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When You Are Dead

By

Mikel Johnson

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

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Master's Thesis

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Mikel Johnson

December 1, 2020

When You Are Dead

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Mikel Johnson
December 2020

Abstract

When You Are Dead is a work of poetry exploring silence and speaking, growth and death, tumultuous relationships, and intergenerational trauma.

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A Critical Preface to *When You Are Dead*

Something dormant: on the unsaid

In her essay “Disruption, Hesitation, and Silence,” Louise Glück introduces the idea that poetry can be driven by the unsaid. “Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts,” she writes, “they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied.” Glück positions the power and presence of the unsaid opposite exhaustive or lengthy description and explanation—work that tells you the whole story and in great detail.

There is a way that an overflowing of language and that spaces brimming with poetry can embody absence as a driving force. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* is a heartbreakingly beautiful example of this. For example, early in *Dictee*, a section titled “DISEUSE” describes a woman attempting to speak. It is a powerfully physical section. The disease “Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes to speak” (Cha 3). Later, she is crushed by the weight of not speaking—“She gasps from its pressure, its contracting motion” (4)—and is even turned inside out by it (5).

The places Cha most delivers the power of absence in this disease section, however, are in three italicized subsections that act as the internal monologue of the subject. Consider the first:

It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void. (3)

These italicized subsections make use of fragments and repetition to show the subject's struggle to speak, but at no point do they suggest what she wants to use her voice to say. The need to speak is physical—it is a festering wound she is struggling against—and it is insistent—*“Must break. Must void.”* The language of the incapability of speech overflows, and in its overflowing, leaves absent what the subject desires to say. The absence of that which needs to be said is heavily felt.

The inner monologue of Cha's disease is unmistakably similar to the fractured inner monologue of my “Overgrowth.” The narrator of “Overgrowth” compares their mind to cancerous cells, *“repeating/ and repeating/ all the wrong things”* (11-13). Its obsessive monologue says, *“Tell a feeling to/ meet a need. Don't/ tell a feeling. Don't/ meet any needs./ Don't show a face./ Don't need”* (20-25). Like Cha's disease, Overgrowth's narrator is silent, unable to break out and to speak and, subsequently, get their needs met. There is fragmentation here, too, created by breaking the lines in harshly awkward places, such as after “to” in line 20 and after “Don't” in lines 21 and 22.

Interestingly, both narrators discussed above tell the audience they are unable to say. The absence is not obscured, it is proclaimed. This tendency permeates my work, such as the final lines of “James Plays His Guitar,” which read, *“before he knows/ and I'll finally have to say”* (95-96), or in “A Valley,” where I've written, *“I was not the only one I hurt./ I have done bad things, too./ They're lodged/ in my esophagus,/ they pulse and threaten/ to be told”* (22-27). They threaten but will not be. The narrator in each of these poems is open about withholding.

Another way a poet might successfully embody the disruption, hesitation, and silence Glück advocates is through sparse language and lineation. For Glück, this is exemplified by Oppen's work, which she calls "bold, severe, mysterious, intense, serene and fiercely economical." A prime example of this "fiercely economical" style can be found in McKibbens' "singe." It opens:

My trust
is always
measured
by what
you've lost—

There is silence in each line in the form of space on the page. Its simple power underscores the importance of the unsaid. What the "you" has lost here is important—painfully important—and the unspeakable pain of this loss is what the poet needs the audience to feel. In this way the unsaid haunts.

Look also to McKibbens' "Dawson, NM. 1905." The poem describes a New Mexico woman who is "As whole as a woman can be" (12) and her simple, pleasant life—with its "soft pleasures/ of the ordinary" (14-15). This simplicity and wholeness set the reader up for the haunting of the poem's end. Out of the pleasant descriptions, suddenly her "gentle husband" is "not yet charred" (40-41). Not yet. The poem's omission of the violence or tragedy of the story

leaves the audience to wonder and search for clues. The revelation of this shocking detail is once again delivered on short lines and with economic language. McKibbens' also chooses to break the stanza there, so that so much space and breath—and the unsaid story—linger on the word "charred."

McKibbens' method of absentia—its short, space-revealing lines, its plain language contrasted with its unsayable pains—echoes in my own work. Consider the final lines of the opening poem of my thesis, "You Can Have It All:"

Like the letters he wrote
in detoxed hallucinations

whose promises
everyone knows

—even you—
will be broken, as if
for the last time.

Keep them.

You can have it all. (25-33)

The haunting of what is not said here is carried by economical language and space most apparently in the middle five lines: "whose promises/ everyone knows/ —even you—/ will be

broken, as if/ for the last time.” There is much that goes unsaid here that weighs on the poem; we don’t know what the promises are, or how many times they will or have already been broken. But the most haunting suggestion (planted by strategic line breaks) is that the “you” of this poem will be broken, too, and what is more, everyone knows this; what is unsaid, then, is perhaps a cycle of abuse. The tension between plain language and the unsaid creates the haunting; the lineation forces the reader to linger on the lines that deliver that tension.

