

Sexlight

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of
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INTRODUCTION

“There is a house I go back to.” Mark Wunderlich

I began writing this collection of poetry one summer, after planting a wild patch of herbs, vegetables, and flowers. It was a summer of recovery for me, having returned from Europe one year earlier with post-traumatic stress. The summer was full of moths; they clung to window screens, danced past my face, flew among grasses and trees. In my worry that they represented something ominous, a return to the darkness I had so recently worked my way out of, I began researching moths and (re)discovered poetry. What I learned has now become the shape of this manuscript.

THE ROOMS

In moments of silence I remember my childhood; the joy of wearing my favorite red velvet dress, the white lace at its hem, and the feel of yarn tights pulling patterns into my knees as I knelt down on the oriental carpet, the rainbow-colored blocks that I stacked in front of the fireplace. Even the way my father came in and shuffled the wood using his awkward antique tools is a silent memory for me. It is this noiseless world that tucked me into a notion of home and left me free to wear my favorite color. The poems in the first section of this collection explore how in girlhood we believe in many myths, view them as real and living truths that breathe. There is the myth of love providing warmth. There is the myth that the intentions behind actions are enough when we cannot imagine outcomes. There is the myth that being a girl in the world is filled with happiness, when in fact our gender causes us much pain. There is the myth of safety when the dangers before us are in truth “too big to eat.” There is the myth that our bodies are our own. There is the myth of grace, yet even the people we love most perpetuate stereotypes of women. I believed in the myths we are asked to accept.

The poems in section II explore how young women struggle with the loss of girlhood myths, even resign themselves to uglier truths for a time. From the age of ten, I wished for the ability to hate food, to reject every piece of it from my body. Rather than munching chips or chewing the gummy bears my father bought in ten-pound bags, I wanted to find comfort in

giving it all up. I hated salt, so I began envisioning the composition of sweets, the handfuls of sugar packed into their bodies. Then I let an image of salt slip into candy bars and cookies, cakes and Popsicles, even juice, until just looking at them filled my mouth with the gritty feeling of irate salt biting at my cheek bones. Some of us bite because we were bitten, and cause more hurt in the world. Some of us resign ourselves to a traditional woman's role and when it falls away beneath us, because it always does, we are lost. Other times we simply curl in and hide, trying to lose ourselves completely. This choice is the scariest, because we may never come back. But some of us, when faced with a separation from self, eventually move toward change and action. The title poem of this collection, "Sexlight," explores our relationship to the stars and the elements we share with them; however, it also poses a question-- what if the consequence of choosing to live fully is our own death?

Because many of us refuse to accept the reality unveiled by the loss of girlhood myths, we begin taking risks to create change. We push past borders, kick down walls, and no longer follow the rules. We reclaim our bodies from abuse and claim our sexuality as our own. We write to bring us back to life and give voice to our experience. We commit to this "coughing up" of "our bones." As lesbians, we trust that we will find a place for our love in the world. We do this to build something new. The poems in section III narrate this active (re)discovery of grief, love, self, history, and female identity.

THE DOOR

While my childhood was a very silent one, it was also rich with language. My mother spent hours writing me letters at times when communication between us was most necessary. She spelled out her feelings in beautiful lyrical sentences and often quoted other writers to share with me important things she could not say out loud. I remember one letter, specifically, in which she paraphrased from Hesse's *Siddhartha*, explaining that she felt her children were not of her, but passed through her. My mother saw that we belonged to ourselves.

My father often read Sherlock Holmes stories aloud until I fell asleep. I cherished the way his voice grew rich with words I had never heard before and the time he spent explaining them, unraveling each mystery, encouraging me to explore what I did not already

know. It was through these familial letters and works of fiction that I grew to understand my parents' views of my role in the world. Their love of language also provided me with role models and written language as a way to voice things I could not say aloud, to free myself from the silence of my girlhood. It allowed me to (re)envision my own struggle through life and name it.

My relationship to language was further complicated by my bilingual education. I attended a German Immersion school until age eleven and delighted in new freedoms with language. The language provided the ability to construct compound nouns like "sexlight" or "lovehope," and offered a new writing structure. When I began attending school in English, I no longer had the correct words needed for math class or words to identify myself within a group. This was true until I discovered poetry. Here language could bring me home to the words I loved. It took on rhythms as I created these compound words. It allowed me to use syntax to voice my complicated experience.

THE GARDEN

The natural world plays an important role in this collection for several reasons. My father's bedtime stories turned the natural world into a magical place of realizations and possibilities for my sister and me; he described the world we encountered daily in rich imagery that brought even the smallest molecule of moss to a rich blossoming of complexity. It was through his stories that the natural world appeared sharp and clear, offering its hands full of reasons why and how we live. Looking at the predaceous nature of beetles, we can understand why one child might feed on others. Other insects, like crickets, seem to mirror our own dance through life.

