

ALSO, KIND OF ABOUT BREASTS

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A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Creative Writing

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Camden, New Jersey

May 2015

THESIS ABSTRACT

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Also, Kind of About Breasts is a hybrid collection of poetry and lyric essays that explores one girl's coming of age and journey through suicide, sex, and the suburbs. It is a celebration of powerful females that swears to break social silences about violence, mental illness, gender roles, and of course, breasts.

DEDICATION

For my mother in honor of your love, your friendship, and your immense strength.

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I. Suburbia

Postmarked: Philly

Our legs are wobbly with lactic acid and wine
by the time we reach the front door and buzz
for the concierge, we have left our key, so instead
we are cutting a rug in the lobby—waiting.

We don't have much, my parents and I,
but we have our arms linked at the elbows,
six legs trying to keep rhythm in our steps.

We have the wind. But, we couldn't pay
to hail a cab from Broad and South, and yes,
we charged the cocktails we had no
business ordering to our tab. Yes, we're cold,
so by the time we reach 17th and Market
we begin running—legs low to the ground
like snow dogs. Street signs are whizzing
past, there goes 16th, 15th, Broad. We turn:
three little pigs running between buildings,
escaping cold like a big bad wolf on our heels.

I am traversing the steps of my parents
childhood—Philly's salty beneath my shoes,
but I am learning what it means to love.

No, to remember all the times we have
laughed, cutting a rug in the lobby—
we're always having no money and dancing
a big bellied chorus chucked into air.

I know there have always been times

like this: how could there not when my ear
can decipher the particular sound of their steps
with a blindfold? There will always be times
if we let them in when laughter knocks
on our hearts, beyond the corner of Broad and
South. Beyond the memory of any night passed
between us, all we have to do is link our arms
—never stop moving our soles.

On Learning How to be a Woman

Rule #1: On Things Every Women Should Have in Her Purse—matches, pens, foundation, keys that mostly open the doors, lipstick, perfume, Xanax, pictures of the one's you love, hairpins, diet coke, notepad, pictures of the ones you love, coin purse, bankcard, receipts from the nights you want to remember, Altoids, aspirin, receipts from the ones you don't, batteries, sanitizer, comb.

1. I am in my mother's stomach and she is going to carry me to term even if I kill her in the process. My name is Justin if I come out a boy. Amanda if a girl. My mother is walking the halls of the apartment in Houston where she's followed a husband and his job, in the August heat she wants me out early. She is so very far from home and family and help. She has a kidney disease. She is not yet twenty-three. She can't wait to meet me, the baby she's risked death for, wanting me more than life. She does squats against the walls to induce labor—entice me—but I am stubborn and I won't budge—not for days.
2. The first time my mother tried to kill herself was before the idea of me was born. Before she married, but after she moved to Florida the first time because her parents unenrolled her from the college of her dreams and spent the money on a summer home. Before we would move there again when I was four. Before I would carry a small wicker loveseat down the ramp of our cramped Uhaul truck

all by myself and after my father asked her to marry him for the first time. She swallowed a bottle of aspirin and her body swelled as it did with me inside.

3. My mother took with fever a week into my life and so I became familiar first with the drink of formula before I learned the taste of mother's milk. I became familiar first with my father heating up that formula and sleeping sitting up in bed, one eye on me all night. I became familiar first with the smothering of a blanket against his chest as I was rushed into the hospital to visit my mother in bed. I will spend a lifetime being whisked to lay prostrate at the foot of many beds, many mother's whims. I will take this same pilgrimage to a hospital bed in Florida, and the sight of her once perfectly manicured nails—now roughly chipped by the nurse—will somehow feel like the worst injury of all. I claim my earliest memory to be of me lying in the alcove of my parent's Houston bedroom, me sleeping with one eye open on my mother in a yellow bassinet. I see this moment, whether it happened or not, as clear as a photograph: the light is hazy afternoon and my mother is young—younger than I ever remember her to be. She is wearing a white floral silk robe and her long black hair is parted to the left. Most important is her smile, there is an easiness to it, the smile. An easiness I don't recall ever finding outside of this singular image. This may be the day she was rushed to the hospital or it may be a calm moment of happiness. Mother watching daughter. Daughter watching mother. One can never tell—except there is that smile, which strikes me now as the most important part of it all.

4. Any time we watch a play, a movie, even a TV show, my mother and me, I tense if suicide rears its ugly head before us. I break out in dry sweats and feel my last meal rising from the bottom of my gut. And for the duration, I have to visibly resist the urge to watch my mother instead of the show.

Rule #2: On Things to Hide in a Nightstand—vibrating toothbrush (3 count), edible fairy dust, ultra-ribbed Trojan condoms (1 36 ct. box), memories, dead batteries, Loestrin birth control (unopened), Joy, KY Ultra-smooth Warming Lube, Yaz birth control (expired), dark blue baby socks, Alieve Gel Capsules, tears, vibrating penis ring (waterproof), strength, daydreams, feminine wiles, Alpropopazal (0.5 grams), blue aloe infused mittens (prevents scratching), pink fuzzy sleep mask (prevents dignity), Nyquil Sinus (empty box), glow-in-the-dark sexy dice, Extra-strength Hydrocortisone, pictures (unmarked), Ortho Evra (3 patches), blue bic lighter, used daisy razor, anything small and needing concealment.

5. I cried the day I got my period and my mother threw a party with homemade onion dip. She mixed together sour cream and a powdery mixture. We ate chips with my father in front of the tv. It wouldn't be until I was sixteen that I learned how to use a tampon, from my first boyfriend, shortly after his own suicide attempt, outside a bathroom at Quiznos Subs.

6. At around three I learn the word “bitch” from my Nana on a drive, in which she must have be yelling in traffic, to pick my father up at a place she can’t remember and which I manage to navigate us towards, even though I am too young to read a map. I try out the word myself a few weeks later on a friend of my mothers who is taking too long to leave and earn a night in my room when I was supposed to be at Nana’s. It will be years before I learn that bitch is a word of convenience you earn when you’re a woman, a badge of sorts.

7. I don’t remember the first time my mother bought me a slimmer, but I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t expected to wear one when we went out. For as long as I can remember, my mother has waxed poetic about the week she spent on only Diet Coke to fit in the jeans she had to lie flat on the bed to button around her waist. In Philly, where we both have moved in hopes to find gratitude, we sometimes share one slimmer between us. We say it’s because it’s the most perfect slimmer either of us has ever found and it feels as if it travels between our two apartments almost on its own. Its black boned fabric moves with you like another layer of skin, and maybe it has a whole lot more to do with that.

Rule #3: On Things to Strap Down in a Storm: lawn chairs, pool slides, windows, doors, bicycles, daisies, grill tops, welcome mats, mothers, arms.

8. At my best friend Aisha's house deep in a suburb of Old Carrollwood Village on a day I wear my favorite pair of butterfly jeans, we touch ourselves under her yellow crocheted blanket and then she touches me, standing in her room. We are ten. I have no words for it, these movements she makes out of boredom that build a feeling inside of me like a glass being filled too high with soda. The second time my mother attempts to end her life will be the same year. She parks herself somewhere on Bearss out by the highway. I will travel that same road to college, daily wondering just where she pulled off.

9. I am a child kneeling on my mother's bed while she places my favorite baby-doll in my crib she has set up with my father in their room. I am praying with my Momma for my favorite doll to turn into a baby overnight because she can have no more children and she wants another child more than I think she wants me. I had a brother once. He had golden blonde hair and laughed with the whole of his round-apple cheeks. He came in the dead of night. He came like a miracle after our prayers. And though we only had him for a little over a year, I still have his socks tucked away in a drawer. I still remember the Christmas wrap with the happy Christmas teddy's. We called him Cody Bear.

10. When I go off to grad school my mother buys an emotional support Chihuahua, complete with papers to fly for free when she comes to visit me. She names her Penny Lane, dresses her in tiny little dresses that look strangely similar to my

own, and calls her baby in a way I can't remember her ever referring to me. For months after the birth of that dog I imagine cooking it for Thanksgiving dinner. I refer to Penny as the Tur-dog-en, and everyone can sense a slight resentment behind my teasing. A few days before the puppy's first visit to my new apartment, a play pen arrives. My fiancé and I spend hours putting the pieces together with equal amounts confusion and bemusement. And it is true, I really wanted to go on hating that dog. Yet, I couldn't deny the lovable quality of its warm, six pound body curled around me to sleep. The way her big brown eyes looked at me with so much need was intoxicating. I've never had a little sister before.

Rule #4: On Things Acceptable to Lie About—weight (within the realm of ten pounds), the consumption of too much wine or champagne, age, haircuts, funky smells, success of performances (onstage, off), calories, the presences of dirt (provided it's swept under a rug), any and all hurt.

11. My mother asks me to wait until my sixteenth birthday to lose my virginity and like the good little girl I am, I wait a month past. On an October afternoon I let him have me in a room that smelled of Sazón and mothballs with five o'clock light peeking through broken blinds. It hurt the way a mother never tells you it will, like burning from the inside out. Afterwards, despite the pain when I pee, I feel accomplished.

12. I am home from school on one of those bogus holidays. My mother and I are spending the day together, a rare occurrence since her returning to school after my foster brother, Cody, came and left. We are laying in her king size bed watching Shrek on VHS. We are singing to the ending medley of songs, we chorus “Like a virgin/touched for the very first time.” We eat popcorn by the handful out of a big glass bowl. In a moment, I am laughing and then I am silently crying because I don’t want days like this to end for us and I know they will. My parents were looking to adopt another child. No one could deny that a baby would be the best way to fill the void that Cody had left, not even me. We had spent weeks watching videos of babies come in the mail. Each face playing with blocks on a tiled floor went into immediate consideration. When I finally told my mother what was wrong that day, we never talked of the adoption again. I dried my tears and we shared a bowl of creamed chipped beef. The videos stopped coming in the mail. I never find the words to say thank you and I’m so sorry.