The words for dove and pigeon are one: on breaking the line

I have learned that, through enjambment and space, another layer of meaning can be created. My favorite way to do this is to break a line in such a way that the meaning is transformed from one line to the next, so that the false meaning haunts the true meaning, an often darker imprint running in the background—not a meaning, but a ghost of one. An immediately recognizable instance of this is in the sixth section of “Drunk with James,” that reads:

where I killed him

at pool

The initial line—“where I killed him”—leaves the first impact, though the true meaning is simpler, more innocent: winning at pool.

While breaking a line adds a layer of meaning through distance, a layer of meaning can also be added by proximity, so that two words or things from different sentences or phrases can be affiliated by being on the same line. An example is in the tenth section of “When You Are Dead:”

i am following a skunk
around myrtle hill cemetery
watching

him wiggle
and bob around graves, a silent
threat that does not want to be

a threat. i am
far enough away

The proximity of “a threat” and “i am” adds a layer of suggestion that the speaker is an unwilling threat, just as the skunk is. *When You Are Dead* relishes the way something can simultaneously be unspoken and yet said.

Lodged in my esophagus: a tendency toward silence

When I was young, and before I knew what an ars poetica was, I wrote in one of my poems that my poetry had “a sword but no shield.” It was maybe some kind of manifesto on being wild, but it wasn’t the truth. I have a feeling, though, it’s what I wished were true. Perhaps its untruthfulness is why I remember the line. Although I highly value honesty and transparency, I haven’t always shown that in my work. I haven’t always shown that in my life, either.

My drive to write collided often with my impulse toward secrecy, so that much of my early poetry was a convolution of metaphor, a situation that encouraged experimentation with poetic language, without which I surely would not have lines like “today you tell it/ monsooned and eddied” (“After We Heard” lines 39-40) or “My summer/ skin unpales—/ we are/ a hollowed perspiring” (“Erosion” lines 9-12). So, for this struggle, I am grateful.

Jane Wong previously described my poems as an “unearthing”—a sort of digging up of what is waiting to be said—a physical thing. It’s simultaneously discovering and accepting that the poem necessitates putting the hard stuff on the page. This can be painful. I think there is a subtle example of this in the first draft of one of the poems in this portfolio, “Overgrowth.” In the original draft, which I called “Growth,” I wrote that “I wanted to metastasize/ my love” that I wanted to make my lover “a carrier/ of my own heart,/ my intentions/ an invasion.” This willingness to equate my love with malignant cancer shows a willingness to speak to my own toxic traits and traumas that I bring to my relationship.

There has been a topic I have danced around in several poems this quarter. It threatens to come out in both “You Can Have It All” and “If My Tongue Dried First.” From the first draft of “You Can Have It All”:

“Not like the time you were six
tequilas deep, five fingers
laced around the palm
of a secret, five more stuffed
into the pocket of a man
who would not move” (6-11)

In revision, this section opens the poem and there is a key word that shows up: lover. It becomes “five fingers/ laced around the palm/ of a secret lover” (2-4). I gesture at the same scenario in “If My Tongue Dried First” when I write that I “would have had sunsets/ with a husband” (41-42) and “an uninterrupted list/ of committed friendships” (47-48). The topic at the center of these sections is infidelity, something I rarely hear talked about from the perspective of the person stepping out on their partner. I believe poetry is the place to discuss and explore such difficult topics. I appreciate poetry that does not shy away from challenging topics in ways that challenge the poet as much as the reader, which is part of what is so moving in Natalie Diaz’s work.

I was particularly struck by Diaz’s statement about writing “No More Cake Here.” “It was a poem that surprised even me when I wrote it,” she says. “It uncovered a truth in me that I

almost wished I didn't know existed" (Diaz). Diaz knows there are dark, complicated truths inside us that poetry will pull out of us. I believe it is our duty as poets to listen to what our poems ask us to bring to the page—the sad truths, quiet truths, lovely contemplative truths, the half-truths, angry truths, clamoring truths, and, as Diaz writes, “even the Judas-truths.” That is an essential task of mine as a poet.

Giving me my story

I owe much of my existence as a poet to Li-Young Lee. He was the first poet I read who truly reached me, who made me feel deeply, who made me understand that poetry is not inherently an elitist art. Before my introduction to Lee, I was taught poetry that I naively felt I was *supposed* to enjoy because it was just what was read at University—but I didn't *get it*. I read Tennyson, Coleridge, Dickinson, Eliot, Donne, and so on—and it mostly did not move me. It is obvious immediately that contemporaneity is an undeniable factor. But, had I not been shown the beautiful contemporary work of Lee, I might never have thought poetry was a world that could include me. I believed it was not entirely accessible to me. Looking back, the elitism I perceived at the time was largely in the teaching of it. However, the belief in—or perhaps fear of—unbelonging that permeated my introduction to poetry (and much of my early studies in general) was also fueled by the formal strategies and subject matter present in many of the poems.