The idea of taking on the life of another living thing was something I learned on Saturday trips to the museum with my father. We would each choose a number, then travel along the glassed-in walls of numbered insects, reptiles and birds. We stopped in front of each case to find our chosen number and read what life we had chosen. I have transferred this idea to my poetry, where animals and insects often serve as metaphors for understanding life. In poems like "Owl," experience is digested and a commitment to the expression of them is

made. The audience is also challenged to look beyond traditional notions of fact or artifact for truth.

My grandmother's attachment to the natural world also contributed to the poems in this collection. Tied to her belief in superstitions, the natural world played a powerful role, one that influenced our daily experiences more than we understood. It included magical beings, like "Spitzbuben," that could sneak into your home and cause all sorts of mischief. "Driftwood" provides a perfect example of this; it shares sailors' superstitions involving the natural world to provide language and landscape in a search for understanding.

Because my childhood and family relationships were steeped in silence, I remember the sounds of the natural world well. Several poems attempt to understand these sounds and to explore their relationship to our family. In one poem, the approaching divorce of my parents is tied to the angry sound of cicadas in the trees. Another describes the bird-like trilling sound of hunger. While it was sometimes difficult and overwhelming to understand the world around me, other times there was nature, a bird that called down to me what it knew of home.

THE HOUSE

Like my mother's view of me as her child, these poems are not of me but have passed through me. From myth, to struggle, resignation, and finally active (re)discovery, these pages explore a journey toward living fully. They travel "wide across our damaged life sky" and remind us to pick ourselves up. While these poems are undoubtedly infused with where they sprung from, my greatest hope is that they prove open to their readers and to their own place in the world.

I.

Myth of Girlhood

We believe it takes root in the belly, sprouts in the clearing
between the dark forests of our bodies.

We believe it brings oranges handed to us from the moon,
that it hollows out, is a clear blue pond, a heart stone on our left.

We believe it is a small bird, translucent, as it nosedives
above us, or a mole grown silly on our softness.

We believe it hangs upside down, hooks our hips
in a tight grip, is even found here along the edge.

We believe it curves in naked colors along throats,
is the dark slit across breasts.

We believe it has a full purple laugh open as a new bowl.
We believe it gives us wings.

We believe it is marked, believe that it spoils, is heavy as fruit,
can outgrow its neighbors.

We believe it is ghost light, silver crosses at an empty dock.

We believe, in the red suit of our bodies, that it breathes.

The Summer Before Divorce

When crab apples hung smooth
and warm as cheeks of the smallest
child, they pointed out Queen Anne's
lace. Stuffed into the ditch among
long grasses, along this barely traveled
road, this flower weaving thread
upon thread from its filament bed.
Beneath the seeds and thorned weeds,
with my eyesight on this spindle of light,
I plucked it, tucked it into my swimsuit,
tied knots of it into my hair.

How quickly my sister ran past, vanilla
melts around her mouth. Her swimming
was long that day. It was easier for me
to step out among the slick snails
that lined the water-logged beach, to leave
the unending waves, to slip from my
suit into a green of shadow leaves
and search for those heat-withered
blooms, their webs some sign of grace.

When I think of their whiteness now
and their eventual wilt, I remember
how the trees buzzed with the angry
energy of cicadas, how the old owl
haunted the dirt path towards the lake,
and how I struggled to float, lifting
my small stomach tight into the air,
the sound of the water-line there
at my temples and the sun like a great
hot plate against my face.

Swallowing My Family Down

I am so sick
of them asking me if I've
eaten, if I eat
too much, if I remember to eat
three times daily

I'm not sure when
grandma whispers to mom that I
look too thin
but I imagine her hoping that is all
that's wrong with me
and she has found it.

When I'm frustrated or cold
mom knows it's because
I don't eat right
and she lists the things again
kiwi, ginger root, any type of soup,
beads of Echinacea, I should
eat everyday.

Dad would never even notice if I
never ate again
happy with his own cheeks full (he
always eats
one bite of each thing on his plate).

The worst part, besides my sister
who eats
odd things all day long like lemon slices
and pickled beets, is that I sometimes wonder
if my stomach sticks out like a
too proud child
because I don't eat right eat enough eat too much.

Working For My Father

My sister and I search for our
city's discarded boulevard bricks
along the rip-rap cliff and doggy
slobber water, amid the lake
smell of watergrass, stranded fish
and the after-burn of orange
shooting range disks.

We pull them in, slick
in hand, stack them, though
they slippery hit inside our
tiny moving van. Its little
red wagon wheels dig
a deep track heading back
across the lakeside grass.

With the rush of blood to
our wrists, we reload the bricks
into our father's old Volkswagen
van. We imagine the short drive
past the corner park, toward
ice-cream flavors we can pick,
and suddenly there is no other
timed thud as promising as this.

We cannot imagine the path
he will fix, each carefully laid
piece worn smooth with so much
past, or how they will move him
out beyond our front yard's farthest
reach, leaving us here with only
these bricks beneath our feet.

