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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Almost Nothing

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

Hilary Holland Clark

Thesis Committee:
Professor Michael Ryan, Chair
Professor Amy Gerstler
Professor Norman Dubie

2017

DEDICATION

For my mother, who taught me to love words, women, and imagination.

Who taught me to live richly within myself above all else,

and that a supper of poetry and cereal

beats a dinner party every time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	vi
Inauguration Day	1
1966	2
Sleepover	3
Sacraments	4
Tenth Grade	5
Musgrave Harbour, Newfoundland	6
Shelly	7
Haibun	8
August Unrequited	9
Orlando, 1973	10
Jessica	11
Garden Music	13
Gastrimargia	14
1989	15
Oysters & Vermouth	16
Glossolalia	17
Pilgrimage	19
beautiful bones	21

A Call	22
Unanswered	23
Eau de Noho (Bond No. 9)	24
Organic Farmer	26
Zoloft	27
New Bottle of Lotion	28
Mothers Are for Setting Loose	29
Dogsitter	30
Weight	32
Scraps	33
Orthodontics	34
Preacher's Daughter	35
If Jodie Loved Herself a Little More	36
Marriage	37
1995	38
Hypothetical	39
Descendants of Dinah	40
1515 Swallowtail Road	41
Lucy Allen	43
At Sixty-One	44
Ninety-Two	45
Beginnings	46

His Cat	47
New England	48
And if I don't want to give it all to poetry?	49
Unwise, I know,	50
Dinner	51
Where, then, is my poetry?	52
July	53
To Amy, first wife	54
Next Winter	55
Cat Poem	56
<i>"The night / Always fails"</i>	58

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Almost Nothing

By

Hilary Holland Clark

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Michael Ryan, Chair

These poems are kidnapped scraps of conversation and memory, moments passed between women in bedrooms and kitchens and cemeteries, echoing up from pits of despair and the quietest corners of my life. Scraps that lodged themselves in my mind till I had nothing to do but soak them in beer and blood and honey, wring them out, and stretch them taut across a wooden frame so that I could tap them gently to hear any songs they cared to play.

Inauguration Day

Over brittle shells we walked an empty beach, past the body
of a dolphin rolling on her ribs at low tide, blue skin

peeling from her hull. The houses of the Texas coast perch
on stilts, look to me like wily women lifting pastel skirts

to bare their narrow, wind-swept calves. Such tenacity.
They plant themselves on the edge of beautiful danger,

ready to stand knee-deep in a hurricane
for the sake of a world worth looking at.

I'm supposed to have something to say on days like this.
Any good poet would. Instead I can't tangle my way far enough

out of anger or grief to find one cogent thought, which used to be
all I needed. I write about women. They're fierce and bright

and tireless and stunning, and seeing one woman clearly,
if only for a slim length of words, is everything I want.

Of course clear has never meant clean. We are each a certain kind
of disaster. Here is today's stab at clarity: my skirt is spotless

because I've stepped back from every storm.
Now, when courage is required, I have no practice.

So perhaps a fuller account: my husband was a quarter mile ahead,
gathering bivalves and gastropods while I waited for the broken

pieces to find me, singing to myself the murder ballad
of Omie Wise, who was drowned, pregnant, by John Lewis.

That's when I saw her, the dolphin, as seagulls stepped
through heaps of froth to contemplate the carcass perfuming

their beach: her mouth parted in shallow water, swaths
of flesh rubbed bare. Graceful exits only exist at dinner parties,

and every shell was the breastplate of a creature better armored than her.

1966

Maggie was twelve, cross-legged
on the porch, when her Ouija Board spelled
a word she didn't know—

psychiatrist

said Aunt Ruth, holding her cigarette back
so as not to drop ash on little Maggie
in her yellow dress and white socks.

Six months later Maggie's father
was making the two-hour drive
to Tulsa, forcing his daughter
to see some bearded, bespectacled man
who asked if she'd ever seen a dog
in heat or her parents copulating,
and Maggie just pressed crescent moons
into her thigh with a fingernail,
watching the skin turn red.

She knew this was the Ouija Board's doing.
It unleashed something in her
or the world—she held her silence
with the analyst and thought of him
while she touched herself, so quiet
under the covers as her brother grunted
on the top bunk. The analyst's hairy hands,
his hard, dry palms, his thick fingers wrapped
around a reptilian-green fountain pen.

Sleepover

Sometime after three the girls finally decide to sleep. Natalie pulls the puddle of sleeping bag to her chin and the other girls explode from a tight bloom, tumble to pillows. They fall asleep in minutes. All but Natalie, who even murmurs *Linda, Linda* to see if she's alone. Natalie cannot sleep in this silence. Somewhere huge satellite dishes scoop garbled space and the dark drips over a house that is not her own, filled with girls sleeping so silently—such delicate little bodies. Not like Natalie's jostling, farting brothers, yowling baby sister, snoring father, not even like her mother who is always turning, sighing, kicking down the sheets.

Eventually Natalie has to pee. Outside the sleeping bag, she finds her legs sweaty, suddenly wrapped in cool air. She leaps Over the swaddled bodies, down the hall, and pauses at a window, pulls aside the curtain. Natalie can tell the pane is cold without touching it. At her house, she goes to bed when all the lights are on inside, only sees reflections in the windows. But from this blackened

hall, the backyard stands in full view. She witnesses a color of day she's never seen. Silver, a world thinly lit by she-doesn't-know what, the lawn frosted crisp. Natalie squats to see the sky—what time could it be? Blackly moonless, lushly starred. What's giving off that light, what lends the bushes, the swing set they played on that afternoon, its gray cast? Morning must be coming, and urges Natalie to wait for her.

Sacraments

The church's row of lemon trees produced deformed,
juiceless fruit (this sounds like a metaphor but it's true).

The pastors' daughters, Lizzie M. & Lizzie Q., stole chocolates
from the secretary's desk & ate them on the roof of the parish hall.

Sometimes they used the church payphone to call any dirty number
they could think of (1-800-SEX-TIME) & hang up quick.