Perhaps the surest way a poem opens up to broad audiences is through easily accessible language—that is part of the effortless beauty of Li-Young Lee's poetry, especially in poems like

“The Gift,” which ask us to look tenderly, lovingly at the beautiful ways we can treat those close to us. “Look how I shave her thumbnail down,” he writes, “so carefully she feels no pain” (21-22). The poem makes us know this is human nature, especially in the child’s reaction to his father placing in his hand the splinter he’s just removed for him: “I did not lift up my wound and cry,/ *Death visited here!*/ I did what a child does/ when he’s given something to keep./ I kissed my father” (31-35). Each word and phrase is easily and intentionally understandable by readers from any class or educational background.

Easily accessible language is a hallmark of many of my poems—not the bewildering emotional overflow of poems like “After We Heard,” with its “fat-tongued/ feet from the bartender/ or gut-boroughed” (33-35), but the near-conversational language found in “Dear Pete,” “Drunk With James,” and sections of “When You Are Dead,” such as the opening:

you are dead

and you will not be coming back

to life, i write

in facebook messenger

and do not press send

because i don’t

believe me.

The generous spacing of this poem adds to its accessibility, I feel—each phrase given the space to be adequately taken in. I wanted to write these poems in a way that was true to certain aspects of these experiences: there is nothing elite and there is very little privilege in them—broke mentally ill folks struggling in neighborhood bars and deteriorating rooms-for-rent—and I wanted the language and experience of the poems to reflect that. I want them to be available to audiences who have been through the same things.

I must remind myself I belong in the poem, that there's space to water my plants, to take the box of old cards down from the closet shelf, to peak at the biopsy scar above my left elbow. But the part of me that is "the toothpaste specks on the bathroom mirror" () also belongs in the poem—and the "five fingers/ laced around the palm/ of a secret lover" (), and the secret lover, and even the "headaches, beer-stench/ eye-crust" and the "slobbering sick" () all belong. We have a place in poetry. I have not always believed this. It is my greatest hope that my work encourages others to see that they belong in poetry, too.

I.

Do Not Write Another Poem

Do not write another poem
of unrequited blood.

Walk
to the farthest tree you can

and smoke
a Marlboro red

and say
it's just the smoke in your eye.

I have tried this excuse
and I know

it works
on men.

Do not carve initials
or even insults, smoke

until your pack is gone
and you'll be telling the truth

when you decline
requests for cigarettes

outside the Horseshoe Café
or on your way home

from your cottonwood
in the Northwest rain.

Do not write another poem.
If you throw out your tweezers,

file your nails too low,
you can't pick apart

your aching face
no matter how insistent

the itch
of obsessive fingers.

If you wear long sleeves
you won't have to see

where the needles worked
in you for a little cash

for a little cold
and a cheaper buzz.

Do not write another poem.
Be a wordless tree

full of your own blood
baptized in smoke.

You Can Have It All

Not like the time you were six
tequilas deep, five fingers
laced around the palm

of a secret lover, five stuffed
into the pocket of a man
who would not move cities

for you or fuck you
or let anyone else
fuck you.

But just like the way you promised
four months into a new affair
to keep your tears

your own, knowing
there would still be more,
that your teeth would be

your own, knowing in dreams
they would disintegrate.
Like the skin cells collecting

in your mattress, like the rosé
he left unopened in the door
of your apartment fridge.

Like the skipping Victrola,
the dahlia bulbs
he reminds you to wet.

Like the letters he wrote
in detoxed hallucinations
whose promises

everyone knows
—even you—
will be broken, as if

for the last time.
Keep them.
You can have it all.

Becoming

Before we were plural, I was a girl child. I lived in a home on Mt. Baker highway, built with stones from the Nooksack River. Scenery outside, the seventies—with their brown shag carpets and yellow linoleum—on the inside. I did not want to be a girl child. I was a dog named Mickey. I was a witch named Scarlet. I was an orange tabby named Charlie who could go into the shallow closet with its flimsy balsa door and come out a humanoid boy. I was a genderless bubblegum blue alien with a single other countryman to speak with.

*

When we were still becoming but not quite there, my uncle unearthed an old home video from Christmas at the cul-de-sac ranch-style home with the deep and sprawling yard he used to live in—the same one in which I practiced safely threading needles through my hands, where I traded the other children my snickers for their good and plentys and tootsy rolls—the “old person candy”—dressed as Jasmine for Halloween, where the smoke followed *me* because *I* was pretty. In the video, I am being interviewed. Mike is being interviewed, carefully restating: “I’m Mike, this is my cousin Kelly, that’s my brother Levi.”

