spits of metal.
I can make out head, fin, tail,
or only flashes of light and sound,
stars that move in the far corners of vision.

Blue herons plentiful as gulls burn holes in daylight.
The solitary flock, long necks pump esses,
blue wings broad as scarves knotted around the necks of children
who imagine they are superheroes.

Low tide offers picnics to grebes and ducks,
abandons the naked legs of docks
that jut out comically into midair,
the wet earth thirty feet below the swimmer’s or fisherman’s ledge.

Like the oil lantern leveling itself
against the list of the boat,
I lean into swells just to feel upright,
terrestrial gravity held like mercury in the stomach.

The ocean tells my time away from home,
each wave a lapping second
between the dryness at dawn and the floods of noon.

I rock with the ocean so long my body holds its rhythms
like speech absorbing the accent of a foreign place.
Later, at home, living by a foreign clock,
every sight is a teetering horizon,
every sound a loose clip tinking against the mast.

Even in sleep I am buoyant,
a creature of land with a sea inside my dreams.
Repentance East of the Mountains

The ground was dry and crackling under small booted feet as I followed my father through the yellow-bellied jack pines and Douglas-fir with the old faces folding in their trunks. He was up ahead, his heavy boots rustling through the brittle ground cover of cheat grass and decaying wood. Typical summer of no rain. I followed twenty long strides behind, my smaller legs taking three steps for every one of his, feet tangling in the brush, stumbling like a newborn fawn.

He found the tire ruts in the earth a quarter mile east of the rock barn. He bent down and laid his palm in the deep, hash-marked groove. Looked at me with a sloping shadow of shame in his eyes, as if he had accidentally cut the skin of someone he loved, his wife or his only child.

Crouched over small as a boy confessing his mischief, spine-rounded reverence in the dirt. Even the atheist knew of forgiveness. He stood up and walked over to where a fallen trunk was melting back into the ground. He fit both arms round it, clasped fingers underneath, cradling it like an infant. Easy to lift from the tangle of bluebells, he dragged and placed the trunk in the rut where the truck’s tires had spun. He did this again and again, filling the grooves with trees until the land forgot the machine’s ever-heaving insistence.

He lifted me on his shoulders and I held on to his ears as we walked home. From this height, level with the heart, it was a softening of footsteps, and grooves the woods etch like scripture on my father’s bark-like skin.
The lights of Las Vegas outshine stars into madness.
You stand within its tremoring chambers, keep drunk enough to feel sane.
Geology lessons in your brain:
laws of stratification, subduction, tension,
erosion of finest particles.
Igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks cycling like angels around the moon.

You think this city has no place in this desert.
You entered the city from the Grand Canyon where you ran fingers
through centuries, dusted yourself with timeless debris
until your eyes watered and carved canyons down your face.
You held old tools in your hand, trembling at the thought of its perfect use
in a past culture, an iconic emblem branded onto your soul,
ravenous to know them.
You fantasized of ice, it's capacity to preserve even the soft tissue.
You think it has the potential to store spirits,
although you are hesitant to share this with your scientist friends.

You were a god, aching with evolution’s ecstasy among the living dead.
You were spectrum of time and position,
stretched palm to sole around all existence.

You entered the city hoping for meadows, as the name deceives,
the meadows, soft loam and tall grasses and wildflowers
feathered and delicate as sunlight.

Now you squat upon a snag,
an angry burn on the landscape from a cigarette
dropped by the same careless, yellow fingers that toss sphinxes in American sand.
A mad chemist colliding cultures like elements
with unknown properties, braced for an explosion.

One hungry eye in the sphinx's forehead, a portal to gods and security cameras,
glowers toward crowded streets of strangers, glittering and naked.

In this precarious state of here-and-now, life begins anew
every half-hour in chapels with speakers in the ceilings,
removable walls, a lobby desk where beings like you are ritually anointed
with free champagne. Screaming organs, needle stuck
in the same shallow groove as bride after bride swoops
in fantastic flair down carpet, savoring
the twenty-three minutes that are hers alone.
Can no one call this place home?
You are a stripper, bar tender, cab driver, performer.
Trenches are filled with old eyes, ancient imprint,
yet the ones who keep you going never stay.

In the oasis of the air-conditioned hotel lobby you can’t see the ceiling.
You could be in the temperature-controlled belly
of Egypt, all this worship around you;
screams to saviors and blinking lights like sparks of a sacrificial fire.

You begin to fantasize again. The people are all bent over
and contorted as if they’re being burned,
dancing to avoid some invisible poison or insect.
Their eyes are removed, the holes filling with sand.
Archeology takes over, and this strangely pleases you.

It is a Pompeii. You are sending the lava in
so fast that centuries later an evolved strain of dolphin or gorilla
chip away layers of time and tuff and basalt
and find the beings of your image splayed face-down over tables,
split open on chairs, their erections preserved like wells
in the surrounding rock, wound like dough around square machines,
the bones of each right hand fossilized on an aluminum lever.

And what legend do the dolphins and gorillas weave from these fragments?

This is the best-preserved evidence
of Homo Sapiens culture. It is as if
the earth pulled its layers like blankets
over this city’s sleeping child. Yet it is safe
to assume that the culture here was quite unique
among desert civilizations. Humans,
parrots, lions, currency. Let us discover
them in their waste. What did they eat?
Why were they here?

What gluttonous assumptions could do us justice?
Although you are god-like you still think in terms of us
because humans are your likeness and this you cannot escape.