Once, when Lizzie M. was at home, Lizzie Q. pressed a handful
of chocolates between her palms till they loosened

in their wrappers and didn't hang up right away, but waited
till the lusciousness of voice told her what it would cost for more.

Tenth Grade

We floated across your pool
on pumice plumes and said how glad
we were not to have boyfriends—never
shave above our knees or go to movies
we didn't feel like seeing. We flipped
through catalogs of expensive dresses,
lemons in our hair pinned high
above the chlorine. Your father
listened to Howard Stern
under an awning, his fat Beagle
asleep on splashed sandstone—our beached whale,
you said. Your sister, deaf and autistic, sat
on the second step holding a soggy picture
of Ariel. I never told you I loved
that boy in youth group, the red beard,
the scar. You couldn't stand him
or church. Tell me
what you coveted for yourself
alone—not those empire dresses
we dripped on, not the beryl fins
you sister crumpled in her fist
just above the water.

Musgrave Harbour, Newfoundland

for my husband

This dark slice of the Atlantic
brings a sixteen-year-old boy
who will one day be loved by a poet
an island of ice. He knows, because
he always wants to know, that this iceberg,
bluely veined as sculpted marble,
is 10,000 years old. He knows
it has spent two years gliding
toward him since it cracked free
of a Greenland glacier. All season
these sheaves of ice will pass
his window. He knows
sometimes the vessels are manned
by stranded, solitary polar bears
who swim onto strange shores
to be shot by the people of the island.
He wonders if he himself will survive
this beautiful, brutal place
of anemic fishermen, where
clever, gentle boys are hunted
across the schoolyard.
In an hour, his father
will return home from teaching
at the university and his mother
will set before them another attempt
at local fare: stuffed cod stomachs,
moose stew, turnip hash.
But his tireless olive eyes
and delicately sloping nose
betray nothing—because
there is no safety here.
He will have to wait.

Shelly

A Serbian-Romanian from Queens
with blue eyes and ironed blonde hair
to her waist will turn heads everywhere
always. And if you are heavy, acned,
and positioned by her side, you will understand
this fact better than she ever could.
You will love her the more for it.
Maybe this is why she will love you back.
But a teenage girl must, by the nature of her
existence, despise her body. Before Shelly,
I loathed mine down to the crook
of my pinky toe. But one night in Phoenix,
at her insistence, I tugged down my shirt
under a streetlamp to show her a small
breast. I was seventeen—of course it was beautiful.
But I didn't know, didn't dare think
it possible until she told me.
In the Walgreens parking lot, we waited
on a pregnancy test. Why did I save it
in my sock drawer for so many years?
Souvenir of someone else's missed period.

Haibun

For the first of our travels we flew to Mongolia, to Ulaanbaatar. Zagda drove us north in a careening VW bus, stopped briefly for a little girl about our age straddling a yak. She pulled the reins high above her head for us, lifted the snorting nose by a rope threaded between his deep nostrils. Her hair hung in two braids, her cheeks flamed, her feet dangled bare against his ribs.

That day Zagda bought us a lamb. He placed his hands on the shepard's shoulders, shared snuff from a blue bottle, sat facing him in the pasture until they settled a price, then led the lamb onto our bus where she watched us horizontally, and we spoke into her soft ears saying all that must be said to one who is soon to die.

We waited in the gher beside a black cauldron whose innards they lined with smooth, sizzling volcanic rocks. Once armloads of carrots, onions, potatoes, and our lamb were piled atop, they slid the lid shut. So went our introduction to the world. Fatty cuts of lamb taken in beneath the gher's brilliant orange beams.

*And when we left him
Zagda sang "California Girls"
over the walkie*

August Unrequited

Drive-thru ice cream cone and waiting
for a text. For the third night she takes
a thin Navajo highway into a stillborn
monsoon—balled up heat sopped in sand,
lightning fissures but no entry point, just
edges and waves of odor. Orange
groves, landfill, overzealous creosote.

The ice cream finishes too quickly
and she's a cold tongue, hot everything
else. Lust and virginity hurl her
toward a storm that permits
no release. She would plunge
into anything given half a chance.

The dark screen of a phone presses
into her lap. For years she will remember this
feeling—imitation vanilla, a fist
of heat, frayed light flicked into
another brown darkness. And it could go
anywhere, strike anything.

Orlando, 1973

At nineteen Susan fell in something
like love with Tomage (thirty, Hungarian),
who, when he proposed, tugged her thin
yellow braid and handed her
a moonstone set in sterling.
When she said no, that she was taking
the bus back to Oklahoma, the fat
brass band on his pinky dug,
cold and polished, into her wrist.

It was her brother Randall who drove
down to retrieve the rest of her things.
(Their father said he could keep the Dodge
Dart in exchange). He brought his pistol
just in case, and boxed up his little sister's
studio apartment. Dinner plates rimmed
with orange and gold flowers, panties
wedged beside the Hungarian's
gray socks, sociology textbooks
from the semester she didn't finish.
Under the bathroom sink he scooped out
curlers, Dramamine, pads (so cumbersome
in those days)—everything
but Rushka, Susan's sheepdog.
Tomage wouldn't give her up.

He never even liked her, Susan said
back in Edmond while Randall stacked
her boxes beside his new car.
Nobody did, said their father.
Dumbest dog I ever saw.
She stood on the lawn and placed
the tip of her braid between her lips,
chewed the split ends, thinking
of Randall's fingers all over her
life: the jumble of makeup, the soft cups
of her bra, the condoms in her
bedside drawer—wondering
if he packed those too.

Jessica

A man old enough to be her
grandfather sits at the table
beside her, asks how tall
she is, touching her
arm so that she will remove
her earbuds to answer
his question. She is quite tall
—and beautiful, he says.
She thanks him, begins
to put her earbuds
back in and return to the notes
spread before her. But he touches
her arm again, asks
what she's studying, what
year she is, her major.
She is a generous, bent
forward smile as she
answers each question.

When he finally leaves, asking
a second time for her name
(it's Jessica—she doesn't
ask for his), he shakes her
hand, says they should
get lunch next time
he sees her. She smiles
still, tells him it was very
nice, really very nice
to speak with him.