“I’m *Mike*,” I say, from a tiny body, wrapped in a half-velvet, half-christmas-paper dress. Uncle John is very amused. He chuckles through the recorder and asks me to repeat myself. He must ensure that future viewers know exactly what the joke is. And the 36 home video consumers at the Whitehead family Christmas, nestled comfortably under the high ceilings of the Roeder Home living room, warmed by fire and two buck chuck, are all shuffle and laughter and sideways glances. They aren’t sure what type of ending I will lead to but they know, at least, there are bottles left to drink and barstools at Cap’s that are already ready to be surrogates.

Doorstep

A man became
a headline and for two months

I read no news and his absence

felt like forgotten faces
on the 86'd list. I

was pre-dawn and prolific:

alone.

*

For years I had worried
that opening a book
at Bayou on Bay

would manifest him—
whispering me crazy, slobbering
statistics from some MRA site,

making villains of melanin
and homeless men and anyone
who isn't men, and making me:

a myth.

*

For years my friends
would reassure that Someday
Someone would make him pay

and now I'm reading
about a million dollar bail
on a stranger's fists,

Josh found dead
at his own doorstep—
beaten and unwitnessed.

Tell me

how buried men feel
more alive than when
they're bar-banned,
how grim makes a habit

of nipping at heels.

Tell me
what to feel—

a peace through blood?
a hush of violence?

omission cloaked
in Bulleit Bourbon?

*

For years my friends
would reassure that Someday
Someone would toss him back.

In life he brought a sharp
over my shoulder, a jump
beneath my ribs and then

a silence
I was not hearing.

In death Josh brings me
deafening, begs me
to ask my loved ones:

if I departed
who would say
that I deserved it?

Dear Pete,

I'm sorry
I wore your sick

like a favorite tattered vest
I could not get rid of.

That when my new boyfriend asked
how I could be so fixated

on an extinction
like Syracuse I ached

for my poor, for my hunger
and hangover

like nothing else
had ever been so perfect.

*

I would rather have you
spinning on a turntable

than smashing fresh bottles
at my crooked brick cell.

I would rather have you smashing
my blacked out words
against my unmoved lips

than know you hanged
in an unlived apartment.

I would rather have you
hate me through my dms
until I'm not me

than

After We Heard

I'd heard about the Tylenol
and the anti-freeze
(and the Hawthorne Bridge
and the .22).

I'd felt that *thing*
behind my cage
as it rattled the ambiguity
of slow as in
slow deaths.

Friend,
we're garnacha-giddy—
sounds slipping
from a hole in your lip,
table all thought-sloshed
and memory wiped.

You're brain-hazed
over his cheeks having roséd—
ivory dumpling-plumped
for anonymity
and an atlas
and blanketing the time he said
they're after me.

Tell me I don't know
the seasick of heaviness
and tilt-a-whirl,
how the unsurprised sternum
reverberates—
all blood and breath jail-breaking.

Tell me I get all
thick-browed and earless.

You can tell suicide
stale-faced sober,
fat-tongued
feet from the bartender
or gut-boroughed,

tip-toed into my room
after a phone call
of *finally*.

But today you tell it
monsooned and eddied.
You tell it sanguine
and breath-wet

You tell it vowed
and wrinkled You tell it litanied
and puddle-drunk
and full.

Drunk With James (A Brief List)

1. Cap's

where we met

where he called another woman
his girlfriend

where he bought coke

where he bought coke again

where he bought coke
lost it
went back in to buy more and found
the first batch on the ground
on his way out, moneyless
and drug-rich

2. Tadeo's

because I was melting
of malnutrition

he fed me with nothing
but margaritas
and chips and salsa
and we glowed grateful
to talk about death
without pretense

3. My apartment

during my vow of silence
the night we met
and for three days after

I had recognized him
from his mother's Facebook page
and typed a silent hello

we wrote notes
to each other on scratches
of paper

we mimed

we fucked on the couch
on my dresser
on my borrowed air mattress

and he watched Hannah B
ruin her life on *The Bachelorette* with me
on my tiny phone screen

4. Squalicum Beach

with a case of PBR

we listened to David Bowie
and did not twist our ankles once

5. Chuckanut Brewery

with our case of PBR
tucked in my backpack

I explained All Cops Are Bastards
while we watched them
arrest a shirtless man across the way
and he told me
of his own run-ins
with cops, how he screamed
intoxication
in newly homeless anguish

6. Cocoanut Grove

which he won't remember
but where I always order kokanee
on draft
the only place that has it

where I killed him

at pool and he tried
to take a pile of my cash, thinking
in his blackout
it was his

I'll never forget him
huddled by the gutter
thinking I'd leave
in the cab without him
that he'd be blacked out
moneyless
phoneless, stranded
and anonymous

7. The Grand

because nowhere else
with pool, booze, and food was open
yet

he downed IPAs
and put the little money
he had left
on juke box songs
I didn't know

8. State St. Bar

where he finally agreed
to meet me again
after a long time of saying
it was not a good time
but sending video clips
of things he "felt in his soul"

like maynard james keenan
red-eyed ranting his music
long before
he'd hit the mainstream

9. McKay's

so many pizzas
and beers in our bellies

he glared
nervous to the distance
with grinding teeth
and gave
a little growl

said something about lightning
in his brain

10. The Beaver Inn

headbanging at the pool table
graffiti-ing the bathroom walls
and telling me

he'll never change

II.