Rule #5: On Dates Not to Breathe—December 27th, February 24th, July 13th, March 19th-24th, January 1st, July 4th weekend, all of October, November 1st.

13. My mother locked herself in the studio we spent thousands of dollars to build for her to make costumes, for her to have a place of her own to create. She turned on the t.v. for a pill downing ceremony. We watched Nick at Night in our separate rooms, her perhaps saying goodbye and me cowering in nondescript fright. I will make a habit of replaying scenarios of this very night for years.

Whenever sleep refuses to take, I will wonder how many pills she took at a time—whether one can of diet coke was sufficient liquid to down two bottles of pills or if some were taken with just the liquid of her mouth. What sort of rest conquers when that many pills overtake the body? I will always wonder how many opportunities I had to go to her, knock on the closed door and stop it from taking place. I will replay this night with something like a dangerous wishing I had the courage to repeat it myself, to prove I could be selfish enough—brave enough—to be a woman who plays with that kind of fire.

14. My mother says that not moments after my birth, I was whisked away with the nurses and my father for a whole ten minutes before anyone remembered she was there, at all.
15. The morning after my mother downs the hundred pills, my father and I go to breakfast at IHOP. We let her sleep in because we don't know she is lying on the garage wood floor. It is the same IHOP I ran around not months before, threatening to throw myself into traffic while my first boyfriend ended things on the phone and I eat the same pancakes I ate the day my grandfather died.
16. For a year straight I would cry ear shattering screams every time my mother dropped me off at school, I was what the school psychologist referred to as Mommy Obsessed. My mother could not leave the house to visit friends, take an

overnight trip, or a long path without me getting irrationally antsy. I couldn't be without her for longer than a few minutes at a time without a sinking pit in the bottom of my stomach that she wouldn't return.

Rule #6: On Moments of Unlikely Gratitude—taking off a bra at the end of the day and rubbing a hand underneath each cup, sprawling the body out on an empty bed once crowded, changing a light bulb months unattended, trashing empty take out containers, stepping out of the rain and into a wine warmed room, finishing a sentence that's taken months to speak.

17. I bought my first ex-boyfriend a Zippo lighter as an opening night present for *The Diary of Anne Frank* at Alonso High School. I was sixteen. I thought the lighter would restore normalcy between us again. He would see it and kiss me like he kissed me in the dressing room of our first show together. All hands underneath my tank top as I tried to wash paintbrushes in the sink. All hot lips on my neck and pushing my head downward in the band room between scenes. I thought if he liked the lighter, he would love me like he loved me before. I didn't know that this begging was like playing with fire or that he would let another girl from the show wear the black Beatles hat I had given him for Christmas to strike. He took her to the movies the next day, probably had my lighter in his back pocket the whole time.

18. On a tour bus going from Miami to Tampa, I am in the arms of the hottest loser in the show. He is tan with a tattoo of an old nineties cartoon I have never heard of and I have picked him because he has no future. It is dark and my father is riding in the front of the bus asleep. I am in high school. I am in the mood for danger. He tells me he is in the army, about to be called back for a second tour. He tells me lies about sleeping sitting up with his head on the butt of a gun and though I know he just wants sex, I do not care. We are the only ones awake in the middle of the night and the last twelve hours have led up to nothing but this moment. It starts off slowly with him rubbing my thigh, endlessly and with more patience than I would ever have. In the end, he flicks me off when he finishes into his own hands. When he comes back from the bus bathroom he seems shocked when I kiss him on the mouth. A month and a half later my period is late. I become convinced that something could have gotten in the wrong place and I tell my mother. The next night she brings home a pregnancy test from the all night Wal-Mart and waits outside while I incorrectly pee on the stick. She tucks me in with promises to wake me up the next day to take it correctly. When the test is negative, there is a look of shocking disappointment behind my mother's eyes that's hard to decipher.

19. My mother directed me as Anne in *The Diary of Anne Frank* at our high school. My boyfriend—the one that was no good, the one that would try to kill himself in front of us, the one that would cost my mother her teaching job—was playing

my father, Otto. In the last scene, the Nazis find them hiding in the attic. We were blocking this scene. Chris had been flat all rehearsal long. Chris was dead in the eyes. Chris, as Otto, did not call out. My mother took matters into her own hands. She climbed the steps of the stage. She grabbed me, Anne, me by the arms forcefully—my hands captured behind my back. She hauled me off the stage. She shouted things I do not remember now, but things that were hurtful. Her multicolored bracelet dug into my forearm, fingertips bruising in the shape of her grasp. We were almost in the wings when Chris yelled, fuck you. My mother took her seat in the audience. We ran the scene again and then Chris took me offstage. He kissed each red mark on my forearm. He kissed my lips. Tonight, would be the last night we ever had sex. Tonight, he would tell me I was beautiful and next week would be the end for us.

20. On the day teachers come from all over the country to observe my middle school class for the day, I get into a disagreement with a teacher at snack time over a missing signature on my Thursday Folder. She is wrong, Ms. Grady, I was absent when the folders went out and had just received mine to take home the period before—it was tucked neatly in my locker, in the large pouch of my backpack where I had stowed it with every intention of presenting it to my parents immediately upon their arrival at the end of the day. But this teacher wants me to pay a penance, she is pulling me by the arm to the gym housing the rest of the offenders sent to silent break. I am not an offender. I have spent each day of my

life trying to prevent this occasion. But Ms. Grady won't listen, how can she over her own voice, yelling? I break into hysterics of an uncontrollable force. Tears streaming down my face, breath catching in my throat, sides shaking. When the bell has rung and the observers come to my music class to watch us participate in Kagan Cooperative Learning Activities, I bawl through every exercise until I am allowed to go to the office and call my mother. I am sure she won't be able to get away, she is a teacher herself and it is the middle of the day. But what feels like minutes flat she arrives with a face made for vengeance and a body meant to shield me, back to the car where she drives me through McDonalds for a large french-fry, then back to her school to set up at her desk while she teaches for the rest of the day.

21. I take a boy to the cow pasture while my mother lays in her hospital bed across town. He is supposed to be driving me home. I tease his leg while we drive and he parks against the fence. He leans me back in the front seat of his blue Ford pick-up truck. He is hard like I have never seen, hard like a man and I tighten my pigtails after removing my dress. We are both disappointed that he doesn't have the condoms to go through with the act. When I finally visit my mother in the hospital, I tell her about this encounter because I can think of absolutely nothing else to say.

Rule #7: On Words to Hang Over the Make-Up Table: dahlia, gin, happiness like water, telex, split, all you do is perceive, falling, unbuilt bones, the namesake of body's questions, suicide, see now then, what we talk about when, you are free.

22. I am alone at the hospital the first time they bring me my cat to hold after her life threatening surgery. There is a list of rules of what not to do, a warning to be fragile with her, she still may not make it, and then I am absolutely alone. I am 23 and I have no idea what the hell I'm doing holding a life in my hands, have no idea how I could possibly be responsible for keeping another being alive. And the cat, she wants to jump. And the cat, she wants to run. She's equal parts fighting me and crying in pain from the movements it's taking to fight me, when I start to bawl. And there we are, the two of us, sobbing in the observation room with only each other to depend. And I swear I'm going to have to give her up, give her back to the nurse because I can't control her—have no business taking care of her—when another sound enters, she's purring. And this little thing, she loves me, and I've somehow managed to stop the crying with my touch. And I realize that sometimes that is all we have in the world, us women, moments of shooting in the dark until something gives.

Donna Reed, My Mother, and Me

I

My fiancé's mother wakes up at 5:30 every morning
to make a homemade espresso in a little tin pot

for her husband to properly send him off to work.
She cooks him eggs, bacon, toast in socked feet.

She doesn't leave herself until 9:00, but in pajamas
she watches the morning news, hovers over the stove,

brings food to the table, the paper. I picture her
as a golden retriever fetching slippers to be pet.

My fiancé's mother made him two PB&J's,
Gatorade, BBQ Fritos, and cuban crackers—

if his Yayi had been over the day before—everyday nestled
in a plastic grocery bag till he graduated high school here.

When my mother tried to kill herself for the third time,

I spent a week at that house. And my fiancé's mother made me
breakfast in the morning, the lunch I coveted for school and I

wished all day I could be my fiancé instead of me,
wearing borrowed boy's clothes, my mother on borrowed

time. Instead of the girl with the mother lying in hospital bed
her red nails broken off by a nurse taking her blood pressure.

II

When I'm sick at grad school my mother freaks out,
she goes on a maternal kick I haven't seen in years.

In high school she might not have been home
to heat me a can of Progresso. But from miles away
she orders groceries for delivery and a little old man brings
them to my door, says they don't have the crackers

she prescribed. I unpack a Progresso soup, light to keep
my diet, and I heat it with her waiting on the phone.

From a distance she hands me a juice, large green pills
to sleep off the afternoon. A coloring book—the old standard
for patients in our home. And to me this moment, canned

soup shared over the phone, her voice telling me what to do
is a start to something we will call forgiveness. And so, I let it in.

III.

In the middle of my cat's intestinal surgery
at the point when we had spent close to
five thousand dollars between us and I swore
I was keeping her alive through sheer force
of will and stubbornness—or maybe love
and as close as I've ever gotten to hope—
I talked to my mother on the phone. She said, you
are a good mother and at first without thinking
I repeated it back, like you do at a coffee shop
when someone in front of you mentions you have
pretty eyes. You are a good mother too, I said
for the first time in my life and on the line
there was something like a puzzle finished.
You are a good mother too. You are
a good mother too. You are good.