I wonder if I have read this
wrong. If perhaps the young
Korean woman has enjoyed
the presence of this man
who has upset me enough
to place his loose belly
and gleaming pink forehead
into my poem. But as he rises
from his chair and slides
past her (his eyes finally
directed away from her
body) I see her wince,

cringe at his proximity.

Once he's gone, her eyes
scan the coffee shop, and I try
to name her expression: not
relief, not irritation—I call it
defense. She seems to search
for the other predators
against whom the best
protection is a smile so false
as to approach a supplication.

I'd like to find her eyes,
tell them with mine that I
have witnessed this moment
of disregard—of disdain—
for her personhood. But she
dips back into her work, secures
her earbuds, resumes
her own narrative rather than being
a trifle in his, a device in mine.

Garden Music

In North Yorkshire off the old Roman road, a tree
I can't name saves me from fat drops of English rain.

The little girl in Los Angeles who wound a hunk of bread
and orange cheese in paper towels was also me. She unwrapped

her prize while wearing purple roller blades behind
a mausoleum during a thin drizzle, made herself

the exiled queen of Moss Forest with nothing but a lump
of bread to revive her. At the other end of her realm, a golf cart

carried weak waves of mariachi to the gravediggers
who may well have known she would think of them

under a tree ten years and an ocean away—where packed
graveyards offer no pocketed treasure to unfold,

and I have no song to share with all their dead.

Gastrimargia

Every meal births fresh sin for the corpulent.
Anorexia isn't an option. Bulimia
is for Catholics, plunging back into their vice
as they exit the confessional curtain. *Roman*
Catholic, my father would correct in his defensive,
Anglican precision. Yes, yes, I think, parting
my pasta. Everything I do is *incorrect*.
Especially here, among the split
loaves. My bites too large, not properly
savored. The slender *relish* their food, the fat
consume. Altogether too much cheese, salt,
shallots sautéed in unnecessary quantities
of olive oil—which should be labeled “first cold
press,” my father instructs. This phrase brings
to mind a slight, feverish woman on white
linen, cool wet rag pressed to the flesh of her
forehead, rivulets slipping into her hair and ears
from the *first, cold, press* of the damp cloth.
She would never eat this much pasta—fine, pale
creature that she is. *Tepid tea and dry toast for our lady*
of perpetual swoons, her handmaiden says downstairs.
But the mistress will barely swallow a corner
of crust, will spend all afternoon—drapes drawn
in the stagnant, dustless boudoir—moving the tea
past her lips. I drain my cup, fill a slice of bread
with yellow, garlicked oil from the bottom
of my bowl, sense distantly that the meal was good.

1989

We still called her Carla
even though she said
her name was Penny
now. She traded on shock-
value back then. Dealing coke,
blowing musicians, stripping
in the summer. John paid
her way, stayed faithful
even though he knew.

I brought noodles, she nuked
a pot of coffee. I can't remember why
she put the VHS in or what she told me
it was. I remember my awe, those boys
really knew what they were
doing—spilled gold, darkly-fuzzed
upper lips, the heat of a white bowl in my lap.

Oysters & Vermouth

She drops an empty shell
onto pearled ice, finishes
a martini. All day like this.

Lips thrumming with salt
& lemon, eyes vodka-soft.
She will order another dozen
& a fresh glass, supremely
briny. This will empty her
bank account—not enough
even for a tip, she realizes,
ordering anyway, leaning
across the bar, uncrossing
recrossing—whittled
specimen. Honed, precise,

poor. She turns her fate on
a thought. Such are the muscular
thrills of beauty & charisma,
she thinks. Taking oysters down
in succession, she hatches
some incorruptible scheme,
Swarovski castle of a plan
to conquer every hindrance.

So what do you do—
that lets you eat oysters—
and drink martinis—
on Thursday afternoon—
and how do I get in—
on the action—

I shave my legs everyday
she says to the layers
of skin slung over cartilage
& cranium beside her. *No exceptions.*

Glossolalia

Another summer dipped
in the Mississippi Delta—
I'm cradled by my childhood,
a duckweed-draped bayou,
the flutter of cypress leaves—
what I found here as a girl
surrounds me still.

My grandmother says her prayers
on a little stool in the bathroom,
my grandfather lifts his binoculars
to watch the hawks circle.
The cotton fields of last century
are now catfish ponds
where a leggy heron tilts her head
to study the sky-soaked surface
and dense congregations of corn
where red-winged blackbirds
tumble in dark sheets, flashing scarlet.

Come moonrise,
my grandmother tucks me under
the crocheted bedspread
and the treefrogs' crescendo.
She puts a palm to my forehead
as her prayers swim
the length of my life,
as her mother prayed over my mother
in the same house, same bed.

Her words lose their edges,
slipping into something loose and foreign—
as I child they told me it was
the language of divinity, borrowed
from a ghost. And back then
I thought she yanked those almost-words
straight from heaven down to her
Mississippi tongue. Now I hear
something else: song of shuffled
syllables, unfurling, improvisational,
one more poem for the night. But mostly a wish.
If there was god, if he could speak,

this is how she'd want him
to sound. This is what she'd want
him to say when pressed
to the forehead of her descendants.

Pilgrimage

Unforgivably unattractive—
high treason the world over. Mottled
skin, asymmetric, features in wrong
proportion. Fat—she allows no other word
for the sprawl of her form. Hair frizzy
and greasy, dandruffed shoulders. Affection

for Jane Eyre nearly obligatory.
Only regrets her own plainness
carries none of Jane's sanctity.

Travels to Haworth, to the moors,
the old parsonage. Slips across
stacked gravestones slick
in green slime, illegible in age.
She regards their teacups.

The miniscule books they crafted
as children must be read by magnifying glass—
what to make of humans who render
themselves nearly invisibly, but together?

Rabbit pie at the nearby pub, coppery
and warm. Woolf visited in her youth,
deep winter of a fresh century. And what
did she seek? Her mother was a pre-Raphaelite
model, so there can be no understanding. Beauty
the only ignorance she cannot forgive.