Heat

From lilacs that overlook the alley, my back pressed to treehouse boards beneath the drilling sun, I see they are old with weather, sent to grey. I lie down carefully; they splinter up around me. I am outlined in this uprising of wood. If I reach up, I can pull one blossom out and suck at its tip. I taste honey bees that swarm where I lie, their fat sugar bodies drumming a fierce bite into the air. But it is the sun that fills me. The sound of its heat drills up from electricity wires, phone lines, pins the earth in a sizzle.

For so many weeks I believe the long sting of the cicada's song is the sound of summer's heat. Only with fall, on a walk between fir trees, the light as unfixed as a child's hair, does the small chainsaw of late August finally break, its body dark and complicated, as foreign to me as my own. Though I wonder how this mass of tunnels and vibrations has made the whole of summer hum, it is not long before I learn that it can only come from the sun, this heat there is no noise for.

Ode To My Period

Dull buzzing begins
 below aching wells,
 a grumbling crowd gathers
 in my under belly.

Soaks into bed sheets, dreams
 of Rose and her redhead,
 soaks into milkweed, silk
 threads of sunset,
 soaks into cement, the markings
 of rough stuff,
 soaks into cabbages, those boiling
 heads, vengeful times.

Leaks
 its slow cranberry
 juice, the morning bowl of
 crimson might-life
 off to join other
 things used.

Ants scurry to sand, water-
 proofed doors,
 horse tails whip storm-
 blown shoulders,
 jellyfish dance in tubs full
 of techno,
 tidal waves pound out cities
 on bread boards.

It has come and I
 lie myself down
 pain-faced on the cold
 panting floor, nausea cheek
 sweat slipping ceramic
 tiles, chilled, dominoes
 dropping hard against
 the head, bowels tumbling
 chasm-drop through
 thigh veins, thumb
 tacks in the belly
 broiler. And all of this
 in the towel shade of
 pink fetal life trust.

The Sixth Grade

When I find a best friend, she
has a giant laugh. Her head
tips back and the horse hoof
shock of her voice jumps out
to kick at the sky. Her hair
is a mess worse than any I have
ever had. We sit and twist
to pull each strand free, then run
along Martin Luther King street,
music banging at our knees.
The gang of boys who chase us
home want penny candy,
something sweet to eat.

Her yard is as overgrown
as the empty lot behind. Only
the old bathtub sits on the back
porch. We plug the tub with a rag,
fill it with hose water so cold
it bites our skin, burns our eyes,
stings their purpled lids.

There are barely any trees.
The work truck is parked beneath
the only one there is. It grounds
the parking lot that cracks up
beneath roots, caught in a slow
tangle of weeds. Tied into the many
things they cannot hold down, she
tells me he touched her, touched
them all, each a different way.

The truck bed becomes our ship.
We sail out to pull in fish the size
of baseball bats, their bodies
long and lean. This pulley
is the line; it keeps us fed.

When the man drives by he
slows down, waves one hand.
Her body is not here
with me, her body is
as cold as hose water, her

body will not drip or move,
her body becomes stone.

The man drives off.
I pull in the fishing
line. It is too big to eat.
It lays there flopping
at our feet.

Sometime later, a neighbor breaks
the hydrant open and leaves. No one
sees. The water beats out straight
as tight lips and mean, whips small kids,
pushes them clear across the street.

This city has a lake. If you were
not on this street, you might see it.
It is Great; it has no other side.
It is as wide as her laugh.
There is no one in it.

The Bridge

*for my seventh grade friend who was raped
beside a busy road during lunch-hour traffic*

For longer than an hour, an owl, a two-eyed ghost
flight of dark wings, sticks beneath her legs
and we are watching. Blond hair
beside the road like a sun-hit coin
and I could always doubt her until this.

Silence stirs and he has kicked his many legs.
He spreads over her like a New York City street
and all its weight, cornerstone of purple shoulders
and terrible. Hollow flung and flung; do you hear
the ghost bells? The sirens tag? Who gave him a name?
Who gave him a name in this dark street
mid-day where she learns it all too late.

The bridge breaks her onto solid land, her blood
the color of the moon, the color of Ophelia,
her knees crumble like sand shells
and we cannot see her hands claw
through night-long tendrils and orchid wings,
thinking of her red dress laced, of some other girl
dancing, of the oriental rug she will lie on.

And she survives him. Leaves herself behind
like an old bag where she sleeps in no memories,
drowns in no memories of bridges mid-day,
bridges collapsing and bodies bridging
into the long arch of pain, bridging
into the things she whispers to herself at noon time.
Her curls scream like firecrackers in this wind,
and the flying things are filled with her old lightness.

