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Looking West

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LOOKING WEST

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

LOOKING WEST

BY ABIGAIL ROYSTER

Looking West is a collection of poems that explores the intersection of faith, doubt, and community in the face of grief. The speaker endures a journey of deep self-reflection as they attempt to find a sense of place across a rural Texas landscape and within the urban sprawl of Northern Los Angeles. The poems contemplate loss as it relates to others, loss of self, and loss of security in spiritual spaces as the speaker navigates the thoroughlines that bind them to their roots. It ultimately attempts to ask, rather than answer: who are we if not where we came from?

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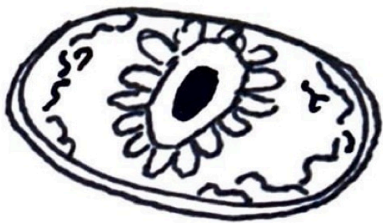
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I.



In the Barn

In fall, when all is weathering,
I am laid in the barn in the brittle hay

like a child who knows not
what needles winter will make of it,

who knows not
what cold does to penned horses.

I am new as damp earth licks
the skin of my bare neck, I am new

as I am cradled in the straw,
tangling and tangling.



The Dress

I have never felt a pew's stick
like this, every cross and uncross of ankle,
a lingering graze on the thigh–
Upholstery.

The dress runs higher today,
floral and flounced across my lap,
an inch above pastoral.

I speak to the seat as a sheep
to its own wool–
harbor my skin.

Let me lay plainly, tracing
your stitching to the seam
where fabric and creaking wood
meet.

Portrait of the Archivist

She stuffed secrets and a twenty-dollar bill
in the left cup of her bra. She'd lived in town
since before the state recognized anyone
had beaten dirt between the pastures,
and she'd tell you. She knew about
your daddy's business, and your granddaddy's
affair. She hugged you like your auntie,
and blessed the heart of any girl who'd had a baby
before a diploma. From her leather armchair,
she'd click her french tips together and explain
to you the circularity of the universe,
how all roads lead back to a gravel-ridden
four-way stop.

The Bargain

A hole the size of a horn,
so black with gangrene it stared
out of his stomach. She sat against
her boot heels and gripped
his forearm, so tight there were
nail marks in his wrist. And she
wept, and bargained so boldly,
she could've plucked someone,
anyone, from the green earth.
So boldly, she would've
let their fate rest in the field,
instead.



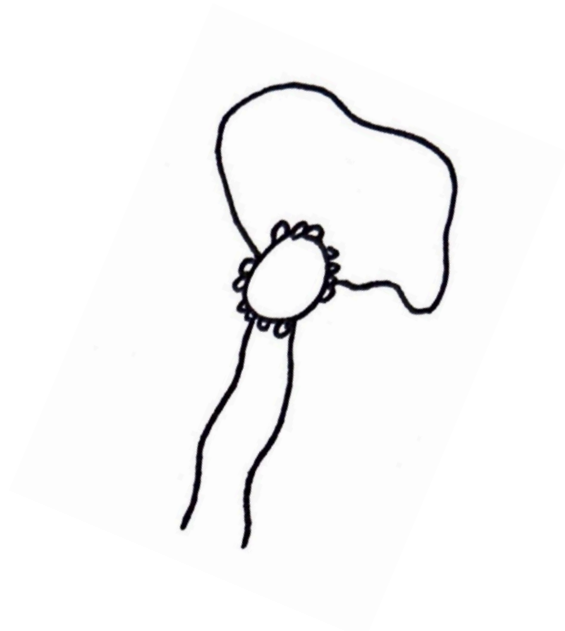
Sifting

We're in the garage, sifting through the storage
he'd promised to clear out last winter,
digging for the wedding pictures
and the '77 yearbook and the bolo tie

his wife will bury him in, who is hunched
over a larger cardboard box, gripping its frayed
edges, sobbing. I reach

into the bottom of my own, wading barehanded
through mounds of plaid pearl-snaps and starched denim
coated in dust and mouse pellets.