Even Charlotte was loved. Difficult
to reconcile this. Brutish man who wanted
Charlotte's letters destroyed. No reward
in solving men. Gave up even before
realizing her breasts would never come.

She looks sometimes to Emily. Not Brontë—
that ferocious brilliance frightens her. But
Dickinson—brilliance softened
with gingerbread and a sloppy dog. Still,
anyone with eyes like sherry must
have had some flicker of loveliness, even
if only in a glass left behind. No one is ugly

enough. But she does not give up looking
for some kindred on the page, for herself.
Certain that something will be found
there. Something will be won.
At the very least, someone
will belong
to her.

beautiful bones

she shuns all
that might add
and not subtract
food certainly
also lotion
makeup
the odor
of her father's
tiger balm
she retreats
to the bathroom
to watch
her bones
rise
like driftwood
surfacing against
her thin
dark flesh
she curls
her fingers
around her
collar bones
only acceptable
portion of her
only permissible
weight
she clips
her nails
to the flesh
weighs the scraps
that she might
consume
half their weight
in the skin
of three
silver grapes

A Call

“Dishwashing is especially beneficial, as the hot water calls the blood to the hands and so helps to relieve the headache or backache.”

—*What a Young Girl Ought to Know*, 1905

I call upon my blood—puddled
in my toes, languid in my liver,
in the glistening filigree of veins
along my lungs, warm and fresh
from the thumping filter of my heart.

I'm doing the dishes, sloughing
strips of hardened fat
and the thin red skin of a tomato,
curled like ribbon or the wall of some organ,
off the faded floral of a China plate.

I wash them down the drain—
steam clouds me like a bridal veil.
This hot, gargling sea crests
and crashes, white foam, white basin.

I'm curled over my labor—a mother
over her crib. Oh blood uncoiled,
oh furrowed fingertips.
My nail polish flakes off
like fish scales in this clear, cleansing current.

And this steam could be the breath
of my mother—her voice soft as a splash,
her smell clinging to my wrists.

Oh mother—what am I
to make of this, your sacred labor,
skidding down through
so much motherly blood?

I call upon this blood—
to these hands,
to wash, to wash.
The dishes in the rack are hot
and drippy as new babies,
and soon they'll again need washing.

Unanswered

I read of a woman beaten
not quite to death while the same
eighteen bones rest undisturbed beneath
my skin. One liver still tucked wet
and clean in my soft belly. Every tooth
chewing straightly my dinner. And the fists
that unleashed their hollow worst
go purple in a prison cell. It bites
into my tongue—fills my mouth
like the warm barrel of a gun.

Eau de Noho (Bond No. 9)

“★☆☆☆☆ *Mutant Mimosa*: Eau de Noho had a chance to be good with its interesting violet mimosa, like the ghost of *Après l’Ondée* looking for a witness in a green wilderness. Then a stonking violet leaf arrives to turn everything watery and harsh.”

—Tania Sanchez, *Perfumes: the guide*

I’m drunk at Macy’s holding this very bottle
of perfume (shaped like something between
a star and the flattened torso of a mannequin)
when I decide that you ruined everything.

Strangely I really am in Noho. Not Manhattan
but Hollywood. Drawn-out lunch break turned
to tipsy makeup shopping. Who am I to thwart
the whims of a sauced thirty-five-year-old
in a pencil skirt? Just the right lip stain might
do the trick. I’m not so naïve as that, but I wonder
if the perfect shade could at least give me
some pep around you, which might have its own
alluring side-effects. You’ve told me
more than once that *insecurity is not attractive*—
cruel and clever burn (one of your specialties).
I make a palette of my hand but quickly forget
which swipe of coral or crimson came from where
and abandon the tubes on the counter.

In this metaphor-in-shambles, I would be
the one with a chance to be good.
Ghost of *Après l’Ondée* on the prowl
for a witness in the wild.
To witness what, I’m not sure.
Merely being seen comes to mind. Not
a good aim at a North Hollywood Macy’s
mid-Tuesday—pearlescent cathedral bedecked
in slim twenty-nothings, eyebrows drawn
to permanent interest. Their interest in me
waned as I wave them off. *They could fuck anyone*,
I think. *But so could I, probably. It doesn’t take much.*

This is when I meet the perfumes. I like that
they have nothing to do with the inadequacies
of my face. And that you despise them all.
There are votives of coffee beans to cleanse

olfactory passages and strips of cardstock
to prevent confused wrists and napes. Within
five sprays I'm lost, blurred in the nauseating
cloud taking residence down my throat.
And what if I just hate you? seems like
an appropriate thought in this chemical
daze. I settle into the question, roll it across
my palm, spend \$200 on a fragrance I can't stand.

Organic Farmer

She, who studied microbiology, disapproves
of his unpasteurized milk. *Brucella*,
Salmonella, *Listeria* or a dozen others
in those sweaty, brimful glasses.

But privately, she must attribute
some of his beauty to those damned
tumblers of raw milk. Something
in the skin of him. Thick, pale skin nowhere
disturbed by olive cords of blood or pricks
of pore. Even shadows cross him
differently: the blue of a metal pail, belly
of a cloud. Skin that stirs without creasing, ripples
without folding. The surface of lightly
whipped cream slipping across itself
in glossed ribbons.

The sound of his gulps
awakens her. Great slurps, bubbles
at the corners of his mouth.
And the rudeness, the sheer
noise, arrests her, almost
makes her love him.

Zoloff

After two months on the medication,
she could no longer climax, hardly
wanted to. And he hardly seemed
to notice—seemed, perhaps, relieved.
She offered to tend to him when she
didn't feel inclined herself, but he graciously
said he would wait till she wanted it, too.
He rose early, well-rested, whistled
on the toilet, told her jokes while she
showered, he shaved, never pulling aside
the curtain to see her, never looking over
when she emerged, holding out for him
her long, wet lines before embracing herself
with the towel.

New Bottle of Lotion

This will be her first child.
In those early weeks
she kept down nothing
but banana chips and pink
popsicles. Her breasts
and belly distended
from a dwindling frame
as she called him
by a name she hasn't
told her husband.