When You Are Dead

1.

*you are dead
and you will not be coming back
to life, i write*

in facebook messenger
and do not press send

because i don't
believe me.

2.

*he is dead
and what we know most
is that he loved star wars,*

they say, forgetting
that song you scream me
clutching my collar

or the times your father
punches you in the face
for drinking.

i see the blood,
a single strip
in a pale mirrored face.

3.

after you show me
evil dead, i show you

my breasts
that are not certain

they want to be.
you try

but you are bad
at this, not like the man

who came to me
when I wanted to die,

fucked me
like he thought
it could save me,

or the man who took me
in the pool
the cart

on the cliff
the beach
the roof—

better
to take a bottle.

4.

you are dead
and i am visiting your grave

near a place i learned
in difficult terms

that zebra clams
cut consciously,

their invasive skills
a shard of glass in wait
for feet too often shoed.

you are dead
where you are not
supposed to be.

5.

we are walking where
onondaga st becomes
onondaga blvd, a signal
of separate strata,

there is a dead crow
on the corner
and i have old crow
in a paper bag,

my sandal
strapped by rubber bands,

when you tell me
to bind my breasts
and offer to help.

any man since
has offered
to leave.

6.

though i do not tell you
you are dead,

i thumb through messages
to look for what
we might have done.

anniversaries arrive
and i share
an obligatory photo
on the internet

of the whole tipperary hill
drinking
in the middle of hamilton st.

if i knew
we'd be dead
i'd have saved us

all that green—

boas and
shamrocks and
holiday beer—

i left
the shirt off your back
to be all mothed up
in a molded house.

remind me
how much time
i was given.

7.

on our anniversary
i write another boy
who says he'll quit.

i can't send the letters
because i told him

*fuck
off*

*and don't
come back.*

i am afraid
he'll bring cocaine,

tell me again
how much he loves me.

once,
i found a shortened straw

in the pocket of a shirt
you gave me.

i kept it

in a closet but use
dollar bills now.

this poem should belong
only
to you.

spare me
my sugar
before i'm toothless.

8.

it has been six years
since i left you
and i forget how

to say *skaneateles*
or *salina*
or *schuylers*.

you
are four years sober, and it hurts
your ghost

to go to blarney stone,
put *pints of guinness* on the juke box,
buy a jameson and a pbr.

do they still serve shots
in plastic cups?

does the bartender still mock me
for all my making
and making jealous?

does he say, *yous was the guy*
with the beautiful girl
who was sorta a bitch?

does he still believe this?
even when i visit your grave,
lay down flowers, wear a jesuit cross?

does he say, *if that bitch is here*
you must be dead? and close the doors?
if you are dead, does he still exist?

9.

you are dead
and i am dead.

we are dead
and the blarney stone is closed.

the blarney stone is closed
and skaneatles is dried up.

every finger lake is dried up
and the trees are rubber.

rubber trees toss us
through fog-thick air,

skeletons skipping
around a tipperary hill we never left.

we never left
and now we are dead
and you never have to lie again.

10.

i am following a skunk
around myrtle hill cemetery
watching

him wiggle
and bob around graves, a silent
threat that does not want to be

a threat. i am
far enough away

to wish
to take him home

to nuzzle his nose
and name him ashley williams,

a hero
over dead things.

11.

i am resurrected
to a cabin in the woods.

i will bleed my walls.
i will haunt
my unfinished basement.

you are giving me my story
and asking me to end it
some other way.

12.

instead of haunting
the ranch room bar, i watch
seven hours
of a show about murder

and friends who turn
lovers
but none of them cheats

or leaves
or has psychotic breaks.

they drink without walking
or floating
across unlit parks
to their favorite bar.

sometimes

the dead folk die

of accidents
and their loved ones
always lie

but somehow don't
come back to life
gray-eyed ready

to make you demoned,
bloodied
or medieval
like i know we will.

13.

i am still writing
about being dead
and realize it is
eight years later

than the day i woke
to you planked
and seizing and you
woke up in a hospital gown.

so i am eight years ago
being fed bagels
in place of trust

and i have to leave you
for fucking new jersey.
i have to leave you

so a spirit can suffocate me,
paralytic
in catholic bedsheets.

14.

i am plodding

through a monastery garden
in new jersey

with a deer
that is now my only friend
despite my fear of ticks.

nothing else can burrow
my skin.

nothing else
would want to.

15.

you told everyone
but me
you are dead.

i tell you
we are dead

as cornerstore crows
as skunks felled

to humane removal

16.

i sit
beside confessional

knowing
you will be inside it,

ready
to resurrect

my faith in death
as death—

in bloodied wrists

or rope or

childproof tylenol
help.