Zurich

First it is the lake settled in land that boils
up as mountains. Then a shore of stones,

of one man stacking the odd end on end,
making a silence all his own. The wind slipping

through zip code dialects, braiding through bread dough,
settling on apples, almonds, Birchermuesli. Then bricks

tumbling up into bars along new avenues, the red hotel,
each window ledge filled with young flowers and sugared cakes,

this sweet hell. And then the low hum, a klang, each tram
arriving past banks full of war-lost gold. Soon fat pigeons

along the bridge for which handrails seem made, their white
lives cast against this blue. And tourists pulling into

clocks and watch faces, bratwurst and church bells,
two by two by two. Now Hare Krishnas in their long skirts

and jeweled faces, handing sticky sweets into the sun. Out of
blue-light bathrooms, junkies pushing through to shoot high

with charcoal spoons, syringes hatching on the blacktop.
Left between churches, sea gulls and girls swooping

toward the water-line, an aurora borealis film of white lights.
Finally, the clock tower's lean face above the crippled

streets saying only, *here, the city, darkness.*

The Evidence

Fireflies sneak along the beach wood piers
and tap snails gently, each tiny threaded tip
spreading serum like a small masseuse.
This tires snails out, cements them in
to their own quarters, where the bright-
tailed bugs soon begin their vampire chew.

Each bite spreads light until shelled homes
become boiling pots of bodies broken down
to soup. After every snail has been tipped up
like a traveling tea cup, the shells are simply
sun wet ovals, little lake spoons. And we might
never imagine fireflies, winged glow worms,

while we sit beneath their soft summer light.
It is hard to believe that fireflies, too, leave
something behind, whole neighborhoods
empty and up for sale. Even their newborn
larvae live for this anesthetic gruel, waiting
quietly like banished stars underground.

II.

History of Myself at Age 18

*All I wanted then was to fill my arms
with sharp flowers*

--Eavan Boland

It is sometimes light and silent
ones who fill me like poison
wood, or Christmas rose. Their
choke juice like an even tempo.

Others creep in like bush cats;
their thistled jaws are live
wires at your throat, your body
and their delight of undoing it.

I have even chosen ones who come
with petaled cheeks, watched them
mine my body, their bulk something
to wrap myself into, a damning
wall to crash against.

Some sprout up out of nowhere
and are most dangerous. They spread
over me before it is time and thrive
like firewheels burning little moats.

And there are those that sway
like sunlit poppies, their long fragile
lines like something just forgotten,
something you barely allow yourself

to know. And it is for the loss of these
last flowers, that I cannot stop the wild
planting of seeds, the rushed throwing down
of shelled boats to this turning of earth,
and past, and the mad embracing of pain.

After My Mother Moves Out

The attic windows arc like two gangly
teenage nudes. We light clay pipes, breathe
in thick streams of sweet smoke that choke
back up through throats. We settle in high,
beneath tall eaves that weave overhead.
Our speaking is awkward as pigeons.
Our bodies are white and bruised.
This is the place we've come to,
forgotten boxes stacked since the last
family move. We lay ourselves down, heavy
with dust, beneath this rummage, beside
the cemetery-spread of my father's stained
glass windows, cracked and missing lead.
Our pieces do not fit. We have a cutting edge.
And there in the rough suck and breath
of every wood floor groove, I learn not to
resist my best friend's boyfriend's kiss.
Below my feet, a clean space where two
simple wedding shoes used to rest, and
having never tried them on or secured a fit,
I am bound where the angled ceiling drops
to meet the floor's dirty spread, its flesh glass
flowers opening deep red, and the heaving
of my tiny naked chest imagining her dress.

Sweet Time

Iowa's Husband is as tall as the tire of a grain combine.
We stand and peel the husks back.

Across the road snapping rollers whip-crack
ears off, let mute stalks fall, a thousand
headless horsemen under tracks.

Knowing how to grab all the silk in one great pull,
he murmurs *making a mess of it, city girl*.

The husks are teepee flaps flown loose.

Like young cotton wrung girls, kernels
loop and turn their bottom whites toward sky.

Popcorn peppy and pointed on cobs
burst bam blow into bright white nonsense.

He is slow in telling me what we both already know—
how easily we throw aside each one past their prime.

Tough ones, thick lined starch packed tight
like mountain goats hiding from hail,
found in *dent* corn, *field* corn, *flint* corn.

I say, I want to eat the red corn, blood red, swallow
this country down whole.

Indian corn bleeds red for the sun fall, sexy
in its wet harvest sweet time, dropping of all hornets.

He talks sweet corn; he cannot keep their silks from drying,
then takes me to the braided rows, the many darkened leaves.

Winged grasshoppers jump and fly.

How easily our bodies forget to fight
the intricate divide, falling into brittle teeth and spines.

It is the same with corn, even the newest kernels
collapse, cave in on themselves given time.