Outside of her dogs, she finds
no reprieve from people—
there are so many of them.
You ought to control your temper.
You should stay calm for the baby.
The satisfaction of justified
judgment—that they might
someday say I saw it coming.
But she is not to be undone.

The baby seems to summersault.
She is sure he will leave marks
inside her—fetal cave paintings.

Somewhere the suggestion
of a thought begs her notice—
I am not as angry as they think
—but it passes through her
without pause, leaving only
a thread-thick wake which sends
this softening across her shoulders.
She breathes from the fresh bottle
of lotion. “This one is nice,” she tells
the black lab sprawled
beneath her feet, holding out
the bottle, squeezing
the fragrance his way.
A large nose lifts long enough
to decide *inedible* before resettling.
She rubs his thick ear between her toes, emptied
enough to feel content for now.

Mothers Are for Setting Loose

Mine would fling me into a tower
with a typewriter and *Middlemarch*
if she could find one for rent in Scottsdale.
She hates that I'm in love.
Her marriage can't be so bad—
I have watched it lumber reliably
for decades, beige Volvo of romance.
Sometimes they dance in the kitchen,
play cards nightly, still have good sex,
my father says after a second gin and tonic.

And the woman herself finishes novels
like the backs of cereal boxes, studies
poems on the porch while Dad feeds
his koi; she texts me her favorite lines—
a woman who didn't finish college, but grows
roses—Ophelia, Penelope, Mr. Lincoln.
She forms collages of art clippings, lines
from books, delicately-shaded
tissue paper—all adhered beneath swirls
of translucent wax. She is a marvel
of personhood, but begrudges me
this love. She sees her life, richly populated
with pleasure and thought, as a mistake. I place
degrees and poems at her feet, hoping
for guiltless time of my own.

Still, she is proud of me—but what am I reading
now? Haven't I been at that one for ages? And
this poem is fine, but I've begun to read aloud
in that way, that "poet" way she cannot stand,
so could I perhaps start again, this time in my own voice?

Dogsitter

She beheaded him
accidentally. Fisted
cleaver drawn
to an irrepressible
bark. Mounded flesh
on the kitchen floor
sends off threads
of blood through grout—
how long before
a damp nose
goes dry?

There's no coming back
from dog murder,
she thinks, watching
the edges of her lapse
in judgment crawl
glisteningly under
the fridge.

Such a mess she's made.
Less appealing now
in the barkless
dénouement.

She removes her sandals—
places her feet
in the blood
quickly cooling
on air conditioned tile.
At least it has the slip
she hoped for.

She could hide
the body in the desert,
let coyotes tidy up
before the owner
returns on Sunday.

She lifts a foot
and wipes it across
gritty pelt,

digs her toes
into the ribcage
so a kind
of hiss expels
from the cavern of him.

If she were a man
she would've tortured
or fucked him
before the precious
slice, but no one
will appreciate her
civility, her tenderness.
She will hide nothing.

Weight

I lose forty-three pounds, diminish
to an object less offensive—that tired
female compulsion to occupy
as little space as possible.

Come summer I visit my mother's hometown
in the Deep South, fall in love
with its sumptuously fat women. They are marvels—
voluminous, dewy blooms, each cascading
over her waistband. Magnificent
iced cakes. Improbable swoops of frosting.

I cherish their ability to take up
more than was allotted, to burst—
impressive laughs, fuchsia lips, tight jeans.

And I'd like to take the hand of one, undress her,
pull her loose of all her colors, watch her spread
out before me, grasp those always-warm and hidden
places, roll across the bed—feel what it is to shake
the world without apology.

Scraps

My mother wrote her life on any surface. Misspellings penciled on a paperback. *Mischivious?* *Mischevous?* she asks Eudora Welty. She kept score of nightly card games with my father on unfolded envelopes. Long division in the newspaper. Directions on a receipt. Arched-nose profile of some wide-eyed woman drawn over and over across an insurance bill while on the phone with her father.

And I remember how often she asked me about my cats. Her own mother loathed cats, never allowed them around.

“Can you tell if they’re pleased when you come home?” she asked. “Do they show happiness? Not contentment, happiness?”

Orthodontics

The assistant, blond and motherly, says they must take another mold of his teeth. Like the dentist next door, the orthodontist (I hear him laughing in his office) is a necktie surrounded by pretty lavender scrubs. Later I will ask my son about this (did you notice anything about the orthodontist, the assistants?) Where there is room (time, energy, patience) I try, in my faltering way, to usher him beyond the world as it is. He asks for the grape-flavored plaster, adds, "Last time I did it in less than a minute. She said it was a record." He constructs this sentence as if he were the active party in having a cold tray of goop thrust into his mouth. "Is that right?" she says, shaking powder off gloves, unwrapping sterile tools. What pride he gathers in such odd places. There are questions he must answer: Who is this boy? What sort of person will he be? He hoards scattered half-praise, hoping to claim another part of himself. When she slips the tray of plaster into his mouth, I remember being twelve, the suppressed gag as cold slop slid up my gums. He wiggles his feet and closes his eyes: he will be accommodating, efficient, fearless.

Preacher's Daughter

He speaks primarily of his loneliness. The way,
as he grew older, his relationship with God changed.

How, when he was younger, he felt connected
to a God he called Daddy—profound spiritual intimacy.

How, over time, this understanding of God developed
into one of a nondescript entity—less personal, less specific.

How, without that connection, he finds himself
plunged into loneliness and fear of death.

You can't be lonely when you're dead, he says,
but I think I will be.

And I think I have never loved my father more. For being
a man who calls his atheist daughter to say these things—

a man who thinks these things. A man who can say,
All my life I have been lonely.

If Jodie Loved Herself a Little More

She would hate her daughters, every slip
of knowledge and beauty divvied
among their tan limbs. Chastened,
she listens as they tell her the proper way
to eat, exercise, read—which lipstick
leaves her sallow, which skirts
are too short for her age.

Back when they were a row
of waist-high, nearly compliant pups,
they gorged on bread—sugar dumped
over blasphemously white
wonders, margarine-smeared.