That Night

I didn't ride the ambulance with my mother.

I didn't see her aspirate the martinis and
day old nachos into her lungs, stomach swollen
with pills as if with child. That night I went
to the theatre because the show must go on.

In my memories of that night I am a prop
in my mother's performance. I flow
from hand to hand. I fade away. By my mother,
I hear myself ventriloquized—I say she is sick
with the flu. I say she has what is
going around. After all, it is the year
that suicide is catching in my life.

In blurred lyrics of Simon and Garfunkel
I float outside of myself. I levitate
over the prop table. In restless walks I prowl
the night. I am in the cat walk. On narrow streets
of cobblestone I wear my head set turned on mute.

I am on the stage. I am flickering the lights.

I gel with an ectoplasmic neon tinge.

I am the Super Invisible Girl. I move the sets
by myself, I lift the bed and place it
on the spikes. I lift and lock the barn door.

I become one of those mothers who lift cars
off their children in frantic panic. For my mother,

I will lift a car. I am not at the hospital
when she will only speak in sign language.
I am at the theatre, costumes in hand, dressing
faceless actors in the dark. Hello darkness
my old friend. I've come to talk for my mother
again. I dress in black like mourning.

I go to Scarborough Fair. I kiss the graduate
parked behind a sub-division. I wear pig-tails
like handlebars. On an abandoned road
in the cow pasture I let him touch me.
He does not taste like parsley or sage or rosemary.
He tastes like time. The hours I will lose. The tick
ticking childhood as my mother lay
in that hospital bed. She pulls my arm strings,
she tilts my head to the right, she bats
my eyes and brings the lead in
her show again and again and again.

Metempsychosis: The Princess of Darkness

When you flip on her lights
she is just another one
of her Mama's seven
babies beaten with a belt
when Mama told Papa
when they were bad
when they weren't
when when when—
Is she no more of
a monster, witch, ogre?
She did better by me.
She never raised
her hand. She wrote
love in my name.

One day when I
become my own
Princess of Darkness
I will down a bottle
of Zoloft with a glass
of Tawny Port wine,
I will lay down in a warm
bath and my body will melt
—piles of ash and pale
wings will grow

a beak will overtake
fire will spout
from my teeth
will bleed ink drops
and the stain left behind
will be more than
a chalk outline.

I will fly far above
the shadows of houses
like sitting ducks.
I too will ooze
so much lightning
from my tail.

My mistakes
will eclipse the sun.

II. Purgatoria

Chris [apply directly to the forehead]

I think the story begins with a stage, darkness. Or maybe it begins with the girl—alone in a spot light. No, it begins when he enters, the boy on the edge of the yellow pool of light. And of course he has the glass. Yes, this story always begins with the blue tinted drinking glass and the pink fluid, juice poured at a time when there was still childhood. No, the story begins with the crashing, the sound of the glass as it shatters to the floor.

When going to visit my boyfriend who tried to kill himself in the Children's Crisis Center, I put on the outfit from our first date. It is March. I do not drive. I am going to the Children's Crisis Center deep into Hillsborough Avenue passed the Starbucks you can see from North 275 to visit my boyfriend who is not quite my boyfriend anymore, but might be my boyfriend again. He told the doctor he loved me.

It is March. It is Friday. It has been two days since he broke the glass in his house. Two days since the two dots of blood on his jeans. Two weeks since he broke it off. One week since we closed the play. Hours, I count them, but should I really be counting seconds? The seconds it took the police to respond to the emergency call? Or the seconds it took to lead him to the backseat where he laid on his side handcuffed? They don't tell you that about the Baker Act, that they will be brought out in handcuffs. That they won't let them wear their dead father's clip on their jeans anymore.

*The glass is blue and though in reality I did not see it crash,
I can see it suspended in his hand thick with sweat.*

We met building a set at school. It was March. It was late. We had red, white, and blue paintbrushes in our hands. Pizza and soda on our breath. It approached midnight and he began to paint me instead of the platform. He painted peace, love, and music on my forearms. Long broad strokes across my chest. I dabbed him in the places not covered by clothing.

I packed the stupidest things in the bag for him to take to the center: shaving kit, ball in cup toy, love note, shoelaces, pens, belt.

I am on my way to visit my almost boyfriend at the Crisis Center on North Hillsborough Avenue with the Game of Life in the backseat next to me. It is March. It is our one year anniversary. We did not make it.

*See the setting sun illuminate the translucent substance
and all is clear: the glass, the boy, the girl.*

Last March, we sat outside Coldstone Creamery eating ice cream and he kissed me in his car to a Four Seasons song. This March they won't let me take the game back to the patient day room, but I go anyway. I am wearing my faded balloon shirt. I am visiting

something like a boyfriend in crisis. It is night. He has a scab on his face, staph from another patient. In the corner, a family is trying to feed their son dinner. He is crying. He is throwing mashed potatoes.

Three weeks from now it is Spring break and we go away together. My family books a timeshare at Inglewood. There is a waterslide. Restaurants that serve steak. It is very Dirty Dancing. We spend the week in a hybrid between siblings and lovers. Him peeking at me in the shower, straddling me in his underwear, but when I kiss him he does not kiss back. His mouth closed, lips un-pursed.

And I can hear the second when glass shatters.

It smells like March, like spring,

ice cream piled high with toppings.

In the Children's Crisis Center, it is Friday and I am visiting my soon to be ex-boyfriend on our one year anniversary. He looks small. He wears socks. I wear platforms that went out of style in the late nineties. I am sixteen. Two nights ago, I kneeled in front of my seat in the waiting room near midnight with salt from McDonald's french-fries underneath my fingernails and prayed.

The trail of blood from his wrist curved like a bridge.

When I finally cross, I will never come back.

When I met my old boyfriend he placed a wooden bracelet around my wrist. He was older. He was worldly. He had spent nine months backpacking through India and I used to wonder if the wooden bracelet he tied around my wrist meant we were married in some small village.

When my not boyfriend comes home from the Children's Crisis Center, we buy him a new phone. We take him to the movies. We go out to eat. He spends every afternoon at my house until late in the night. It is almost not March. It is stifling. One night we get a call from a teary-eyed Abuelita whose broken English barely conveys that Chris is having a fit in the dining room. He is hysterical. We drive back. He sits on my lap, staph infection against my shirt, and cries, rocks back and forth. They do not mention this when you fall in love.

The glass is blue and though in reality I did not see it crash,

I can see it suspended in his hand thick with sweat.

See the setting sun illuminate the translucent substance

and all is clear: the glass, the boy, the girl.

A month or so after my not quite boyfriend comes home from having his crisis centered, I dress up like a little French girl. I sell flowers at a concert in a purple dress. It is April. We are posing for a caricature by an amateur French street artist at a concert for a

company that is paying us to pretend. We are pretending, that we are together, that we are French, that we are happy. He is singing *Vincent* in my ear, "Starry starry night/paint your palate blue and grey."

And I can hear the second when glass shatters.

It smells like March, like spring,

ice cream piled high with toppings.

It is March. It is Friday and we are not playing the Game of Life. He tells me they won't let him shower and I feel married to him. I bring him the change of clothes from Abuelita. We are all awaiting his toxicology. Waiting on signs of cocaine, signs of oxycotin. Earlier today, Abuelita thought she found the drugs in his upturned room and rushed them down to the center for my approval. A vial, she said, white powder. A bottle, she said, a ripped off label. Fake snow, I said, Cracker Barrel. Antibiotics, I said, from my father.

The trail of blood from his wrist curved like a bridge

It is April. My mother's birthday. We are eating osso buco with our fingers. I am drinking my first mojito. He and I are dancing on the tight dance floor of a Latin club. Our hips merengue, my legs wobble with alcohol. I let him spin me around and around and around. When we leave, I can't walk a straight line. I sit at the kitchen table with my

parents, it is one of the first times we are alone since the big event. I eat white bread
downed with a glass of milk.

When I finally cross, I will never come back.

That night, we upturned his room. Carried him marionette from the backyard where he
tried to run, my parents and I. We were all there, the ones that loved him. He was
despondent. He was thirsty. We were going to get to the bottom of this. I poured him a
glass of juice, thick pink liquid in a blue tinted glass. It was March. I was outside. I heard
the cries and when I came back there was glass on the floor.

When I finally cross, I will never come back.

The first time we kiss, it is a trick. We are backstage. I am going for a cheek and he turns.
He drives me to the cast party later that night. The first time we sleep together, it is a
surprise. He comes to me. Clicks the door behind. Already wearing a condom and I don't
get all my clothes off. These are the things I will remember more than anything.

The glass is blue and though in reality I did not see it crash

I can see it suspended in his hand thick with sweat.

See the setting sun illuminate the translucent substance

and all is clear: the glass, the boy, the girl.

And I can hear the second when glass shatters.

It smells like March, like spring,

ice cream piled high with toppings.

The trail of blood from his wrist curved like a bridge.

When leaving from a visit to my someone who tried to kill himself in the Children's Crisis Center, I hear the nurse ask him if that was the girlfriend. It is March. He says yes. In April, he will call me his friend when I ask him what it is we are doing here. He will remove the girl. I will be devastated. I will leap from the car, run down the street. I will be sixteen with money in my pocket running, away.

I think the story ends with a blank stage, full lights. The boy has left. He was always going to leave, eventually. Then why do they do this dance? Yes, it ends shooting a blank voice out of the sky. A voice over—the girl. She is crying. No, those aren't really tears, but make-up. No, that's not really crying, it is singing.

When I finally cross, I will never come back.

When I finally cross, I will never come back.