17.

i am at holy rosary
and they will not let me
take communion, unfit
receptacle for god's blood

but an okay receptacle
for my own blood.

they will not let me eat

so that when i am dead

none of them will have to know me.

18.

we are dead
and they do not bury you

in your apartment,
like you asked

or in the orthodox russian plot
like your mother wanted.

and if they don't
then i don't know where to find us.

and if i don't know where to find us
how can i make sure we're dead?

III.

If My Tongue Dried First

if i refused the relief
of a favorite bottle

the soothe
of a bitter glass

if i'd tasted
a righteous dehydration
before flying

with a troop
of saturated
restaurant staff, then

on our seventeen
person vacation
i would have slept

cold
in an overly
air conditioned basement

angry
at over-heated men

who sleep
too soundly
and without sheets

i would have walked
blistered
at callous chatter

of too-drunk
supposed-to-be
new friends

be side eyed
for a temper
i could cling to

stormed
into the cobblestone

to a company
of cicada, still

met a solitary cliff
but fully clothed
i would have scooped

sayulitan trinkets
like a real
american tourist

would have had sunsets
with a husband

would have an
undamaged
nose cavity, an

uncluttered apartment
an uninterrupted list
of committed friendships

i would have hiked
again
to playa malpaso

this time prepared
with a meal
and closed toed shoes

yet with only so much
time before another
flooded tongue

Erosion

The summer mines us—
leaves us
both in caverns, sunk
and suddenly
aware
we're at the bottom,
that we've been here,
so long.

*

My summer
skin unpales—
we are
a hollowed perspiring—
lift me
up in buckets
to behold
you, rough-toothed
with boozy drench.
We glitter
from our depths.

I hear
in every echo
I exist.

*

In the heat of August,
I could drown myself
in anyone, and you
are the sound
of the Pacific Ocean
and I
am the sound
of the Pacific Ocean, and all

our salt erodes us
to our core.

5 a.m. Two Ways

I.

Outside is still and inside we are clamoring

a cocaine drench, our beer abating.

I pray for paused ingestion

for a jittered sleep, disturbed by dreams

of disintegrating teeth, a few before

the early bars relieve us, welcoming

night shifters and meeting us

addicted with side-eyed unsurprise.

Love, let us depart.

Let our spines kiss,

our noses separate.

Let reverberation

retreat within, let

our eyelids blanket

shaking, shuttering

both dawns.

You metronome and all

the chickadees sing.

II.

Outside is still and inside we are
already waking. My ears escape
a shadow at the cat's demands
circling you as you brew
a day's conviction. This morning's alarm
did not meet headaches, beer-stench
eye-crust, not the slobbering sick
of six months ago's forevers.

My skin stays
still, your eyes

uncross
and our teeth

fasten back
into our dreamy

sober
jaws.

Becoming

Fully plural, we cannot shake our thoughts of morning glory, creeping frequently into our brainspace from behind. Morning glory is a fact of the day. It is the title of a poem. It slithers around a cartoon corner, ready to wrap us up. It is always the morning glory from the margins of our childhood home because it is true no other morning glory exists.

We close our eyes and we are standing in a steep and crumbling driveway. To the left, there is a mossy concrete ledge. Very old concrete cliff. Very old river rock house. Very old collapsed-star-being. Beneath that four-foot cliff is a forest floor. Some of it is fluffed in decomposition, rich with earthworm, groomed by garden slugs, but most boasts morning glory, which Child Mikel and also this plural being loved.

Morning glory with its holy white trumpets, heralding us to join them, with their spaded leaves. Morning glory singing hymns to the fir in its embrace, climbing toward the noise of an evasive pileated woodpecker, who has heard this story before, having bobbed his red head more than once over this crumbling driveway scene.

Child Mikel is six years old, locked out of the house with a full bladder after school, the hood of their favorite pine green coat pulled to tightly comfort ears.

We can no longer hear *You Are My Sunshine* without our collar collapsing into our trachea.

And morning glory crawls toward us, it sings. It loves us and it wants us to know this—desperately to know this—and we glow back to it. Glow from root to brow to rib. For we do not yet know what it is capable of.

Dear James.

I write this
in a journal
I've bewitched,
its sorry façade
of *live dream hope*
now buried
 in candle
 and shadow
 and claw.

Show me
an arm smooth
and raised from flame.
Show me
regeneration
 of liver
 and endings
 and feelings
 and words.

You keep saying
you started working
for me,
you quit drinking
for me,
but can't learn
to be full
when you kiss me
goodnight,
can't say
 I'm here
 or beautiful
 or it will be alright.

Dear James.

If only You
were writing any words
to me.

James Plays His Guitar

James believes
I've been snowed in,
as promised,
marsupialed and
anonymous in earbuds

but nothing plays,
just a muzzle
to mitigate
the monster
that is a sensory storm.