The Hunger Bees

The third month I refuse
to eat, Mom begs me
take just one bite, does not
hear them crawling in my jaw,
cementing just inside
the hollows. Their phantom
wings whack the roof
of my cavern body. I pray
they catch and sear all my live
witches. They are the push
of life losing itself. They
dance in, dressed like tiny tin
canaries; their trilling is even
in my fingertips. I'm tuned
to the wrong station. I'm
a walking sausage casing
of television static. I'm
the clattering of spoons,
the envy of caffeine,
but more than this,
I'm the squeak of chalk
and sand ground
between a million teeth.
I'm a hive of madness.

wild poppy waifs

in the nut house
again she wants to go

baby on the fourth floor
waiting we are all

chirping in our cage
there is nothing of a growl

tonight we are yellow laughing
flowers in the have-lived song

petals drop we raise our
bald heads toward sky

dumb struck and gasping
in our own giant

God fuck

Remains

She moves out with
 the kitchen clock, egg
 poacher, newspaper
 wrapped plates, cup
 boards, empty desk
 drawers wiped clean,
 and it is only now
 I realize there are
 peanut butter toast
 crumbs in the silver
 ware that I need here,
 or that her dark nesting
 drain hair stopped
 the flooding house
 throats. The hallway
 light show ghosts
 are left only for me.
 I stuff Rilke's *Letters
 to a Young Poet*
 in their spaces
 and tell them:

*I have wine
 glasses and no pans.
 I am an empty
 woman house of
 eggs and no
 where to go.*

I fall through carton card
 board cracks into light
 where the milk water
 flood glows, olives
 dancing in my whetted
 hair, gurgling the salty
 red flow of someone else's
 big tomato. How did I end
 up here, finding all my lost
 self in yolk breathing foot
 palms, humming the breath
 of pancakes, choking the thick
 throaty sponges down like voices
 of jazz, sweet clove lip skin

waiting for my plunge. This
sends me over the winding sheets,
tucked into christened ever-loved
body folds, toward the white
ice light and topographic
holes now clear in sight.

Sexlight

Fires fly and blow through us, then spit us out
as one dark lung. Their expansion and breath
roll us into earth, our gentle bones, our sticks
of talking. Here we are, the immigrants of stars,
our complicated language of calcium & bone
broken at our hips, our oxygen & dust
as we rummage through lust, our carbon & age
staging how we decay. Still, with each fission,
we know what came first. We feel it move
from inside our thighs, spread out past knots
we call knees, travel on thin lines of gravity,
down to the slick caves of our feet and there,
pulled tight the moment before our innermost need,
it all turns to white light and heat.

It is the same with the stars, their breath heavy
with the pull of dreams, their bones of light
waltzing as we sleep, tissues stretching
between needs, between songs & great white teeth;
they become what we can not fail to see.
And we go on this way, walking through long jobs
and homes that curse, trailing ourselves wide
across our damaged life sky, past atoms of hurt,
the intricate stardust of thirst. And what if
at our threshold, caught beneath the tension
of each nerve, we burst, supernovas
in our glitter gowns, diamonding souls
along our feet and something even more complete,
the white dwarf of our death we burn to greet.

Beetle Child, Little Girl

for Jessica

I hear you call through the room
where they lock you in to your
nightlight glow and bedtime rule.
Your mother screams whenever
she is near and so the venom
of your tight bite is riddled through
with acrid words to spit on those
who ruin you. Your family is large,
two thousand, and heavy at your neck.
You beg fiercely, "let me sing to you."
Your lawn-green back, a skeleton
of sticks and stones, things thrown
into the winter of this darkened place.
This is how you climb, your six legs
struggling for a foothold, your song
of lovehope and newbreath begging
for an accent far from here. *Sprout
new wings, I whisper, climb into
a body, disappear.* I am convinced you
are predaceous because it's all you fear.

The Day The Sea Spoke

for William Harrold

He was skating too near the end
of an unrailed pier and he has fallen
into me; a shiver tomb; each tongue
& wave knock open like a pocket.

We pass through yesterday's water
and it is never warm enough,
low bath he could never wake from.
My movement even as shell breath,

I tell him nothing
governs a body like this.

Watch my wave flip warbler
in the sky, its white belly
a new moon.

Call it a poem
Call it a mad rush toward drowning
Call it black lace at the coffin's edge

The hectic raced waves are his last chance
and an entire life becomes one
falling into this.

Every love smell and every stolen
apple, every bone and knuckle ache,
every wavefront beneath this pier,
calling him to the spreading of this place.

Polydora ligni at Low-tide

Their stark white bodies slip out, stand
against the fist heavy cliff of noon
like Giacometti nudes. Water surrounds
them, builds them up like bone. Still,
there is a body line edge from which
they dance and sway; they hit light
and flicker like tiny glass slippers.

Some find the razor rights of beach
rock, shiver as their thin bellies slice
and scar into their own set of tracks.
Others let antennae deceive them,
drag them in at low tide and leave them
strung out along the ancient shelf, clay
like a death root in their mouths.

And there are those who pull back
in, tuck themselves into delicate mud
tubes, hook to tight walls, or press down
beneath the awful tangle where they drill
through backs and slip into the warm
mouth of clam, to simply curl in, form
fallen moons along the dark wet sand.

Driftwood

To raise the wind, sailors may pull one knot free
from a witch's rope. They hurl old shoes,
the harbor far from where they float, to increase
their luck and hope. Your leaves could protect
against evil, rowan wood good for warding off
ghosts, if only they kept you about the boat.