Balloon Girl Speaks

I don't know why car parts remind me of you—
rearview mirrors and leather backseats
sticking to my legs in the heat, all those little
squeegees they give away at the gas station. I don't
know why driving down Sheldon, I can't help but look
to see if there are any cows in the pasture
by the road we used to hide behind, can't help
but hear Mamas and the Papas if my radio is off
and it's been years since I went parking with you.
And I don't know why I remember any of you
squinting to read lucky across my purple
underwear and not any of the time spent kneeling
on the grass in front of my house begging you
not to go. Better to remember wheels peeling
on tar. What is it that makes memories a danger
for which we never have sufficient warning?

Even on this side of the picket fence, you
bouncing in a Denny's booth over ice cream
sundaes—the summer we didn't think
life would get harder—pops into my head.
I drop it like a hornet to the street. It wasn't
all bad. Before the trail of blood, a trail of kisses
from my neck to my abdomen, fogged Optical—

delusions: you weren't (aren't) my Prince Charming.

And there was a time I was willing to forgive you
for it. And a time I was furious you wouldn't be
my man on the white horse, the one you claimed I
would want some day, when I was tired playing

our game. I thought I was strong enough to mount
that horse myself and lift you one armed from dust.

We are not balloons, us women, tied
to the banister waiting for men, like you,
to set us free. Had I been given a chance,
I would have cut my own string.

I have met the man who will marry me,
and you were right, about him, but you
knew nothing about my capacity for strength.
I am no damsel. I clawed myself to the top
of all this white. I sweep myself off my feet.

Woman of the House, Burning

There is no use stopping it from burning
whatever it has mind enough to swallow.
Fire wants what fire wants, there's no stopping
who or what it picks. If my parents and my fiancé were
trapped in a burning building, he would at least
have a shot at being the one I save. Maybe he fears

the answer deep down: no. I like to think
I would rather die saving each and every one I loved,
than ever have to make that choice. Truth:

I grow wings from small of my back and skin
sheds like ashes to feathers and flame.

Are you too chicken shit to save anyone,
but yourself? And maybe some good books,
the cat, your grandfather's claddagh ring once
tarnished now hanging gleaming around your neck.

As a child I ran in the other direction whenever I heard
sirens, glass, dogs—any noises loud or looming.
I have never been cut out for epics.
I would be no match for fire.

But if it ever comes calling first for my name
I want to be the first thing sacrificed in its path.
(Wouldn't that be something, something like
saving, too?) So, no one will have to find me
out for the monster I have always been
sure I could become without help of fire
to burn for me an extra layer of skin.

III. The Funhouse

A Poem About Sex While Watching Flamenco

What it feels like, for the woman:

Like stomping on shattered glass
to make music with my feet. And
when the man sings, our body is
a battle cry returned. A proposition—
wounded call, response. And when
the woman sings, manifest in my bones.
Sound that shoots up the veins. My face,
lips, mouth, eyes full and spilling.

And what it feels like, for the man:

Waiting, all of us waiting for the moment
he comes, arrives—our hands rejoicing
even though he made us wait, he can do that
—he is a man.

And when I dance, I want to be large more
than sexy so the stage will hear the weight
of my sorrow steps. I want to be giant
enough body to notice when my hip
shoots out of my side—you need flesh
to make combustion, any fool knows it.

And when we dance together, collision. Each
of us desperately trying to hold down our hill.

And what it feels like, for the woman
—knowing what hill to die upon.

Blue Panties

after Steve Scafidi

my favorite part of having sex with you isn't
that moment of climax that feels something
like a city sinking. it's the moments before,
you laying on the bed in just a pair of blue
panties—you hate it when I call them panties,
but, damn it, that's what they are.

when we are stripped down to mostly our skin
we can chose to be anything, so make me
a gypsy monster: no panty boundary lines at all,
flesh jiggling to the rhythms of our flood boards—
walking to devour mushroom headed tulips, bulbous
and ready to open at my will. I am a Picasso woman
—I've placed all my parts where I've always wanted
them to go. I'm not all breasts and cheeks just line curve
line line curve circle dot. no form-figure, just parts drawn

hard, sumptuous. yes,

my favorite part is you on the platform stage
of our bed, audience of a thousand eyes all in place
of what used to be my head blazing. I've become
the glorious she-male monster. Come, dream
with me—we can I can both have breasts

if I'm the one sketching—any parts we desire.

now,

wouldn't that start something of a tennis match
for the guys on the street ready to see flesh
—did it ever really matter which?

my favorite part is you on the bed, slitted
panting like breath on a windshield, and me
walking in front of the upstairs window
knowing they are watching, all the guys
on the street. I've become the formless
masturbator—all flesh and hair
blowing in the air—walking to that tiny
bit of indigo, dampening not like flowers.
me floating, almost, ready to press
my face against something warm and

like a fountain. no,

my favorite part of having sex with you isn't
that first moment I slide to so much huffing.
it's the moments after when there are no teapot
cries, no one wearing the weight of panties,
just silence and lovely bodies spread—

Weighting

I was somewhere around eight years old when I first become aware of the weight of my own body. On a hot summer day in Old Carrollwood Village. In the backyard of my best friend Lisa's house, we stood barefoot from the pool on her wooden playground set. Her Mom watching from the kitchen window inside, cooked dinner for her husband, a cordless pressed to her ear ordering Chinese for us. We ate Chinese every time. Lisa was seated at the bottom of the slide, her hair blonde, wearing a mismatched bikini. I'm on the top of the slide when my wet body slips. I land on her leg. I didn't think I had hit it hard as I'd braced myself on the sides of the yellow plastic slide, but I was a kid who distinctly hated the feeling of being in trouble.

"I slipped. I didn't mean to. Are you alright?" I asked

"Of course I'm not alright. I just had over a hundred pounds hit my leg."

And there it was: my weight. I recall having told her how much I weighed earlier in the day. She was always asking anyway and perhaps we had weighed ourselves on her bathroom scale again. For Lisa, this was the first sign of anorexia guilt she would later battle by the time we reached middle school. I can remember looking in her full length bedroom mirror, comparing our shapes. Mine already had the soft protrusion of what would be breasts and Lisa never skipped an opportunity to point them out.

Lisa wanted me to go get her Mom, but I'm terribly shy and would rather have risked Lisa's anger than have to talk to an adult about a mistake I've caused. I made it as far as the screen door where I stood with tears in my eyes looking between Lisa at the bottom of the slide and her mother in the kitchen window, framed.

We used to put on shows for our parents in the living at the end of each play date. Lisa would play a Prince or a Jester, and I would be her buxom Queen. But we didn't put on our usual show on the day of the slide incident. When Lisa felt better, we decided I should be punished for my offense—so we were even. She hit me across the face with a plastic blow-up hammer we had used in countless skits. She accidentally clipped my eye with the plastic seam. I would not make her tell her mother, but allow, instead, her to slink into the kitchen for an ice cube.

Because I thought I had it coming. Because I weighed so much more than Lisa's seventy pounds. So, I sat in her room holding the ice to my face and scheming about what lies we could tell my parents, in case it left a bruise.

Nana moved in with us when I'm was the third grade, after Mom-Mom died. She had cake crumbs underneath her fingers nails at all times. She taught me about all sorts of delicacies: ice cream on top of Eggos, home-made milkshakes with Entemann's donut

chunks, Johnny Rocket french-fries dunked in floats or smothered with cheese and meat, popcorn with chocolate melted on top, McDonald's. And for a short period of time I was weightless, but by the time I reached the fourth grade my friends and I planned our first diets at school. For as long as I can remember, Nana flip-flopped back and forth between extreme dieting and extreme binging. A habit I've tried on a few times, myself. As a child of six or seven, I had been drastically underweight—according to my pediatrician. I remember the chalky, icy taste of the Pediasure milkshakes my father would add chocolate sauce or ice cream to as an after dinner snack. But by the time I hit the fifth grade, my father would drastically worry that Nana had made me fat, just like she'd made him. From there, I became well versed in the feelings of guilt every time I snack on the potato chips that have always been in our pantry ever since Nana moved in. I learned the feelings of shame associated with eating the things I want to eat. In her old age, Nana has begun to refuse food, whole cartons of ice cream will go unopened in her fridge. It breaks my heart.

I remember praying to what my mother referred to as the Booby-Gods for breasts the summer she directed *Cabaret* at a musky theatre in Hyde Park. Sally Bowles was red-headed and when I helped her through quick changes back stage, her breasts were perky—milky, in my face. I wanted them so much I could taste it. I had just bought my first bra that spring for a production of *Fiddler on the Roof Jr.* I'd preened in the dressing

room in a strapless bra from Victoria Secret and a pair of black tights. I wanted so much to be sexy, and in a spot light. Today, I have a 36DD and when my breasts are thick, swollen I look in the mirror and pray for them to go away.

And then one day they arrive, the breasts for which I'd ritualistically asked, and I am ready to show them off like all woman (in the theatre) do, during my own quick changes backstage. Sean Nummy had eyelids the color of lilacs and I wanted him to do nothing but see my breasts, my body with the baby fat all gone and the new, new curves. Seeing his penis was not something I'd bargained for doing the school play.

Nevertheless, there I was covering up the tankini top I was spilling out of with a faded men's Coldplay t-shirt. The first make-up I'd ever worn offstage smudged at the corners of my eyes in the hot tub. We were all eyes on bodies that night. The sixth graders didn't usually get invited to eighth grade parties, and I am not sure what I was doing there myself. But there I was, more boobs than I knew what to do with and my costar's pale skin and purple eyelids asking, truth or dare? We were a far cry from *The Music Man Jr.*, where our characters shared a quick peck on the cheek instead of the kiss full of tongue I had imagined while listening to the music swell.