You think of Newton and rock cycles. You remember
that matter is buried, weathered, burned, flooded, eroded, rubbed, and broken,
but never disappears. The land is a page permanently scratched
with such violent and magnificent characters.
Like writing on real paper with the thick starkness of ink
or hot, hard-won blood, the old-fashioned way.
Every building that has ever sunk into sand
tattles on our love of pirates and kings, castles and pyramids and MGM Grands.
You think, feeling humble and irreparably human again,
that we should have stopped at the lodge-like tourist center at the Grand Canyon.
Permanent as bone, real as continents, this is how they will know who we were,
as a man in ice is known in a warmer time by the tools on his body.
And the pesky foul soul he was sure would vanish at his death
is found, preserved according to the laws of a phenomenon
with many syllables and triple vowel instances
that was named after you. And it would scream its honest causes.

This city is an offense to all laws you cherish,
your worship of pattern and explanation.
Exceptions always shatter your hard belief, bit by bit.
You like that all artifacts have a use, specific and essential.
You hope your theory is wrong; that perhaps, when the flabbiness corrodes,
it will be better. The sparse deception will paint us brighter;
the silly legacy we leave behind
will send the next Darwinian fittest spiraling off dizzy into a new era.
The Roundness of Oceans

It plays in loops rolling over each other,
eddies over your toes and fanned foot bones,
samples the shore like a cat’s tongue

pushing milk that worms down her throat.
Brine filming over lungs. Water undulates like dough

running under purple-veined hands into an oblong loaf,
or pools to float buoys like cheerios.

Grinding rocks down to flat globes,
sculpting driftwood ovaries, softening

glass. Shards of an old beer bottle,
after its sleep with the water, cannot cut
into the bottoms of feet—
a terse blade that has lost its nerve.

The source of cycles, bruising into coves,
molding tombolos in the sand, upthrusting the archipelago,
curling fingers against the back of the moon.

You who lets the ocean break over you
will lose your edges soon enough,

knives blunted to marbles
falling dull on a pillow
by a sleeping face.
Emily's Screamers

Emily called them screamers, the splinters that take the whole weight of the tree, snapping just before the trunk smacks into the earth. Sharp and thin, they mourn their arrival with long calls to the pin-light of weak stars. Cedar and fir sing these low solos from the clear cuts out into an erased overstory.

As a child Emily saw fairy tales in the clear globes of white currants, disgraced the puddle-skirting cow by kicking up her own mud. Never forgot, even as she aged, that fir trunks looked just like old faces.

The forest is all whispers, but the longer I listen the louder it gets. She could hear them, ears tuned to the earth’s silent hum, and painted the sounds. The screamers are a hot orange against cerulean, willow, and aquamarine.

After painting she would return home, always alone. Chairs roped to ceilings like stage props graciously lowered for the rare guest. Gifts of trees, stumps, totem poles, one called “happiness” for the bewildered actors. Upon exiting with canvases tucked under arm, chairs are restrung, lofted into the gallows like wooden skeletons. There was redemption within the hemlock, in the forgiving droop of arms falling round her like a heavenly dome for the grim performance of human gesture.

I walk into the clearing cluttered with stumps. Who among us deserves atonement? I hear the elegies rising from splinters in crescendos.
Cross-legged in the salal and maidenhair
Emily and I are painting the denouement in plentiful strokes
and depth-catching swirls, offering voices.
I listen to the screamers' songs,
my small voice mixing with the last words
of this broken, bodiless choir.
Sauna

I heat up til
I almost explode,
skin leaking
desert springs,
then emerge,
covered in coarse salt
of my own
residual ocean.
Extraction of an Arrowhead
for Kanyon

We watch for talismen
in starlight skittering across the night sky,
in heavy leaning of mountain-shadows,
in the sudden gloaming dorsal fin of an orca
black against a purple and gold sunset.

Our muses stagger
from nature’s collisions and explosions,
glide like angels on pearly clouds
over the fall-out of the fantastic.
We punch out prose
to fill our large spaces
left by mysteries we try to reinvent.

Rocks shaped by old hands,
precious and worthless,
lie beneath humble surfaces.
A pinched tear drop rising
from the earth as if evoked
by the sky or drawn, quietly miraculous,
by an intent moon.

I bend in red dust,
my back to a gorge, the ancient
oxbows of the Columbia River.
Eyes to dirt, I find the thing that calls me
near the place from which I too am extracted:
a simple chip of vestigial labor,
a small, brown wedge of attention.
Nocturnal Contact

The sounds leaping over the fence from their darkness into mine erode in my ears, sink into skin like heat.

Deer sounds, uncountable, could have been two, one, four. I stop. The dog stops his jaunty ringing and the bodies scatter through salmonberry, foxglove, and fern.

So many cool, silent things sway in night air as if the opalescent moon was far brighter than the sun, far more compulsive, drawing life up from day-sleep.

I could not see their bodies, darkness and a tall fence between us, could not judge the length or mass of antlers, the number of prongs extending from spirit in bone.

Invisibility brings us almost into contact. Human and deer abandon our roles so we both are startled, both target and predator.

I am eavesdropping on their language, how they sense danger, communicate food, soothe newborns into standing on wobbly rods, bend to lick salt off rocks at low tide.

Havens of shadow on opposite sides of a thin wooden fence, the dog and I on the sidewalk, they in the mossy woods.

The moon shines down on both sides, their light divided by canopy, speckled motion of leaf-whispers across silver backs, mine glaring on stark concrete, all elements erased but the human.