But you were thrown, tossed and boiled
in this wild bed. Oh the ocean keeps moving.
Its wind wrestles and bark strips from your hand.
And even though many times, you desire only
to sink, it brings you back up. It hauls you
on your invisible wing, beaching you
on this locked shore, more than once, where
luck on its six little legs crawls over you.

Oh how you burn here, your body white
as ash. I find you fierce and naked, a long arm,
you wicked thing. Turn your body over
in my hands, my charm against storms,
the taste of light tears soaked into your wood,
the sound of each wave rippling sand, and the hot
sun flooding my mouth with your voice.

Puberty

After she tells me her cousin touched her in places he shouldn't have,
we leave our shoes, abandon her street, follow the waist-high wall
that winds its way east. We drag our hands along the rough brick
warm as a cat's tongue, and hope it cleans us as we run.

Our palms scrape along until they slip over a robin's body bare
as bone, its gentle skin thin as rice paper; we can even see its veins.
With eyes still closed into half moons, blueberry quarters, it is birth and death
fallen here together on the city's effort to keep us walled in.

We follow a line of trees along the edge, and just before
the bridge, we spot a man who flashes us, his long
trench coat and fumbling hand, and then his skin
echoing like a night-light, spreading the earth beneath us much too thin.

For days I remember why our bodies always sweat,
why we must cross this bridge, and how we stood
glued to what we thought we might fall through, knowing our bodies
were never our own, knowing what slept beneath the darkest hood.

When I imagine her, six and sex-thing under wing and weight of so much
bad that it could drive anyone mad, make the newly hatched leap from nests,
naked and full of torn breath, toward a more solid resting bed, I go back
and hit the bricks again, to soften where they drive us, toward our end.

The Red Tree

Breaks into tiny glass whistles
 And I belt into the winter of this gone place

Spine of night silver, the dock worker's evening
 All the blue, become nothing, in between and then

Frost bells on ankles, little, how they ring hear
 The hollow of this snowwind lapping

Let the red juice ride me
 Loop me into new stubble like a small
 Parade, pink arms of daybeat, dried salt of catfish a finger dance

And the red crow draws in.

III.

Poetry

I have not yet woken from this dream or pulled
 the broken arms from my hair.
 I have come out to night
 like wind, caught and thrown out
 on this long crawl back
 to our beginning.

*

Tell me

you are hidden here, far from shore,
 the waterline tight beneath
 my own making. Or bring me home,
 sweet one, to the valley where the dead talk
 of rising into night
 and biting air.

*

Days and still I haven't forgotten
 that I breathed you in like something
 I never realized I knew, the way
 I crossed over toward the lake and lilacs
 fallen by June were still
 in the air.

Tonight

The garden breaks into lights, small
urchins of air, and you with your ringlets--
I cannot tell you when I sank
toward the rumbling of volcanic cracks
or tossed coins back into the treasure.
Only that I had no need for these heavy
bones, the dropping weight. Pull me
into your long castle, its thrones and towers
like bright flames cast against homes
now angled on the stocking shelf.
And your stars, the tight angles of their
curling in where sometimes there is no hope.

So dance with me, take my arm,
there is so much space above your city.
Our hips round and worn as a cow's cheek,
and there is nothing more than this. If you
dive for me, my hawk, my red tailed feast,
there are no towers or castle, only this
length of your hair, the push of morning
against your navel and here, my hands,
full with Yevtushenko's love smell
of stolen apples. I'll wait for you,
my silent cliff dive of wrestling hair.

Gardens

1. My father planted only things he could consume:
his row of snap peas thick as an ancient wall, pear trees young
and weighted with dreams wished for, carrots knuckled down
beside the rhubarb wrestling out the weeds, the hurried arms of squash
and pumpkin wrapped around knees, and finally cherry
trees, full of small pitted uglies & tattered bells
that flower into the sour of things you must first warm over.

2. In my mother's garden, everything was reaching.

She spilled her hands into lavender beds

and gladiolas. Blue-dressed irises lined the hedge,

their bodies slim and dancing. Her Danish

flowers blossomed at night, their heads like night lights, distant

flares. And her bleeding heart something of a miracle,

its long arms bent twofold in pain. Here

she seeded the big German rhubarb,

the heavy leafed and hardy-footed boys that sat like war time

in between it all. Their many leafed-heads

were something she tended to, kept

frozen in her mouth.

3. The short legs
 of my garden
 are slapped
 into soil, hostas
 far from any edge,
 courting basils & blue bells,
 more than I can say,
 fine chives
 that drive
 slugs into sunken
 tins,
 then rhubarb
 leaves that ripple-
 drop like dog ears,
 their red legs loud
 as laughing
 mouths, tomatoes
 clambering
 up
 the fence
 like the wild behinds
 of baboons,
 the door front
 littered
 with pansies barely able to say
 their own names.
 And finally,
 the sage bush
 begging the air
 to grab its sweet
 milk, to draw out
 the bitter from this
 old family's liver,
 while my hot
 hand keeps pushing
 all our borders
 further out.