My bathing suit rode up my butt cheeks and there was nothing sexy about it, any of it. We had spent the entire run of the show peeking at each other through the dressing room partitions in the back of the chorus room, I knew the way his skinny legs poked out of his soccer ball boxers and he knew when I started wearing my first thong. I relished the way old fashioned, high button clothes unzipped to reveal the newness of the bodies I'd seen on Kit-Kat Dancers backstage when I was still a round child. The way all the eyes, men and women, dropped to inspect the curve in my lower back—the Goosebumps on my skin begging someone to see. The high was so much different than applause.

We'd joked, teased, aggressed and now Sean Nummy was being dared to jump into the pool with just his freckles. And this too was a new kind of seeing, but I'd never seen a penis before—wouldn't have known what to call it, if asked. Naturally, I froze. I had wet hair in the night air and legs made to run back to the house, into the bathroom where I wouldn't see his penis and could dry my hair with a towel off the floor. I could hear the other girls coo and scream. They were seeing their first penis too. But we are all natural born actors, us women, I just didn't know this side of the stage, yet. I didn't know this is what it meant to be young, an actor, a woman, a body with weight. There would be a bed in a room at a cast party where I would touch my first penis and watch the way a man's face tingles, but things with Sean Nummy and I were over, that was evident when I left the pool.

A year later my breasts will swell to a 34C leaving me oddly on the outside of locker room chitchat and dateless for every school dance. On the brink of menstruation. My mother, who had been waif thin and breastless until she had me, was perplexed and awed by my fast progress. In pop culture, I was touted as the perfect size. In prep school, I was a freak in the sideshow getting harassing calls on my cell phone, but no trips behind the bleachers.

I used to be infamous for relations with co-stars back in my teens when I was still in the theatre, and small. I would kiss one costar behind the thin flats. He would pull me close right before we had to go onto the stage. His tongue prodding my lips apart like a man who was searching for more than just his cue lines. He didn't care if he was wiping red, red lipstick off of his cheeks in the blackout before a scene, this boy. He didn't care that I was sixteen or that I had just barely lost my virginity. He tasted like cigarettes and when I put on that little magician's assistant costume, the black leotard and fishnets, he couldn't keep his hands off.

And this was the kind of excitement that made me feel like a woman, the way I could put on (or take off) a pair of fishnets and be the most important thing on the whole set, the whole room, the whole world. It didn't matter that I had a boyfriend or that the kisses were going to end when they tore down those flats that we pressed our bodies against, wasn't this the point? The playing. The pretending. The ending. This was what it meant to be young and an actor. This is what it meant to be a woman on stage, eyes and lips always pressing some part of my body.

I mastered the art of losing ten pounds during tech week in high school. It wasn't hard, I'd watched my father do it my whole life. I skipped meals and burned the calories onstage in skin tight costumes made for tiny dancers, not woman with curves. Nightly, the deprivation would earn me a binge session with free chips at a restaurant bars with the cast.

I've played Hooker's, Strippers, Ingénues, Chorus Girls on stage—my body constantly on display in bras and panties for an audience.

I celebrated the end of the run of one show, in which I did ballet in my underwear for a big production number by eating a large stack of ribs at the Chili's right by school. We waited for what felt like an endless amount of time, for the entrees to arrive and in the meantime, I gorged myself on chips and salsa equivalent to more food than I'd eaten in

a week. When the waitress finally brought out the food, she sat my big pile of ribs down in front of one of my male friends—she was sure such a large meal was for a man—and sat the dinner salad in front of me. That night, I shook it off because it was a feast with friends, one that was deserved and happening late at night, so the calories I consumed were sure not to be used for any good by the time I headed to bed, but I didn't care. In my stomach the meal felt gratifying, I was finally satisfyingly full.

I can't look back at pictures of the show. All I see is the tiny roll of fat that appeared occasionally, in the photos shot up from the audience, when my character gyrated her hips. Getting out of the shower I stare displeased at the growing pouch of skin protruding from my stomach. I would kill for just that tiny little roll, disgusted each time I have to shave between my legs and can't properly see all the skin I need.

I wore knee-socks and come-fuck-me-boots with little short dresses that showed my thong that year, when I was seventeen and wanted to jump out of my skin. On tour, we rehearsed the final number in *Showboat* every day as a preshow warm up. We danced the Charleston in our street clothes and I knew that he was behind me, that each time my leg kicked forward and back, he could see it—the tiny purple G-string covering up bald skin. I knew what this meant and what they said about the kind of girls I was trying

to be, and I didn't care. This was my year, my tour, and if I had the power to bring down a man in his twenties with a body and a tiny triangle of fabric then so be it.

In between scenes, when I was wearing my black Gibson girl wig and costume jewelry, he told me exactly what I should do with that G-string before we got back on the tour bus. So I left the theatre with it tucked deep inside my purse and nighttime air breezing under my dress. But when we stopped for a post-show dinner at a truck stop somewhere on Alligator ally on the drive from Miami back to Tampa, I chickened out and put the thong back on in the Lysoled bathroom.

It didn't matter though, he still found his way back to my seat—found his way past that tiny piece of fabric. And the movie on the bus that night was *Young Frankenstein*. And I think everyone was asleep, but it was hard to be certain. And I think we all had beer, yes, we all had beer because his fingers were cold where my skin was hot. And I think I was acting like I didn't expect him to kiss me after and call the next day. I remember the performance of my orgasm and I remember pretending it was all okay, this weighting.

Towards the end of high school, I found the sort of friends that mattered. But they were a bit on the heavy side and my parents worried that having fat friends would make me

fat. Every time we went out, my father reminded me to eat healthy. I had shows coming up. I was in training. Just because my friends were making bad eating decisions, didn't mean I had to, as well. One night, I snuck them into a Hookah bar and blew smoke into bubbles. On the way home, I couldn't resist a snack of McDonald's French Fries and the most delicious Diet Coke I had ever tasted. We ate the food fast in the car. We threw the bags in the outside trashcan, hiding them in between black plastic bags and settled back into my room without the evidence.

When one of them lost sixty pounds from trying really hard after a lifetime of weight struggles, I would be remiss to say that it didn't jostle me a little inside. I remain scared he will drop below the weight of my own body and I will be mortified because I am all out of excuses. So, I go through week long stretches of carb-free clean eating, no alcohol. But something always happens, a need to fill to the brink of spilling, like a can of shaken cola. It is nondescript. It disgusts me.

On the eve of my last district thespian competition my parents and I spent a tumultuous night in a Macy's dressing room trying to get something to show me right at the competition. I was 145 pounds, up from the usual 130 expected of me even though we all knew I should have been 125. I was a doll that never fit the clothes they wanted, breasts always too big and pouring over the tops my mother picked. And so the night

ended with me going up a size in a pair of jeans and crying while my parents were out at the clothes rack searching for a top.

Even still this day, my parents will make me go back and change if they don't think my outfit is flattering enough. Fashion is what they do. I will visit with a suitcase full of clothes that I never touch. Most day's outfits will be laid out on my bed, new dresses they've made waiting on my door as I utter a silent prayer that they fit.

I sabotaged my career in college when I finally gave in to food's siren call for reasons I still don't understand. Sure, I audition for a while. Pretend I don't notice looks from directors, sizing me up and out of parts. Then one day I audition for *Hairspray* and am called back for Tracy, instead of her thin friend. At first I stare at the cast list mortified, sure there has been some sort of mistake. Overnight I decide to own it, to give the greatest performance of my life—hoping beyond hope that they will suggest padding my costume in the end. At callbacks, I sing my heart out, dance like the uninhibited fat girl they want me to play, and I know I act circles around every girl there. But it's still not enough, and I lose the part to a girl that's thinner than me anyway. I never go to another audition again.

The year before I left for grad school, my father became obsessed training for his role in *The Full Monty*, just as I sized myself out of the parts I wanted to play. As he realized the thinnest weight he had ever been in his adult life, I reached a personal high. Full Monty was my last show and I when I left the theatre, I lost my sense of beauty altogether. Without the tiny body, the eyes watching, the skin tight clothes shed publically offstage I had no idea what sexy meant.

When I moved in with my fiancé across country, I entered a temporary Renaissance of guilt free eating. There were no moments of judgment or pressure when I entered the kitchen for a snack. We spent nights cooking gourmet recipes printed off the Food Network site and it's the first time since Nana that I can breathe a sigh of relief after a meal.

But it ended when my father asked if I possibly I thought I could be pregnant, grasping at anything to make sense of the further weight gain. I have often daydreamed about pregnancy, a chance to fill myself beyond self-control with the excuse that I am eating for two. A honeymoon of no hunger, where I pass off gluttony as a healthy babe.

The weight-renaissance ends with a single step on the scales. My body forty or so pounds from every stepping back onstage. I hide the loss behind nights of role play. In our bedroom I can be like I never was onstage confident—a police officer, Santa's little helper, even an unsure lingerie model—anything to perform.

At our new church in Philly, my father wants to take in the message of the large Pastor who is filled with more love, humor, and humility than I can ever imagine, but I can tell he can't get past his form. The way he occupies the stage without apologies irks at him. My father has been apologizing for his own space long before I was ever born. He doesn't want me to apologize to anyone, yet at 23 I feel the need to apologize to him more than anyone, least of all myself. He says his biggest fear has always been someone being able to refer to me as the bigger girl. That it could be alright to refer to myself in the context never occurs to him, yet I feel I owe him an explanation for why I let him down when all he ever gave me was adoration.

A friend of mine went into treatment for Bulimia a few years ago and I am embarrassed to say that on multiple occasions I have wished I had that problem instead of the one I do. To have that sort of strength and control over my body. To deny myself the nourishment I so frequently overdo. I wish I could be one of those girls who lets my underarm hair grow out and celebrates the larger side of myself, but I am not that evolved. I care what my body looks like even if my fiancé caresses my waistline during sex in the shower, like he really wants me, my flesh. Yet, while he is going down on me I can't help but be disgusted at the bump of my stomach that distends over his eyes.