I come up with nothing.



Funeral Casserole

these dishes on the banquet table laid plainly

in aluminum cooling are grief

revised

to be consumed

to be salted

to tear the eyes away from tears

to eat

a silent reprieve

allows breath to bellow up

between bites

a reprise of life

dined

Ode to Texas Morning

When that honey dawn bursts up
from that eastward nothing into something,
it riles the mist on the bluebonnets
growing in bundles across the yard.

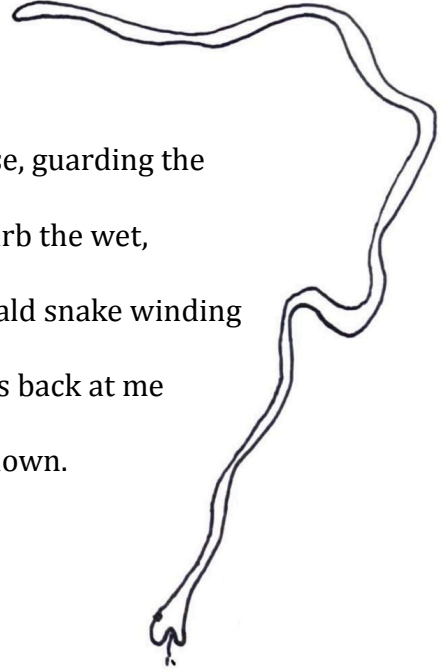
The wet rays swirl and swirl,
settling against the panels
of a tin home slowly creaking awake.

It is the beginning of today,
and it will be fine for a while,
says the farmer's almanac and the bible.

It is that ignorant light
that rises despite the circumstances,
the warm ease of ritual and clearness of sky,
that sunlight in morning prayer, singing.

A Disturbance

There is a black-painted clanging iron porch that wraps around the house, guarding the back door. I walk with heavy tread, foot swinging to crash down, to disturb the wet, stagnant air. As I throw open the screen, I catch a glimpse of a thin emerald snake winding its way up a support beam from under the metal planks. I pause. It stares back at me through the suffocating afternoon, this sweltering heat, and sulks back down.



On Fire, All Over

The men in this town got their guts full of god,
spilling over their best in show belt buckles so god only glints
when they lift their arms too high over their head.

The ladies got god in gaudy jewelry, lumps of turquoise singing
against their loose, sun-spotted necks.

I'd like some of the god they got.

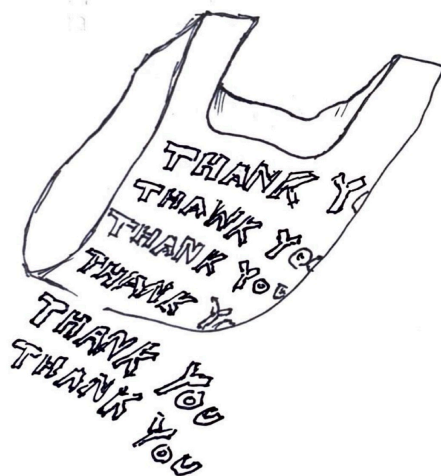
Their god they got knows them like the wrinkles in their hands
know the prayers from their bedsides.

They got god so sure in their chest they smoke him
like a Marlboro light.

They got god sprinkled like ash all over them.

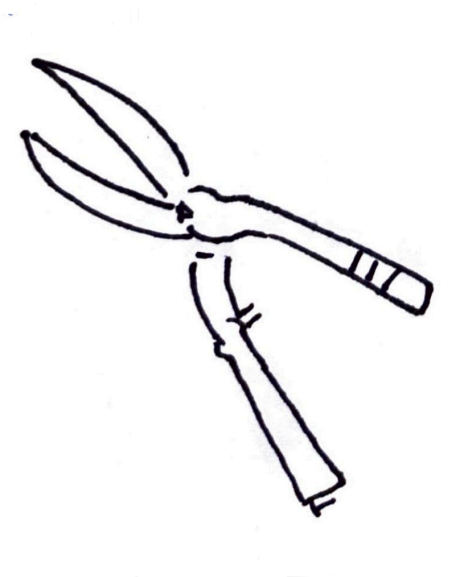
They got god on fire, all over them.