Cancri: The Fourth House

There is a house I go back to

--Mark Wunderlich

This is what I have done,
 watched your hands knot down into this soil, secretly
 asked you for some wild constellation:
Plant me in the earth, give my bones a new house
skin they might arch and raise, pull me into whatever is close.
 This garden is full of lazy hearts and poppies, their eyes

are bruised and in a row. Trained on the gate, my eyes
 can no longer see what I have left undone,
 though I feel it is much and too close.
 I look for myself among long grasses. Then secretly,
 with your heart as cornerstone, I build a house
 large enough for nettle branches, restless trees, a full constellation

of my needs. Even so, my constellation
 has a tail of wicked grief. It pokes out eyes;
 it is mean. It knows too much about the path, the house,
 the ugly weeds. Look at what I've done.
 Look at where the rarely-opened knives carve *hurt + secretly*.
 I kick down walls that used to hold me close.

Bring your mad blossoming of wet breath close,
 bring lightness & the sexy constellation
 of heat, strip away my troubled sleep. I will tell you secretly
 why I have fallen on my knees. My storm had many eyes,
 uprooted many trees, and once done
 it whistled down like a thousand hungry bees. I house

this quietly. Press knee-deep into this house
 of tangles, bring your sweet hand close
 and see what I have done
 with my old life of dark constellation,
 with its sleek and heavy leaves. Let your eyes
 explore my night but don't we all secretly

want to wade in new light, to reach out and secretly
 hold the midnight blue of dreams, to house
 something more than what we've known, than what our eyes
 chose to follow or misread. I will hold you close,
 string up lights for this perfect constellation,

build new paths that start from what was done.

Secretly we open wide and grow close,
our house so full of night, a constellation,
eyes that drift across skins, blink starred, blink done.

The Woman

for June Jordan 6/9/36- 6/14/02

The woman who took being fucked to prove
 that was all the world wanted from her
 The woman who ate air to feel the hunger
 of her own bones grow and burn all of her witches
 The woman who drug slapped each thought
 of something more until she fell in pieces
 The woman who pushed through the troubles
 of others because she had no sense of her own
 The woman who tucked them in and pulled them
 out until her knuckles frayed and bled through
 The woman who carved small faces on her skin
 so they would smile-force her life into a grin
 The woman who buckled down to survive
 the callous hand of her step-mother's eye
 The woman who wrote of death-luck and fix-me lists
 and counted her faults up leaping in twos

The woman who discovered a woman's love
 in spite of societal hate
 The woman who threw up poems
 and turned them sweet into batter
 The woman who knew of house ghosts
 and willingly let them in
 The woman who grandma-talked her way
 through binding fear and panic states
 The woman who tore open the wounds of rape
 so she could live stronger and die late

and the woman who still gets tired
 and the woman who still lights the kitchen stove
 and the woman who tears apart each hide-me gate
 and the woman who keeps stumbling through
 though she often feels she has lost her way
 This woman
 is a woman who heard you.

Sexton

Before you, there was only Yeats,
stuffy as pleats in Catholic school
skirts. Wild on your evil wing,
out every day, we see you
in thumb prints and broilers,
in carriage rides. We breathe you in
like giant magnolia petals floating
on spring, thick as cow tongues,
wet as ferns. We fold you into leather
patches for our elbows, to feel you
there as our arms circle-dance
the writing pages. And we love
that you are with us, here, as we turn
pancakes over for breakfast,
burn bushes away from those
hiding, tear and peel the paint
off our many weathered faces.
We are your dream girls. Never silent,
ring-curling in our flower beds,
never choking down hot milk
skin or braising before the fire.
We pick ourselves up,
our lonely, whole, some severed,
stitched and silken lives.

Eleven Years This August

*We must all eat sacrifices,
we must all eat beautiful women.*

--Anne Sexton

I was a lucky girl; I knew him.
He explained this would happen
anyway, seeing as how, we were
falling in love. I had always pictured
the undressing, the slow laying down
of fields. Not this rough run mill, this
breaking down of the body's wheat
grains against heavy head stones.
I was only hollow, only this echoing
bone shell, white Vatican walls
of foot slap echoes and little bells.

I heard myself, the one who didn't fight
him, in the poems of unlucky women
who were threatened or beaten or those who
screamed. So I stand, naked as I've always been
and hard for him to look at, the big Queen
pickle, the howler in the bunch, 'cause I've
been much too quiet about my losses. From
the sea of muscles and dark strings, where
long sand bodies tear and swell, I give back
that old dungeon and its shackles, lock it
in his bones. I am everything he has not stolen.

Very Modern Frau

*Meine Oma faehrt im Huehnerstall Motorrad,
Motorrad, Motorrad.*

*Meine Oma faehrt im Huehnerstall Motorrad.
Meine Oma ist 'ne ganz moderne Frau.*

“My Grandmother rides her motorcycle in the chicken house” was my favorite childhood song. Imagine her strapping on the helmet, her black hair tight beneath its shell, riding like mad through feathers and feed because it is wild, and because it is something she can do.