Now her frenetic mob boils
saltless pots of green lentils—*So good,*
so good! they say. Jodie eats
dutifully, adding only pepper.

She tries not to remember sweetly wasted
Saturdays, soft pile of daughters
in her bed—juice-stained, syndicated
laughter, flash-pan disputes. None
of this sinew, false adolescent alliances.

Jodie considers smearing a glob
of bacon fat into their pot
of barley wet with spinach.
Just let it melt, corrupt.

They're boring, really, her daughters.
She finds a fat silly book, buries herself
in purple down, closes the bedroom
to those pleasureless creatures
perfecting their art of deprivation.

Marriage

Waiting for his angry body to disturb
the air, for the dim bedroom light to split
across his silence. His power is a cold sludge
that soaks the carpet, makes a sickly slurp
as I wrench each foot from the slop.
My power is a life without him
woven in sad, secret moments, pulled
around me as I wait for his flesh to shift
the seas of our sheets, sink us in silence.

1995

“I forbore to remark that women like me really expected very little—nothing, almost.”

—Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*

I had an abortion
got divorced
cleaned with white vinegar
wore thrifted tees
chucked the television
ate lemon-dribbled salmon
read in tall grasses
gathered skulls
of fallen grapefruit
slept naked
shaved nothing
bathed in warm cream
forgave no one but myself

Hypothetical

One may be inclined to feel childish for cutting into oneself as an adult. The onset of Non-Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI), as the *DSM* refers to it, occurs most often in adolescence. So should one engage in this behavior in adulthood, one may feel like something of a whiny little bitch. These feelings are natural. Expected, even. So when one's husband tells one to *Just calm down*, one may choose to tell him to *Just fuck off*.

When one is in possession of a multiple mental illnesses, one may sometimes feel like a magic eight ball, a cheap object perpetually shaken, uncertain of which particular imbalance will float forward. One would like to say that one's Sertraline was prescribed for one's anxiety or depression, rather than one's unwieldy PMS.

One might like to think that, when time and money are short, one may spread one's dose thin for a few days, just until one may get a refill. One would like to think this small adjustment could occur without one slumping to the floor, shouting obscenities, smearing mucus across the pants of one's spouse, retreating to a bathroom in which one places lines across one's leg which appear too small to have been made with a bread knife, but indeed were. But one may not always avoid such outcomes.

In these moments, one may find oneself fixated on a recollection. For example, observing a man on the lightrail who took a pocketknife for a swim across his arm with a swift ease which one couldn't help but admire. One may also recall how this man observed one observing blood spill across his jeans, how each drip stained them purple, how this man looked at one directly, even as his blood plopped to a jostling floor and his soiled jeans, and said to one, *Oh why can't blood be blue?*

One may think, upon examining such a memory, that one's own pain is neither so acute nor so beautiful as that of the man on the lightrail. Still, one knows that one would not like to trade with this man—after all, one's own NSSI will cease once one's pills have again entered one's blood and wrapped their little fists around one's rioting hormones. In a day or two, one will sometimes forget about the crumbling lines across one's thigh, until one sits upon the toilet, and will suddenly recall, and touch, one's shame.

Descendants of Dinah

Children in a bloated creek fling
petals of goat soap upstream.
There is no end to the number of times
a person can be struck in the cheek
by a brass buckle.

She rubbed glistening fat
into each udder and used a gleaming
oyster knife to carve the head
and horns of a ram into round, bluish bars.

When the milk foamed up crushed
clover her stepfather slit
their furred throats—a field
of dark, juicy cane slashed
down to soaked earth.
He left his boots on the porch
to go crisp with blood...

She left their bodies rotting a week before
burning the barn. Left her apron
folded on the soft banks, clad
in blossoms of mildew and goat shit.
Twenty miles south, a girl with red
hair cooling her feet watched
creamy suds blanch a lily pad.

1515 Swallowtail Road

After calling the children in, skinny
chlorinated cousins slipping
across porch tiles, Mimi waits
for the storm, grinds humidity
between her molars. When lightning
finally falls, a gold stream of Wesson oil
pours through the trees, roughly
rips the old magnolia in two.

She spoons pimento cheese on square bread,
passes paper plates around the table
of children, their hair drying stickily
over pinked shoulders. She can feel—not
the light—but the crack. She wonders
what has been cloven, where the pieces will fall.

*

Granddaddy Puck stands in the doorway,
one foot dipped in the cold pools
of dementia, and thinks of killing himself.
His wife turns from their mirror, the needle
of an earring paused against her long
lobe—she sees that liquid ring wetting
the hem of his slacks, measures the depth
of waters he can only name as cold. *But
he listens so sweetly now. Doesn't mind
if we miss the early service.*

*

As a girl, Sarah fell onto this bed with brickdust
on her cheeks, too hot to worm under aubergine
blooms dripping to the bed skirt. Now the quilt
needs dry cleaning, puce petals thin as papering skin.

She hears her brother having sex with his wife
in the next room—the family only comes here
for funerals now—and she touches the wall.

For whole summers they dug for treasure, kicked
anthills and watched them riot, tore the hot end
off lightning bugs and stuck them to their flesh—flecks
of gold across foreheads, encircling wrists.

In the morning, they picked crushed bulbs
from the sheets, filaments gone gray—he told her
those flames belonged to them now. He told her
that light is never lost—it only moves, and moves again.

Lucy Allen

She told us about everything
she planted, boy who brought
her oranges, barbeque
eaten at the gas station
like she was doing them a favor, scent
of the bayou in December (*bah-oo*
she said). Smelled like—I can't
remember, so I fill in: wet iron fence,
rotting cypress leaves, cold skin
of some unhappy bullfrog. My visits
were all summertime sticky—I
hadn't realized Mississippi
even knew about winter.

Lucy danced while she sat. Swung
her knees, sidled white tennies.
This was the old Parkinson's
but she made it seem
a fidget, as if she couldn't wait
to tell the next story.

We all sweated and rambled and shook air
into our shirts while Lucy danced, got up
too early, ate nearly nothing, grew
butterfly bushes taller than her,
lilies that died in a day.