II.



October 5th, Los Angeles

The gardener hikes up his ladder
and chops the browning palm fronds
at their elegiac stem;
call it performative autumn
or hazard prevention
a passage of time unnoticed if not
for the faint clip of a shear
above street traffic



Portrait of the Gardener

He's got a weathered look to him,
from all this heat. He pulls up
to the curb in an old chevy
Wednesday mornings, with a
ladder sticking out of
the truck bed and a thermos of
something warm in hand. He works.

Some mornings the mower drills so abruptly
into my sleep I pound my fist against the mattress.
But I like a clean lawn.
He shuts it off
and smiles politely as I shuffle past
him with the dog, squinting at the freshness
of the grass clippings.

Oranges!

orange tree
hanging over
a backyard fence
on alameda
keeps the squirrel
population at an all-time
high. oranges, oranges
for everyone, orange
rinds on the sidewalk
a block down
who doesn't like a
walk and a snack?
oranges, oranges
all over alameda,
oranges the
squirrels bite
and barter.



Ode to Concrete Strip Mall

you might get veneers done, and then your nails. you might reach through the cracking
plaster and grab a peanut butter cup, and your dry-cleaning, and drugs, and stuff. here, the
hue cast down from the Ca h Adv nc sign sinks into the whirr of the pay-per loads through
the chatter of the sitcom rerun in the thai diner humming above the shear of salon clippers
amidst the crumple of plastic grocery bags that read

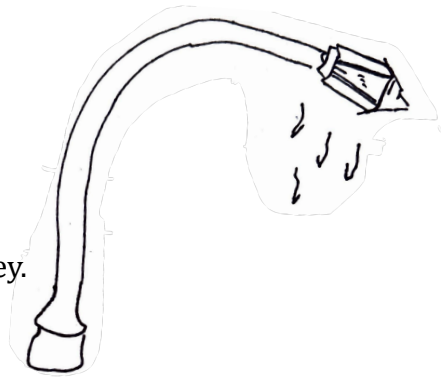
thank you, come again.

Looking North from Griffith Observatory

From the twenty-five cent telescope, you'll notice
how each string of light dims and yellows
more than the last, snuffing out at the edge of the valley.

It is clear, here.

But from below, every sun bleeds from the same streetlamp,
and the freeways burn through the Hills like live wires,
and the Hills burn through men like matchbox sticks,
and the men burn through women like thin kindling,
and the women burn all over, on fire.



Elegy at Mexican Restaurant

The red linoleum booths
are lined in neat rows up to the back
wall where a mural of the Virgin Mary
sits praying over the dining room. We
look eyes over a hot basket of chips.
For the first time,
it does not feel appropriate to order
a strawberry margarita. I put
my napkin on my lap. I take
a chip between my teeth, and it breaks
me. I cannot describe to her
the way the salt lingers, the way
I feel compelled to stare past
the table and ask her what she would
like to order, to tell her how long
I've waited to be sat across from her,
and eat.

The Burbs, or, Existing Ceaselessly

There is no flat land here but the freshly-painted streets
that unfurl like ribbons across the neighborhoods,
that trace this life back to an open, bright-painted door.

The silence we have always known lays in the tufts
of the pillows on the couch, prodding us to sit and listen
to the air breaking over the hills.

The early evening settles deep
into the wooden floor, recalling a hundred-thousand
steps, and the room warms slightly before six o' clock.

Until the distant windchime shakes us,
we will watch the dust float in the window light.

Existing ceaselessly,
we will spend the nights in this house.