My fiancé has a friend that I find gorgeous, I never fail to repeat this to him after an encounter much to his dismay. Her body is small, breastless, short. When we see her in shows, a lump wells up inside my throat and I wonder if I have made a terrible mistake leaving the theatre. I was as good as her once, prettier even. I never saw it once despite all the boys I attracted. Still, if I could be her instead of me, I would.

My body has always been a mix of could be's. Would be's, only if. A mix of feared and warned might turn into, if I am not careful. It exists only in the space of people's minds, creating a mirror image that some days I avoid standing naked on my scale that rests at the fifteen and not the zero in my closet when my fiancé is not home. If I am down the five pounds, it's a good day. If I am up the five pounds, I eat breakfast. I stand precariously close to the back of the scale, refusing to bend my head towards the number too much because it adds weight and sometimes I subtract the fifteen pounds wrong on purpose.

Scarred

My grandmother is of the generation scarred. Irreparably marred, cut up by doctors for the sake of living. Sometimes you have to give flesh to save flesh. And I want to trace the edges of each puckered indented gash that grazes exposed torso when I see her dress in her new, new apartment she can only get around on walker, maybe cane. These days she needs me to slip my pointer finger between her heel and the back of each shoe before she can start her day. I like to feel the beauty of a well-worn scar, to see if it feels like the indentation of pen scratched on page. I want to trace each crooked line to hear not the story of hurt—the story of all the times she was still willing to put up a fight.

I resisted getting my ears pierced until early in my twenties, I feared the needle breaking through each lobe. My grandmother used to cut skin tags off her neck in the bathroom of her house with scissors from the junk drawer and maybe some antiseptic spray. I do not have any scars, no raised lines or deep crevices traceable across hills of my body. When I pull aside my top—smooth, freckled skin that hasn't seen the cutting of a knife. There are no gorgeous lines perhaps only a little too much meat, vulnerable but intact. My body doesn't tip its hand at each struggle its seen and maybe there haven't really been any struggles, only pinpricks compared to hers.

Heirloom

When I look in the mirror too long
Princess of Darkness starts to take
shape, in my eyes, fair skin, full breasts
—so I dye my hair black, paint
lips candied apple, put on her jacket
and crush bones in my path. Change
can happen in an instant—Juniper
and Lombard has Philly blowing
through curtains in my living room,
I am petting my cat nuzzled soft
on my chest and I know I love her
more than I have ever loved and
sometimes deep down she's
in me, Princess and her razor
sharp flesh tipped nails. And I want
to know how the Madonna dares
to clasp her child like she has never
feared strangling a cat. I am
a monstrous lover, murderous hungry.
I kill all the villagers in my path, rape
the sidewalk blocks, eat ribs with fur
still attached. I squeeze breath
out of tiny birds, between my thumb
and forefinger. I am too old to be Little
Red, too old not to be howling—

The Alienation Effect

I fear I am turning

into my grandmother. I can see her

now driving down the same streets

(Belamy, Ehrlich)

see her see her down the same

(Ehrlich, Gunn)

down

the same streets down the same the same

(Dale Mabry

Belamy)

streets of Tampa Bay worried

if she makes a wrong turn,

worried

if she goes another way

(Gunn, Ehrlich, Dale

Mabry)

to the grocery store someone will die. Will die, that

someone she loves. Loved. That no one will be loved. That

someone she loves like a top like a like a like top.

She will lose

control. Her mind is like a spinning top. Spinning

spinning.

Toppling.

Anxiety lollops over logic until one is indistinguishable

from the other.

And I am scared

of the piece of her lodged in me. I fear it is contagious,
come to mention to mention it, it is lodged.

It is lodged,

the breath, I can't breathe,

did I mention it?

I feel a scratch. When the anxiety fills me like an unwanted lover

my grandmother and me become one—I am walking

down the same

(Lombard, Pine, Spruce)

down the same, see me down the same streets

(Locust, Pine)

the same streets of Center City, terrified if I make a wrong turn

(Spruce, Lombard,

Locust)

if I take a different train stop

someone will die.

Will die, that someone I love. Loved. That

someone I love spinning

like a top like a like top

will hit. They will hit. I will hit. She will,

we will spin out of control,

like a top.

Pink Elephants on Parade

I. In Case You Were Wondering, Why My Mother Tried to Kill Herself

So am I. Maybe it was because I didn't want to be called Mandy and I wet the bed more than the average kid. And most nights I couldn't sleep, not for her—not for anybody, so I wedged myself between her and Daddy in bed well into my teens. Because I knew words like want, bitch, please don't leave me—alone. I couldn't soothe myself or play by myself, let her and Daddy go out by themselves. I would ruthlessly beg to be taken along. Didn't want anyone to have any fun without me, didn't want to be left behind with the sitter, terrified. I could never be alone. Perhaps,

if I had been a boy—Justin—or hadn't locked us in a bedroom for hours with no key and only a towel on the floor for our bursting urine, she wouldn't have felt the need to try at all. Maybe if I had only told her the bumble bee had flown into the sleeve of her blouse that day we sat on the sidewalk writing words on concrete. Maybe, if I had been easy to drop off at school, didn't scream or wail when she placed me inside the classroom door, didn't so frequently need her to pick me up at lunchtime. Wasn't so obsessed with wanting her. If I had only just been enough—wasn't that all she ever wanted, palimpsest and me to be enough.

But I couldn't: stop my legs from kicking out, my heart from beating fast. I wasn't any good at math. I couldn't divide myself. They couldn't subtract me from bed. I wouldn't add another baby—couldn't make the baby stay with us when we did.

I loved her too much and that might have been sufficient reason enough. I should have told her she was beautiful, shouldn't have caused all the fight my parents had —especially the one that carried loud and booming to my room that infamous night. Should've followed the sound of the screen door slamming. Should've taken the pills from her hand, ate them all myself.

II. Rules for Attending Business Happy Hour with My Mother

You can't walk around without a drink in your hand, that's rule number one.

Now, number two: don't have more than two, three if you can really hold liquor—and believe me, we can always hold at least the liquor.

No, the first rule involves having had enough to say, fine thanks and how are you without slurring words for most of the night.

But there is always the time, when the belly's warm with fluid, you are plush and brave enough to tell some secrets—break a few of the rules, or maybe it's number four—

we only talk about it when my mother has a couple martinis in her or we have shared a bottle between us, we love nothing more than to share a bottle of wine between us.

Inevitably, there is a moment nothing's left at the bottom of our glasses and we can't stand

silence, not in public—not shared crudely with others. And so we break it into her night

and let it sit there, displayed for all the people who never asked.

III. Autophobia—The History of a Deep-rooted Fear of Myself

I don't trust myself at all to do any number of ordinary tasks:

turn off the gas stove, put the plastic
containers on top of the dish washer, well
wish my neighbors, fill the ice trays for the
freezer, drain the water from the bath
tub, not leave knives in plain sight on my
countertops, zip my dress up and over my
backside, lock any of the doors, clean up
broken glass, wash my hands, not kill the cat.

Inside I have a seven foot serpent monster hiding in a frilly pair of my
pantaloon, ready to pounce the second anyone notices its thick, scaled
tail sticking out from underneath my pretty, pretty dress. Some days,
I try to cover its deep evergreen scales with: make-up, hair dye, perfume,
slimmers, meds. All it needs, the giant snake in my clothing, is you,
to name it and it will appear in all its terrible, slithering, monstrous glory
(the terrible person I am) brimming, waiting, roaring, clawing, wanting
to clamp down on my prey—spill up out and over the edge.

IV. What's Left, Unsaid

I learn the silence first from inside my mother's stomach, I am engulfed—we are engulfed—in the sound of so much quiet hidden in prayers, in between the lyrics of lullabies, in the gap of sidewalk steps outside on the green, green lawn in front of houses that sit like ducks in a row—in Tampa, in the suburbs, in the past, until will finally leave, even though it takes years to do—to break the hidden silences, I mean. We learn the rhythms

of our language before we learn the meaning of its words.

I think someone says this long ago in a bedtime story where even the human monsters are defeated and all the maidens have is silence in the line breaks of church vows to never leave home again, to stay by their kingdom, to hold down their loved ones tightly—to man their fort.

Maybe, no one ever says it to me, not outright. I simply learn it in the womb peddling a pink bicycle interpreting the rhythms of my mother, her sorrow song, which is another way to say: her story.

V. Breaking the Sound Barrier: On New Ideas About Thunder

We hit it one night without realizing, breaking its fragile membrane
like an egg or maybe a hymen (aren't they really one in the same?).
The night is late and it's true, we are drinking too much wine, like always,
but somehow we tread there for the first time by ourselves and don't
remember how to repeat this story when we aren't trying to put on a show.

You say, I think the project has been about you trying to forgive me, all along.

And I say, I needed only to understand what I had always known. It's always been
about love, Momma, even when I thought I had none to piece together like a gift.

And in the sky, maybe heaven, there is rejoicing we'd never heard. And it's as loud
and hearty as thunder, which was only ever drumbeats disguised as something grand.
Tonight, we have reclaimed the rain we've made it sing better for us than the Cherubim.
Who knew wine glasses could make such choruses? Who knew mothers and daughters
always had the power to control the music of the sky? And this party, it is loud. It has
the
neighbors knocking, and the dogs a barking, and the building shaking on its foundation.
It has the babies crying and the nanas waking and the street signs swaying and the stop
lights dancing a disco. It has my mother and me, forgiving. It is louder even,
than what has always been silence, until we broke it and the voices—
their stories—could finally start to soar.