Find a man
with long curls
and stick-and-poke
tattoos and bring him
to an empty apartment.
Lull him
into a sincere
sense of security
by pretending to be
magpies
or prehistoric fish
who've come to land.
Once he's built an altar
in the corner
of your living room,
turn the lights down to embers
and curl yourself
into a den of blankets.
Observe.

A man shall leave
his father, his mother,
hold fast
to his guitar
and they shall become

one flesh.
A witness, I feel warmth.
And the blanket

wrapping my shoulders
has now melted.

The feet beneath me,
the Christmas lights
and the tree beneath them,
my cold, my cramps my
hair my breasts—gone.

Just frenzied semicurls
trying to find their way
between a black Vans beanie
and a gray Value
Village flannel

as the guitar strap betrays
his baggy clothes, shows
the feminine curve
of his back
and waist.

Newblack pants
impossible in saturation.
Hand-me-down SWAT
boots too much
in their clunking. I can see

by his reflection
in the winter evening window
that my retinas
will not penetrate
this revelation,

that my fixation
has not fractured
the brainwaves becoming
soundwaves becoming
that pulsed warm being.

My pen moves faster
wanting to capture
him as them before forgotten,
before he unmask me.
Before he knows

I've been magpied
and apostled and crawled
from heavy salted depths.
Before he knows
the cross I'm bearing.

Before he knows
and I'll finally have to say.

Becoming

In the no-man's-land that is the Temple Bar, over stuffed dates and a grainy vegan cheese, we give our mother another chance. Almost 31 years since she has birthed us and she is back to drinking cocktails and wine and sometimes beer and is now working on today's second paloma. We have chosen a mocktail. We have just passed 30 days clean and sober.

She says, "I feel like you've rewritten your childhood."

She means, "You can't trust your memories."

Means, "Your pictures grew horns."

She says, "You're trying to keep score."

She means, "We live on the ocean. We're just floating here, tethers sinking into the mirk, and you have the nerve to ask me what our boat is made of?"

She says, "You're acting like a victim."

She means, "No one else will ever love you."

Our mocktail comes with a whole sprig of rosemary. We want to rub it on our fingers, on our upper lips, bring it back to our partner and let it heal him, too.

*

We ask ourselves if it's true we are rewriting our childhood. We decide this is an acceptable thing to do. Instead of our mother singing *You Are My Sunshine* in our Mt. Baker Highway home, we will hear Ezra Koenig whisper a soft and woeful *Hannah Hunt* as the deep brown carpet becomes deep brown earth and the eggshell walls become a winded winter air. He will tell us about the time he saw crawling vines and we will know the power of plants of prey.

IV.

“Saturno devorando a su hijo”

Saturn has changed his name
from Cronus, considering
anonymity a road away
from child-consuming madness

In statue, feet bound in wool
he may be seen stony
unfoldable and bloodless
Austere to shepherd

a golden harvest
wherever you place him

and yet

*

On my way to the Prado
to discover Goya

his pinturas negras
once the walls he painted

to haunt himself, I drift
through el Parque del Retiro

my clothing black, my
meat cadavered

Everywhere, people
are in love, the winter

making roses
of their skin

the paddle boats
their neighbor ducks

the balloon man all moved
by them. Children

wearing mittens. Lovers
who have not made

children, yet. I am glad
and saturnine I am alone

*

Our parents take us
to the room where we eat.

Their jaws, in time,
unhinge.

*

Goya painted Saturn
on the wall above

where he took his meals
Saturn devolving

paranoid, stormed
never meant for the public

Goya devolving
his immune system warring

against his own
red cells—he learned

from his brothers
killing his brothers

in continental war, it was
a deafening sick

*

We make our walls
to match our brains

how we were taught
our brains should be.

*

Against Goya's will
they cut away
his crazy, slabbed its image

into museum, stretched
from the bones of his
Quinta del Sordo home

to be marbled
endlessly by the eyes
of El Prado's patrons

And the gray gloom
of my own sight is greedy

rolling across his art
to be a part of me

*

Give us more
than one festival
of liberation, one

slobber
of saturnalia

Give us more

*

I would like to think
I'm nothing like Saturn

his gaping cave a trophy
in a den of patterned pain

his claws becoming
the spine of his spawn

his skin become blur
of a younger world's words

Saturn is devouring his son
and it does not matter
if he wanted to or not

*

If you see your death
above a dinner plate, swear
that this line ends with you.

*

Saturn's knuckles disappear
white-gripped

into his child's bloodied
spinal column, below a neck

that holds no head
between arms

disappeared
to blood and darkness

The curators called
this grotesque “Saturn

Devouring His Son”
but we’re not sure which kid

Goya caught him
cannibalizing

Dear nameless child,
we’re not sure your gender.

v.

Razing

Each hour
 an act
 of my own
 carves

into my sternum
 makes me know

what I have done

can never be

 undone.

I'm trying to explain
 the deserts
 in my eyes

are not man made.
 That my brain
 saw drought

and didn't know
how to oasis.