Her route carefully planned, she spent her childhood riding trolley cars all over town, carrying the small crackling packages of fish food deep inside her pockets, delivering them to her father’s customers. She saved her last fare to buy a few sweets while walking home and ate as she went, the sweetness of ambition in her veins.

My grandmother fell in love at a masquerade ball, while engaged to another man. These two ate ice-cream, the July heat ripe on their backs and the wet sugar smell of something melting on their lips. After one week they married and moved to America where in winter, he said, they could light the snow on fire, then simply sweep away the ash.

On rainy days, she remembers how she bent and rebent cleaning floors of the old convention center after her husband’s early death. She mutters words like *beschissen* and *verdammt* under her breath, sucks in a quick bit of air, and rubs her knuckled hands over knee bones. Then she *tsks* the way Germans do, as if something were worse than very bad.

On cold mornings she beats thick coffee cake batter with a wooden spoon. The winter sun begs for one lick at our windows, while she counts out perfect German numbers. When she speaks German it is usually in the middle of something and under her breath. Each beat slaps and resounds. She knows the magical number to begin on and the other number needed to stop.

Whispering songs of horse riders and falling, she has me piggy-back and is dancing around her room. Once in her eighties, she walked ninety-six blocks from my aunt's house toward downtown, before she called to be picked up. Every morning I woke to find her tipped on her back, legs bent in the air, wheeling herself away on some imaginary bicycle, and counting.

She demanded chocolates and jewelry the last time I saw her, things to store and share after a stroke confined her mostly to bed. Then she asked me where I was going. I had just arrived for our visit. "I'm going to America," she said casually, "there, the food lies in the street." She has returned, again, to the promise of something she can eat.

The air is full of late spring lilacs and humidity when my father wheels her gentling body along the street. "I died you know," she tells him, as if it were a feat. He slows, places one hand to her cheek and asks why he can still see her breathe. She answers without moving her head, "because I refuse to stay dead."

Owl

All morning
I have been coughing up her bones.

For science, this is an art, an artifact,
there's no telling what they'll find here.
Take this fur and string apart these
long lean bones, but I will tell you this:

*a wisp of shin where legs once wrestled the ground,
the slow pull of backbone against cottage dirt,
the hairpin curve of neck where it slipped into the water of a soft chest;
there is even an elbow, its gentle heart open like two wings spread.*

Tucked into my wintered body
are her quilts of daylight and prairie life,
the rolling in of hills, my arduous flight
more simple with her memories and skills.

Like Some Flowers

for Sally Mann

I have been night blooming, worn
Cereus roots tightly at my neck,
a ring of thorns, this lovely
whole newly severed still breathing
sex light, long unfurling saltlick
satin leg sleeves, twisting windful
tentacles, loud snow silence
screaming of tight chest strings, the syrup,
the running over, the great dive, the whale
songs echoing inside this seabound
seabound height of Godly humor.

My love, she

I.

can wash barnacles from inside
my skin, send rhythms fast
along my spine, past the back
of my ears, cut through the thick
knots of my throat, and ripen
my warm harvest lips until they fall
open, red and heavy as stunned
apples and I dance out of this
housewomb of motherlove.

You've thrown me into the hot
spit sun and fluorescent bitchstar
nights. The world relit for me
so soon and I blame you for this
wanting to handburn drum
skins into the break of day,
loosen knots, and slip lips into
the most steaming seeded spot.

II.

feels our legs fold in like bark twine,
soft roots ankling the ground,
arms lost because they do not sway,
and only our heads raise. If in mulberries,
our minds wrapped into the knuckles
of its thick branches, and if the moon
tips its yellow sweet batter onto our bed,
there will only be hands, suddenly
lost and large against our nesting.

I could bring you a love call,
like train wind past you, to take
your breath, or give back the patterned
shards of every teacup lost to the crack.
But most likely I will not raise a hand
from these grass blades like small hammers
at my wrists. We can stay in the pulsing
of this new bind, so many sproutings
lodged beneath our knees. They will
allow us, here, this gentle seam.

Clogging With Crickets

When the orange draws in
from fields, we lift up
from stones, unbury ourselves
from little holes. Then reel
in night, our thin lives part
of the stitch. The almost smell
of rain bears down against
the land. We pretend it is day,
whip slap thin thighs and fling
partners in winged skirts up
into the rhythm lines. We beat out
the running of anthills, pound away
the slow deliberate climb until our
small bones and skin tines grind.
Still, we save wings, strike a leg
and scratch against this scalp,
loving something in the push
and wild sending off of self.

Raspberries

In wheatgrass and white
summer rains a bird calls
down to me what it knows
of home, the weight of thick
plum knuckles burrowing
down, branches spread thin
as sticky newt toes holding them
up against the sky. Their sweet
red juice pulls me through
where they run. Past our long
unfurling, the slick tongues
of our innermost needs, past
new leaves that bind us to
the sun and its feast, past
the awkward lunge of tubers
and old vines that tie us in
to paths of sickening brick.
For me there are stars and turn
pikes, the awful road, my own
two feet I carry away with me.