A Brief History of Unabridged Insomnia

Some women pass heirlooms through generations—jewelry hidden underneath worn dresses on immigrant ships—my woman inherit insomnia. This was the way of the world to me, the inheriting and the hiding, before I left the house that never slept. Now, it's just me, alone, who lies awake in the cubby of my lofted bedroom off Broad, while everyone in my building sleeps. Now, watching my fiancé slumber, tumbling with eyes closed and mouth open, I've learned we're a special kind of creature, us insomniacs. We, the guardians. We, the nocturnes. We who break clocks, walking the house while the others curl into night's length.

As a child, I frequently left the bed in which I refused to sleep to sit on the steps of our townhome on Castle Hill. *Grease* could be heard playing from a tiny t.v. at the foot of my bed. But even as John Travolta sang on an abandoned swing set, I'd have already bolted to the top of the stairs. It seemed my parents were always down there, in the living room, watching a movie of their own. And so I would sit like a watchdog, the carpet matted underneath my white nightgown with the little red hearts, my mouth fighting back sound. On any given night they must have told me to stay put, but still I eased down one stair at a time until I could see their feet, legs, shirts, faces. Usually, I'd been put to bed at least four times, and I wasn't willful as much as I was terrified. If my mother caught sight of me the fifth time, fury. One night she chased me up the stairs

with words like, if I catch you I'm going to..., but I was under the covers before the last word hit. I remember the door slamming open, shut—crying myself to sleep.

I've never trusted alarm systems or locks, I've seen too many movies that proved them wrong—too many casts on the nighttime news. I once saw a movie on Lifetime where a girl got stolen clean out of her bed while her parents slept peacefully in their master bedroom. Nights since I was a child, I've slept with my t.v. tuned to my safe shows of late: *Gilmore Girls*, *Golden Girls*, *Friends*, *The Nanny*—it doesn't matter as long as it's sure to play on loop—repeating, our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name, instead of counting sheep. It used to feel like every sound in the house was coming to get me. Each creak of the house. Each time the cat came to visit, I was sure a faceless he was coming with a knife to find me in my bed. Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name... it didn't matter there was a pole wedged in my window, two extra locks, plus the screen. I was convinced it was going to burst open at any second.

For years, I opted to lay on a cot on my father's side of the bed, instead of toughing the night out alone, while he read *Anne of Green Gables* to me late into the night when I feared what would happen if I shut my eyes too tight. If I close my eyes even now, I can hear him reciting the chapter in which Marilla has banished Anne to her room until she apologizes for her latest offense. And these days I feel I have so much to apologize for, in my room alone in this waking. If I try hard enough my father's voice comes back to me

low, patient. When Matthew finally comes to Anne's room with all that love in his eyes, I can finally fall asleep.

Even at seventeen, I wedged myself into the twin bed of my Nana's room, her skin papery thin. We would turn the t.v. to *Cheers*, while I white knuckle gripped my phone. Even if I vowed not to be caught spending another night in my parent's bed, but nights would find me there, wedged next to Nana's lumpy body while she mumbled something like sorrow in her sleep. I would stick it out to around six, when I would climb back into my own bed swearing that tomorrow was another day and I would sleep in my own room.

I still won't sleep in front of exposed windows, won't go to bed without checking the stove three times and the locks on the front (and back) door four, have to check: behind the clothes in both closets, the shower curtain, the doors of each bathroom, the porch. I might be older, but I haven't escaped the terrors of night, just gotten sneakier about my fears. Most nights my fiancé doesn't even notice the obsessive checking, can't hear the obsessive worries in my head that haven't left since a child, only gotten more complex with age.

It's not out of the ordinary for my mother to run a bath late at night. Dip herself in the tub to quiet skin that wants to jump right off its bones, and might if she lets it. Her eyes are quiet, droopy in these hours. Back on Nighthawk, I can hear the water surge through

the house on one of my many trips to and from the bathroom. Many a night I would have given any number of things just to join her, sit on the edge of the tub and read her stories of women in faraway places who nightly, fall fast asleep.

Sometimes my mother forgets to sleep at all, playing a casino game late into the night. Seconds passing with each ding of coins collected until the fake money runs out and the dreams will be too weary to come. Sometimes she wakes from nightmares before the sun is out, nudging my father to watch a movie, please. Join her in the tub, please. Be her friend, please. Love her until she can fall back asleep, please. I refuse to wake the fiancé, so I hide my nightmares reading my tablet into the early hours of the morning with old *Golden Girls* videos playing on YouTube on the dresser. Next to me, my fiancé sleeps soundly on his back sleeping the sleep I had not realized possible until I moved in. When I finally am able to fall asleep, I lay half my body across his—arms grasping around his waist and one leg slouched to the other side of his form, head buried into the pillow beneath his head back to the our father chanting.

We used to tell nightly time by reruns on Nickelodeon, my mother and I. You know it's late when *George Lopez* comes on for the second time, she says to me even now. Just wait until you're up for *Everybody Hates Chris*, I would wager. We laugh, but even tonight we will lay awake long enough for both. She will leave her marriage bed and lay on the couch with the t.v. turned real low. Tonight both our faces will be lit with the t.v.

light, in separate rooms we will take part in this light like ceremony, hoping to hide well enough from our loneliness.

And sometimes on nights we find ourselves alone in the house, my mother and I have sleepovers in the king size bed. Between the two of us we wake every hour, we keep watch over the other's brief bursts of sleep. We grow fond of the other's waking, our communal sleep ebbing and flowing like a hot, humid wind oscillating from one to the other.

My Nana's job begins when she senses our eyes have closed. If I listened close enough I could hear her slippered feet waking. Hear her shuffling against carpet—hallway, living room, dining nook—and up to the thermostat pushing air to clamp shut, hot air to fizzle forth. Hear her shuffle under the dark of night hitting light switches left on in her path, out to save a buck-an-hour for the remainder of the night. Sometimes I would wait till she was inches from the t.v. I turned to nearly mute in my room before I'd turn to face her and tell her to go back to bed.

One night when I refused to spend any longer at my Aunt's hotel because *The Sixth Sense* came onto t.v., Nana stayed up with me in the living room watching *Friends* on VHS until it was light. I nodded off regularly, but every time I closed my eyes the lady with the thick cigarette burns on her arms spun behind my eyes and I tortured myself awake. But the t.v., its calming glow, that made things better for a while. My Nana and I

laid on twin couches facing each other, the curtains to the backyard pulled tight and our legs tucked under long night shirts. She, mourning the loss of her mother, and me morning the loss of what I don't yet know.

Occasionally, Nana converses in her sleep. She has dreams so real she wakes up expecting her sister, nine-years-old again, sleeping by her side. She wakes and swears my dead grandfather is standing at the foot of the bed, asking, does she want him to make her coffee, some toast, maybe an egg? And some days she answers back to the air. Yes mother, I will drive you to the mall today. No Jack, I couldn't think to eat a thing.

Sometimes Nana would wake before the sun was even up, padding to the kitchen to heat coffee in the microwave, string crumbs across the tile like a breadcrumb path to something like distaste for having slept alone. She would bang cabinets just loud enough for me to hear, in my room across the house where maybe I had managed to engage in a fitful sleep. Even now I can hear her banging cabinets to sing the song of her loneliness, hoping someone will crack her an egg and sit with her while she eats. Some nights I've walked the stairs to the kitchen in almost a trance banging my own cabinets in hopes my fiancé will wake just long enough to ask me what's wrong and coax me back to sleep.

Benedryl, Tylenol, Vistaril, Xanax, Motrin PM—all friends to those with a deep need for somnolence that resists satisfaction. We the insomniacs make a habit of any cocktail of

the above, whenever we can. Nightly the drugs lead us to the fridge for cookies hidden in foil under the cover of the breadbox, a can of Diet Coke, raw dried rice or pasta hidden in boxes under the covers of the bed. We take turns conversing in a nightly dance to the kitchen, feet fitting the same path minutes apart. Soft pads on the carpet, cold marks on the tile floor. We break the vacuum seal of the fridge. We break diet vows made by day. We break bread in the wee hours, spoonfuls of peanut butter in solitary communion, handfuls of crackers dry in the mouth. When sleep comes we greet it with our mouths wide open, the three of us. Our breath crying out in moans, snores, or mumbles as if reassuring ourselves that we will not lose our voices, remembering there is a world on the other side of dreams. We sleep hard. Bouncing, rolling, swaying from side to side as if we were dancing with the covers, dancing with each other, dancing with ourselves. I miss my insomnia sisters, now, on these nights we've broken apart.

Elegy for My Grandmother Lying in Bed

Damn all those trying to reach us, we say, damn all those
trying to reach us. My grandmother and I are on the highway
—salty, salty air in our hair and windows down.

Only one of us has a phone:
and it isn't smart
we've left it in the trunk
and run away to the beach
we've got the radio blaring
we're screaming in the wind.

I'm trying to resurrect my grandmother, she lives very much
with the dead. Nights she wakes and swears she sees him
sitting on the far side of the dim lit room, waiting for her,
my Grandpop Jack alive. The part that scares me most:
he answers when they talk, or so she says—no apparition.

Nights I've seen him too, in my dreams, where he arrives
to approve all the choices in my life, things he's missed
in the years he's been dead—my new apartment, my new
fiancé, my new poems. And yes, those dreams taste
sweetest, and yes, I wish I could make him to stay longer,
enough just for our arms to touch before I let him go.
My grandmother, she can't let him go. She wants to leave
to follow him more than she wants to stay with me, so I call

her back from the edge of the water she walks toward
when his voice sirens her, come to the land of the dead.

I still have time to resurrect her, here from the edge of worlds,
to bake Russian Teas and it's Christmas again. She can't float flat
on the waves because there are handprints of flour on her pants,
not salt. We don't have time for aprons, there is powdered sugar
on our noses anyway. We are eating raw dough, making box brownies
missing the oil, the eggs. And now, her face is colored with joy, it's all
coming back—she's coming back—to me. If only for a moment we
can still plant fake flowers in the garden outside our Tampa house. Damn

what the neighbors think, we say, damn what the neighbors might think.