 Bring me
two sticks and
 teach me
 to divine or

teach me to raze
 my fingers
 and tongues

kill it
 with fire
to be beds
 of ash.

Make me

a Baker's
globe mallow

something dormant
waiting

for the rain
that follows flame.

A Valley

Today I'm a makeshift
paper towel
coffee filter

and grounds scattered
on Armstrong
53 52 linoleum

its shined
and cluttered greens

irregular
rectangular
over asbestos.

Today I am
the good intentions
of a bunch of kale

I couldn't
find the time to cook

and the nauseous wafting
of McDonald's trash.

I have not been honest
about some things.

Look:

I was not the only one I hurt.
I have done bad things, too.

They're lodged
in my esophagus,

they pulse and threaten
to be told.

Look
at the toothpaste specks

on the bathroom mirror

at the cascade
of laundry obscuring
a frayed wicker basket.

Look at the mail
piled up at the door
addressed to a man

who's been gone
over a year now
but left

the painting of Baker
I gave him

when we first
got back together

that mountain
whose shadow
we both grew in.

Dear Friend

On a dear friend's birthday
I string myself
with knowing

I am no longer
a dear friend

*

If I could place
an apple basket

anonymous at the door
could I do so
knowing

I'd never see
whether she smiled
or peeked
down the street
to catch me?

It would not be me
It would be no one

Who is this gift for?

*

I'm honey-stuck
with all the times
I almost called—
Thanksgiving
their anniversary

A groomsman
was the happiest
I've ever been

will ever be

*

She looks blushed full
and careless
 better

in her life without me

and I wish for her
 for all my loss
 she stays that way

Paloma

for Joe

We tended this tree
until I laid
its branches bare.

You wintered,
I parched—
a thin-ringed year.

What good is guilt
without reparation?

A bird quickens
without permission,

I gift uncertain breath
for wings,

my own frail things
unwished unraveling,

knowing the words
for dove and pigeon
are one.

Devil's Springs

We make
each other's mouths a well
to share in, the fruit

of our journey a liquor
we mix with nothing
but to hallucinate our tongues

like brave children
at summer camp
licking banana slugs.

Lydia tells me I'll be
smooth-stoned and cool
someday, like pebbles

she'd be happy
to find in her shoe
and I consider a night

Cazenovia's rocks
sharpened into my drunk
and stockinged feet,

the towel she brought me,
the steadied kiss. And now
she plants a protective spell

of fir and circles slowly inward,
our well a centerpiece.
I speak into the dirt, promise

to bless each worm
I carry from the pavement,
each snail I remove

from certain crunch,
each spider, from as close
as my bones will let me be.

Ferns, thank you

for the air in my nose, so rich
I could almost choke.

Moss, my bed,
you could cover us all
to make us sleep.

Lydia illuminates
we are a mess of mud,
we are a babble

of blunders and broth
aching to be cupped
in loving palms.

We make a forest
full of lovers, stitched

in hot breath, full
of unpretending.

We cultivate
into a shelter, twist

like old growth
over our new growth,

a fortress to soak up
the well we overflowed

of Devils Springs 160 proof
vodka. We build a forest

believing we control
when it will wither.

I speak into her belly.
I promise I will learn her.

She breathes
into my palms.

She tells me
to keep building.

Overgrowth

We promised we would grow
together, two alcoholics

from alcoholics, two sick
seeds unlearning

our parents' words.
We'd be canopies

to our undergrowth,
flowering to overgrowth.

-

Cancer is an overgrowth,
cells repeating—

and repeating
and repeating
all the wrong things.

I've been pacing
between the bathroom
and my heavy bed,

my eyes sapped,
my mind repeating
all the wrong things.

Tell a feeling to

*meet a need. Don't
tell a feeling. Don't
meet any needs.*

*Don't show a face.
Don't need.*

I'm invalid and pull
the blankets
up over my head

for emphasis, to canopy
and envelop in moss,
I close my eyes.

-

You built a garden
on my apartment deck—

clay and plastic pots
of dahlias and chives

and marigolds dusted
by a tiny spider's webs.

It's guarded from the city
by a chestnut tree—

you will not let me forget
the blessing and make

a watering can
of a two liter I bought

when I was too sadsick
to feed myself.

-

We promise we will grow
like saplings, vulnerable

and new, our oak tree
our own cathedral vault,

our oak tree
a forest without end.

We promise to be gardens
we will water, nested

tenderly
on an apartment deck.

Our clay
pots overflow.

Becoming

We must disremember
the way white flowers reached
over curbs of driveways, their tendrils
propaganda to our childhoods,
and how we would love them.

But we're thirty-one years and here:
each fossiled clench, each twisting
arm unable to say, "I feel,"
and dreams we thought were real
but must be dreams.

We're dried up, wood-peckered,
moss-covered, slouching.

Forget that sacrificing teeth
once brought sleep and money,
not cheek-sucking and rot.

Be an internet of fungus.
Be below it all.

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