At Sixty-One

She enters the unlit den where her mother, ninety-two, looks out the window from her wheelchair. She sits on the piano bench beside her mother, who holds a small glass of wine with a cube of ice dissolving across its surface. She asks her mother

if she is ready for bed so that she can wheel her back, hand her a toothbrush and damp washcloth, lift the blouse from her body, supervise the swallowing of pills, tug the hearing aid free, finally feed her to the sheets. *I'll be ready in ten minutes*, her mother says.

She takes her mother's hand, braided in blue and far too small—a cool, delicate object she scarcely recognizes. She cannot guess if this is what her mother wants—to sit in silent darkness, hand enclosed in a daughter's grasp.

Perhaps her mother would rather be alone. More history presses against her than one daughter can process, and she becomes aware of her own ineptitude for sorting and identifying feelings. She never got along with her mother

who, in another time, might never have had children. Certainly not four. This woman who, at seventeen, dragged her every belonging to the curb to sell for a ticket to New York. How could such a girl settle for mid-century suburbia?

How could she forgive her children for existing? The room is stuffy, the streetlamp across the yard unnaturally yellow. She thinks she should be able to tell, just from their hands, whether this moment brings pleasure to her mother. Some inward tug or warmth

triggered by touch. But she cannot tell. She thinks some fond memory should float forward, a tender recollection to place inside the hearing aid beside her. But nothing comes to mind. She can only wade through these ten minutes before rising up to be of use.

Ninety-Two

I saw the Taj Mahal,
though you wouldn't think it
to see me or our town.
I went to Istanbul, Barcelona,
places I can't recall.
Africa, even. A few years ago
I went to a meeting
for elderly folks
at the Lutheran church.
They had crafts, little talks,
lunch—something to get us
out of the house. They would ask us
questions about our lives. Like
where was our favorite place
we'd ever been. Not one but mine
was out of the country. One lady
said the Memphis Zoo.
So that made me grateful.
There are pictures
that my children and theirs,
year to year, pull from attics,
trunks, dressers to ask me about.
I used to answer, but now
I marvel. To see one's life
for the first time. And I am proud
of that woman when I see her.
She's well-dressed and confident
wherever she stands. Though
I never thought so at the time.

Beginnings

“Love so sprang at her, she honestly thought no one had ever looked into it. Where was it in literature? Someone would have written something. She must not have recognized it. Time to read everything again.”

—Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees*

I didn't know love would mean sucked toes,
greasy hair, too much tongue. We sleep and eat
and let our laundry pile up. Empty the litter box,
get better at oral, drink more coffee even when
the milk is three days past due. I practice not criticizing
or *being nice*, as he calls it. My hand gains dexterity.
I lose a little weight, still eat all the wrong things.
And when he comes in from his shower, he gets back
into bed with me, a new warm thing entering
my sleep and my limbs. The same revelation
ten times a day—the same messy adoration.

His Cat

When I lift her she is long and loosely
spined, the swell of her belly
in the cup of my hand. She has been trying, again,
to lick oil from a cold skillet. I drop her
to the tile and she mews grumpily—
I'm always interrupting her work.

It's impossible not to wonder what I am
to this cat, if she recalls the ex-wife
when she finds me in his bed. He says
her reserve won't outlast winter, and it seems
important business, this winning over of a cat.

I drop her a pinch of shredded cheese—perhaps
there can be an understanding. This narrow black
creature watches me more than the man
in his office does. *Soon we'll both be captives
of winter.* I scatter more parmesan.

When I bring home a thrift store desk, she mounts
beside me. She's here for the window but permits
my observation. Pale pricks of nail and teeth, reposed
threat. The man in his office I learn by dark, one
trembling thigh, the thin skin of a neck felt rather
than seen. Even by day he averts—*I intimidate him,*

or that is the claim. *And what to make of his penchant
for our kind?* she asks, nosing the bottom
of my empty milk glass. *We are hungry, strange-
throated creatures,* I agree. And my threat—?

I press her sleeping paw
between my fingers, translucent
menace from tufts of black.
It seems good, at least, that
we have met.

New England

I'm still deciding what this is the edge of.
Across the river, Canada confuses
the time zone on my cell and at night
pervades a stillness I choose not to consider.

Thin, stationary clouds waiting for November, crow
in the uppermost branches—that I'm in love
is a certainty. The nature of that love is less
apparent. He remains more patient, bright,
gentle—but that's no name for us.

He cups the cheek of his cat on our heavy
winter bedding. They sleep like this till midday,
both wheezing shy of a snore. Who could break
the heart of such a man? Who could be so brave
as to try not to?

It's nearly too cold now to sit outside,
but my west coast blood and I brave
the soggy grass, mark the iced passing
of a train I only see now that the leaves
have dropped. Maybe it's merely
the season—a shift still so foreign
to me—that leaves even love dormant.

Plenty of the birds remain all winter.
Swathes of black satin shredded
in the branches. I wish I could tell them
apart, forge some recognition. But they resist
my careful eye and that oldest need, to name.

And if I don't want to give it all to poetry?

Can't we just eat together, shield our eyes
at midday, talk now and for hours
without any thought of putting it to page?
Tonight, I will lean into the slicked tiles
of the shower as long as the water stays
hot, and when I go to bed, fall asleep
in a moment. And if I'd rather have
a lovely kitchen—what then? Copper
pots, thick walnut counters warm
with beeswax. Scrubbed floors
and long-necked flowers dropped
into a pitcher of cold water. A cat
chirping through the screen. Dinners
of roasted root vegetables and loose
laughter, more sleep. There are worse ways
to waste a life. Particularly if the poetry
is never good enough. How does one write
a poem better than blueberry pie or beef stew—
well why not just make the pie,
call it a day, a lie, a life?

Unwise, I know,

to ask about those women
he dated before me. Particularly now,
three weeks before our wedding and, if
we're being honest, just before my period—
days of perpetual tenderness, hours
of hopeless provocation, senseless
disputes. But I press on calmly in the dark,
inquire about her hair, her skin, her doctorate.