We are running rampant the screened porch with rabbits, there is
laughter between us and it's April Fool's Day. No, it's summer
and we have money, so we're visiting Johnny Rockets
in skirts to flirt with soda jerks and she isn't making her own
lemonade at the table with one slice and three packs of sweet
-n-low. In-between the living and the dead she isn't scared
to spend two bucks for a soda and we don't have to share
just one appetizer between us. We have milkshakes and fries
smothered with cheese, meat. We have stains on our face
but I'm talking to the waiter anyway. He's worked on a cruise
ship and I am going to be adventurous, adventurous like him—
adventurous like my Nana, some day. And so, we decide to stay.

IV: Infinity

Momma, There is More

At the end of the day, there is something like a face left on a white towel, purple eyes on top of a smeared O of a red, red mouth. Black lines, not quite like crying more like breathing—veins pricked all the way down the terrycloth pooling in bruises. And then there is you, naked. Splotched and not a trace of battle armor left to face yourself.

It is easy to blame it on the mother.

Until I've put on her clothes from top to bottom, and the costume doesn't fit. I am bursting at the seams, spilling out the cups, drowning in the hems. I didn't think that spot lights could blind me, burn me, betray me like they do. It is so hard to play her part.

Help me, Momma, please. I'm having that nightmare again, you are on stage. I am on stage. It is opening night and we've only just read the first line of the script, but everyone seems to expect a show. All the other actors seem to know what

the hell they are doing. Isn't it so hard to live
in a world where everyone else seems to know
what the hell they're doing?

Hold me momma, please. Wrap your arms
around me and let's dance, instead of dream.
We can outstretch our arms and sway
to the beat of our own making, leave
the wet, washed towels on the floor. It can be
just us for once, no people, no memories, no
fabric—costumes—between our bodies.
There doesn't have to be music or spot lights
or make-up, we can leave that on the discarded
towels. We can face this bare, only ourselves trying
desperately to make sense of all of this dark

Black Ice

My boots slide on melting snow, the black
ice has hit. I am seven again kneeling
in my nightgown kneeling on my mother's
bed, praying over a baby doll in my old crib
with hopes tonight it will turn into a child
for my mother who is so young—
the same age as I am now mid fall—
and wanted another baby more than
she wanted me. Or so it seemed sitting
on top of my very first pink bicycle,
the one with the little white basket
and streamers, in my screened-in porch,
peddling three steps forward and three steps
back on the grey porch slab since my parents
wouldn't let me ride around our neighborhood
alone. I watched my mother inside—hair done
in a towel—gazing at course catalogs mourning
my brother. I wondered if I fell off my bike
would she notice me? But then I'm crashing
in the snow and am seven years old again
sleeping with dreams of a baby brother
I could gift my mother to make her smile.
Once my foster brother was thieved
from us, I would never be able to compete
with the boy that got away—who did no

wrong—forever that baby frozen in my crib.
Who will have time to remember anything
but the slam slam slamming of the screen door
that rings, even now, in my ears as I hit concrete
and ice melts into my jeans like memories. I am
back in the city, 13th and Locust, scrambling
to my feet before the red Patco poles, urgently
hoping the man who stands outside my stop,
daily commenting on my wardrobe hasn't noticed
me, or my fall. It is late, so I rush, wishing to ghost
the remaining three blocks I have left to cover.

The Yellow Bassinet

In my earliest memory I claim to be a week old
and I am laying in the alcove of my parents
bedroom in a yellow bassinet. I am lying

in a yellow bassinet with one eye open
on my mother. She is young. She has long black hair.

I am watching her, in my memory, wearing a white floral silk robe.

I am in a yellow bassinet learning the art
of sleeping with one eye open on my mother.

At one week I dare her to walk away.
At one week I cry because I know she will.

After my mother tries to kill herself,
I am seventeen sleeping on the living room couch
any time my mother returns to the cold converted garage
where it happened. The place I dared her to go in my
yellow bassinet. I am lying

on the couch, one eye open, my mother
returned to her crib of depression.

I am daring her to try her shit once more

with me laying so close. I am crying
because she threatened she would.

I am gathering a box full of narcotics and knives
under my blanket. I am sleeping with one eye
on my mother's closed door. I am watching
reruns of *The Cosby Show*—are there any
Clair Huxtables in this world?

In my earliest memory I am a week old

and I am watching my mother lay
on the blue couch in the garage.
I am begging her in a floral silk robe.

In my earliest memory I am Clair Huxtable

I am dancing. I am lifting up a car.

In my earliest memory I am an invisible girl

I am weighting the feeling of a closed door.
I am placing all my love in that eye.

In Restless Walks She'll Prowl the Night

The night before my mother tries to kill herself
we drive—I on her lap—in a crowded car
to a theatre in St. Pete, 30 miles away across
a bridge of dark sea water and on the way
home I fall asleep, my head on my Momma's
shoulder (face pressed against her orange jacket
with the gold pin) while she rubs my arm with
dull manicured nails—I don't know tomorrow
she will find her yellowbird Vera Bradley purse, lock
herself in the sewing room in our garage,
(the room with the door that locks the wrong
side to prevent any dangers from getting in
will prevent her from getting out) she will
pop a can of diet coke to wash a bottle
of Xanax and generic SSRI's; she'll lie
to sleep on the blue suede couch, flip on
the t.v. and close weary eyes to perhaps think
of (my father and me) white noises or all the happier
times that escape me here but happened all the same—
she will tell me she tried to get out, my father found her lying
on the planks in front of that door, so I suppose it could be
true that a spirit—my spirit—called out to her
in the wee hours of that morning and begged her
to stay, wanted her to come closer, hold her away from all
that light, but maybe I really need to believe she lied

dreaming—that of it was no more scheming but a dream—I want
to believe she lied asleep, peaceful as I did, seventeen
on my Momma’s lap, the night before when all
that was on our mind was getting closer to home.

Prodigal Daughter

I always wanted to take you with me to eat all
the juiciest apples in the garden. This feast
of fruit shared between lips sticky, sticky
is long overdue. In this world where there is
imperfection and sadness, the least we can do
is take time to smell blossoms, communion
on small gifts. My only regret: not having enough
time to sing songs of gratitude, to the rain and you.
But I've got time now for that kind of redemption,
all I ask in return is for you to sit with me in the fresh
cut grass, lean against the trunk of this oak. Listen:

I am grateful for mosquitos, moths, and flies
all things hiding in plain sight. I am, of course,
grateful for nights of insomnia as I am all objects
that bury into holes in the wall. For emptiness
at the bottom of glasses of wine, as I'm sure you're
too, eventually. For leaves tracked into the house
and crunched underneath soles. For citrus,
but that goes without saying, we all need a little
acid to remind us we burn. Holes in socks, zippers
that take four hands to stretch up sides or backs,
all the words and phrases you promised one day
I would thank you for—I am grateful, though they
took me awhile to translate the language of origin.

The bible always said I would return to you, Momma. When I was most battle weary, I would fall prostrate with wanting at your feet and you would cleanse me with fire or baptism or both. You would teach me to believe in gardens, to pick calla lilies and place the buds in our hair, between our toes, inside our stomachs. I am sorry for the anger—all the times I didn't say you're beautiful and ask you to join me for apples in some far off garden.

Please forgive me, Momma, all this writing—the only road back to you. Please hold me, hold me I've traveled far and need urgently just to come back home, to you.

To My Darling Daughter (On the Day of Your Birth)

One day you will be like the little girl with her
hands down her pants in not quite a peace sign
in the middle of my summer camp classroom
and someone will tell you to stop loving
yourself, like I told that little girl. Another woman

will avert her eyes, Daughters of Eve.

She will bring you to the fellowship of burying
our face into the pillow to hide. I do not yet

have the courage to tell you to love yourself
and to mean it. But I hope you learn sweetness
like so many candied apples in the wishing well.

Today you are born and I am sorry
for the nuances of womanhood
you will have to find out on your own.

Know this now:

I didn't do any better for you than my mother did for me.

Don't you see Eden. Punished for the juice.
Punished for the smell— apple sweet, like summer.

I hope you will remove the good book
from between your knobby knees. I hope
you will walk down the street in a red dress,
reach underneath.

V. Beyond

Also, Kind of About Breasts

Cinderella didn't truly have breasts
 because I bet if she did we
 wouldn't idolize her. The world
 of Prince Charming's can't handle
 a DD cup that spills over the sides,
 areolas that make you want
 to sing "American Pie".

No,

we were taught to fear apples,
 specifically those that women
 offer you. And somehow we forget
 the serpents blame, the apples
 between a man's leg. We are
 supposed to love those, devour
 them like so much crème brûlée.

Why,

are there so many movie scenes of women
 sleeping laying motionless and so few
 of women eating ribs? Cleaning bones
 with rusty brown sauce dripping down
 their forearms?

Why

do we fear women enjoying the flesh?
 Want to see their collarbones protrude.
 Maybe if Gretel had more flesh Hansel
 could finally man up and save the day.

No.

Why does the day have to be saved? And
 I'm sorry this is another poem about fairytales
 and apples and sleeping and not about large
 beautiful asses dancing. Why are there so few
 poems about big beautiful women dancing?
 Legs bent into groves and the music jiggling
 the fat in their thighs.

Yes.

There are so few stories that end that way,
 in celebration of women waking up:
 —beer (not babies) in hand to quench the immense
 thirst. It is damn thirsty work to be a woman
 and there is no better drink to down a big chili dog
 than an ice cold porter in a tall, tall glass.

Yes,

more stories should end in that kind of feast
and women, never having to fall asleep.