Dinner

Over the blush body of a split steelhead
we stand together in ignorance.
Neither of us has cooked fish before.
I run a finger down the packed segments—pink
and gleaming as the cells of a grapefruit—feeling
for bones, thinking of some gloved woman
in a factory doing the same before dropping
its cool body onto this styrofoam tray.
Or maybe it's done by machines.

Very few species can recognize third-party
relationships. A dolphin knows who,
among a team of researchers, is in charge.
An elephant, remembering each calf and
to whom she belongs, will call to the mother
whose child is in danger. To my knowledge,
trout are not members of this little club.
There is, perhaps, no species but ours
that can contemplate the purely
second-hand, as I measure myself
against a first wife never met, now dead.

I swipe warm lemon butter down its body
and he sprinkles salt, pepper, and parsley
before we slide it under the broiler.
We are never in the kitchen together,
but this fish has brought us here.

When I ask him what emotions he thinks
are unique to humans, he says, "Fear
of death," then refines this to "existential
dread." He later adds, "Awe—because
you can't explain the universe to a crow."
He's probably right, but tonight I'm not
prepared to deny any feeling, even to a trout.

Where, then, is my poetry?

I fear that I could live without it,
which is to say that I have nothing.

I find the easiest word,
the slack verb, forget to save
the smaller thoughts. I discard
and roll over, blame
love and happiness
for a fat mind and empty
printer. Better to make
cookies, have sex, sleep late—
sins against no god
but ambition.

July

Then the summer
our cat seemed to lose
her mind, crying all day
at every door and window,
clambering into the tub,
onto the toilet seat, pacing
across our pillows.

We held her like an infant,
fork-fed albacore, crossed
the yard with her in the rain,
brought home little more
than a scrap
of wet black ribbon.

We felt her agitation,
animal yearning, deep
dissatisfaction. *What,*
what do you want?
And was there anything
we wanted so badly
as what our small cat
called for?

To Amy, first wife

If I wasn't so anxious and you weren't so dead,
we'd have coffee and look into the women
who looked into our husband. I've seen
just one photo of you—arms full of laundry,
striding through the door in full sail, smiling.
I was relieved by your plainness, disarmed
by resemblance—both of us pale, dark-haired,
unremarkable. Of your wedding, he tells me
about flowers in your hair, a miserably hot day,
inedible cake, vows you wrote yourselves. You know
his way of speaking only in simple truths. Here's one
of mine: I've no easy way to tell your story
when people ask, no right to say what little I know.
Three bouts of cancer. Addiction. Divorce. Death.
Before that, just two people new to each other,
not wanting to unravel because of one lump
in one breast, a marriage of hope and green cards
more than love (but this is only what he tells me—
perhaps you loved him; felt loved by him).
Two people never imagining another mass
buried behind your eye or that your archeology
PhD would remain unfinished.

In the closet I find the painting you gave him,
ask why it's not hung. "It's too sad," he says.

Next Winter

We eat cold salted steak from hands
stained and scratched in blackberry
bushes on the river. I roll out a slab
of dough, fold the edges over
mounds of sweetened fruit.
The galette bakes, berries run
their juices across the pan, smoke
in the oven. Too much sun
and food for regret, and I slice up
the mess even as it bubbles, drips off
the board, pools redly on the counter.

We keep eating. On one end of the yard
crickets and heavy toads. On the other
goldenrod, queen anne's lace. Mosquitos
too, temperamental geese, fleas on the cat—
and long white nights wait for us
somewhere ahead.

Cat Poem

At barely five pounds, Bee's fur is thin
and brittle, her hips slice upwards
as she walks. Still, she's devoted
to my cooking, chirps by the stove,
doesn't trust me to decide what she'd like.
I line up morsels on the tile:
mozzarella, tomato, chicken.
Yes, no, yes. More, please.

His first wife slid from cancer to painkillers
and back. He reviewed Polaroids for Aetna
of breast reduction candidates while she
bounced between pharmacists, adjusted
to her auburn hair returning frizzy and black.

Everything Bee eats shoots through her,
winds up running along the grout in a variety
of unpleasant shades. The morning after we shared
our lobster rolls, the house was redolent of seafood,
Her puddles tinted pink. When she screams for food
we give her more and more—everything we have—
knowing we'll sop it up in the morning.

There are two types of women who apply
for breast reductions. Those whose
whole bodies are heavy, whose breasts swell
and fall over other swollen, falling parts.
And those with small, thin frames whose breasts
hang in disproportion, ballooning off otherwise
tiny bodies. All have born their burdens,
backaches, stretch marks, and, probably,
cruel remarks—till this indignity: a flash,
indents down their shoulders, faces
out of frame. A vulnerable moment
shipped off to distant hands.

Early, before we've faced all that Bee has left us,
she climbs into bed between our bodies, circles,
settles, rubs her dirty chin against my thumb, purrs
so heavily it seems to have doubled inside her,
buries her small skull in his palm.
For a moment, she isn't hungry.

He will answer any question I ask about Amy.
Did you try her drugs? Were you there when she
died? Did she use your last name? Others
I can never voice, and fill in myself. The smell
of her stomach, sound of her moan,
moment he admired her most.

In the afternoons, Bee pines for sun, stretches
across a mote-filled patch on my desk, flecks
of dust settling in thin black fur that glows
burgundy in the light. This was her cat first.
Even after the divorce she stayed with Amy,
passing to him only when she was dead.
I can't know what she remembers of Amy,
what questions she could answer. Or whether
she would tell me, even if she could.

"The night / Always fails"

After deciding that all of my feelings
are a bowl of cold soup gelled over

I abandon them in the kitchen sink,
retreat to my box of a bathroom

where I cut off the lights and twirl
the shower knobs to full steam ahead.

That poems try to write themselves
on the dirty bottom of the tub where I sit

speaks to how long I've been doing this.
That they are bad poems speaks to how difficult

this will always be. I gather each leg into my arms
to hush myself in this makeshift womb.

I have done all of these things since childhood:
spat up poem shards and turned raw red

under a limey spout. In the darkness I cannot
make out the words being written around me and wish

that I could let them go, let every line stuff my drain
like hair, until a shower is just a shower, and never a poem.