Urania

by

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A Thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

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Newark, New Jersey

May 2018
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The Moons of Neptune

Naiad

In the water that animals are drowned in,
in the water spat back into the spring where each year children
leave their hair as an offering and walk away ungilded
and bound to expectation, in the cursed water that dampens
the hands of boys not yet women, surrounded by dust
and wilted leaves and all that’s undone from the skin, I wait
to be gifted a form. Naiads must leave the water for their final molt.
A moon disappears, is found, sixty degrees off its charted course.

I’m allowed to keep moving, despite my calculations. Watch
as the locks I cut from my head fall into my mouth
a second time. I’m not clean enough to have what I want
but I’m happy with my lot. My sex cropped into a long scar,
my flesh cleaved in two. My blood washing down the drain.
This body’s all loss but I laugh until the ocean fills me.
Thalassa

This body's all loss but I laugh until the ocean fills me.
In Aesop's fable, a farmer blames the ocean for the countless injured by its splintered edges. As always, the question of nature.
Bodies in the open are questioned in the open:
a moon compressed like a disc, a woman unwoven by the stares of passersby. The spirit of the sea takes figure and points to the wind, the Moon, the heat of the Sun, until a finger limns each force in motion. How do I understand why I need to look like, to be touched like, to be possible as—
let me put the theories aside. If I thought nothing about my body.
I could still trust myself to a scalpel. Tell the sea that a world where the wind's been crossed out—where the tides could never split a ship in two or crush a moon into pieces—doesn't exist. But I exist.
I won't stay the kind of animal ashamed to be caught alive.
Despina

I won’t stay the kind of animal ashamed to be caught alive, burdened by its name and face. If I think, my thinking closes the windows and curtains the world constructed by the senses: the parades of light the eyes parse into features, the sounds the ears catch and sustain as evidence of movement. A surgeon snapping on nitrile gloves. My breath, its constant sermon: exist, exist. Look at what my being has brought me: knees, and foreheads, floors, and minds; grenades, mines; parents, secrets, and speechlessness; my being, my reality, the absolute experience of living in a body, my changing and modifying body, my fixed and animal body, my body and the sequence of present moments it creates and commits to memory, to a memory all its own. I exist and so I’m sentenced to joy, to joys yet named.
Galatea

I exist and so I’m sentenced to joy, to joys yet named. I tether to the arrow of time. I warp like any gathering of dust beside the shepherd moon that binds me into rings and dense, unexplained arcs. I have no choice but to continue. The room coils along its path, and with it the road, the hospital, the shops, the fists, the living and every record of their living, and the arcs, the bright, strange arcs that weathered the void and kept their mysterious unevenness.

Every second appears, inexplicably, from nowhere. The world the body causes discolors at the slightest thought. I sweep my dust off the hickory floor and wonder if a river could turn back into a bloodstain. I know my contents, my vulgar contentment, will change. I will, unspeakably and inevitably, change. My father did tell me once: everything suffers.
Larissa

My father did tell me once: everything suffers.
Like any father, he thought the war made him a prophet.
Like him, at my calmest I would direct my violence
inward, where repetition soldered into habit my fear of wasting
a good body, a good bloodline, an expensive collar, my good
luck, my father’s twenties, all that rocket fuel, for the sake
of a different kind of ugliness. I’m not the son he was promised.
I can’t even be a proper woman. I exist.

Which handles of the hydria should I hold? To carry or to pour?
Where am I obliged to take this jar of ash, its blood ballots?
I’ll die whether or not I’m happy. I’ll live whether or not
I’m happy, despite what’s assigned to my body, its uncanny
likeness, its valley of keepsakes, shoulders, and jaws, its
almost woman. I arrive at the present not as described.
Almost woman, I arrive at the present not as described. I settle where I shouldn’t. This tiny moon, twelve miles across, by all accounts should have been tossed into Proteus or else destroyed by the inclement capture of the aberrant moon Triton, but instead landed, somehow, in one of the rare troughs of spacetime where such a small moon could be stable. Its faint blur, like a hawk’s dive photographed with too slow an exposure, was almost transparent and went unnoticed on public images for nine years. In this way, I rotated and stacked memories. I glimpsed, by accident, what could be a woman, what makes a woman, indefinite and unconfined. A syzygy requires only a line, but an eclipse, an occultation, or a transit needs a view, a design beyond design. How surprising: I like my lips. I want to be kissed like a woman, and touched.
Proteus

I like my lips. I want to be kissed like a woman and touched in mundane ways like a woman, because I'm a woman, not a horse bent to the will of its form. At the shore, the old man of the sea changes his shape and tries to twist away. He'll give up eventually and reveal the future's secrets to those who persist, but first he's a boar, a foal, a seal, a tree. Then he's a long-lost grandfather who fought in the war, an American, who on the phone says “hon” a lot, who doesn't know what he missed.

Now he's a mother, silent. Now he's a moon with polygons for faces vanishing in the glare of Neptune. When wishes are granted, rearrange the spaces prepared for them, often too small or too great. For unfulfilled longings, offer another pear at the altar. Beg as I beg, for mercy, for a habit of mercy, ordinary and baseless. Wait as I wait for a mother who spares nothing for her sudden daughter.
The way out of today is always today.  
Because I could want to live, I let my breath save me.  
I unfold from beneath my tongue a ribbon  
of longing. I persuade myself to disobey,  
to bet my body for my body. A chemical taste sets  
into my gown. Tender and open,  

I turn over and over in the air.  
Every satellite in this system was skewed or consumed.  
I choose because I can choose, not for the sake of the Moon,  
though even the moons can snow, bury their redder hues.  
All summer I waited for a body I could bear,  
my chest smothered with fears too old to explain.  
I took on a form knowing I’d be refused  
by a mother who spares nothing for her sudden daughter.
Though even the moons can snow, burying their redder hues beneath the sheen of nitrogen frozen out from the atmosphere, my mother will still remember the twenty-five years she had a son. My childhood, layered into the ice like a season pressed into sediment or grown into wood. An old routine. She worries, not for my safety, but that I might live

without her permission, and be blessed. Am I blessed? I have a father who speaks to me, though he hasn’t seen me as a woman. I can read about a moon streaked with wind. I can learn to read in my first language. I can say I have no doubt about whether I can exist. I have copies of the ballads my mother would play in the car. I can even listen to her voicemails to remind me the sound of my old name. I have yesterday but the only way out of today is today.
Smothered in my chest, in fears too old to explain, 
sits the war that conceived my mother and thus 
my possibility, the war that gave me the world and hid 
the puzzles of its terror in questions too heavy 
to pick up with my mouth, in parts of the body untouched 
by language. Because I knew nothing of that violence 
but that it caused me, and had no means to attend to my guilt, 
I demanded every bullet melted or fired, every bomb 
factory bombed to shadows, every signature put on trial. 
Even surrender was better than apathy. 
The idea of a country fattened me with daydreams. 
A country whose guests I’d never be among, but inviting. 
A thousand arms, long and restless, opening every box, searching 
every room where snow buries a redder hue.
I chose because I could choose, not for the sake of the Moon.  
I can’t follow its cycle or widen my shadow, heavy and round.  
If I could choose again, I would choose to be changed  
into the moon with four frigid seasons caused by a mere  
four-degree change, each season four decades long.  
I would pick its infinite surprises:  

its thin atmosphere, its active geology, its tilted plane  
and migrant origin, its disruptive capture from the Kuiper Belt,  
its tall geysers of nitrogen gas. Better to be a moon altogether,  
constrained by the mass of a planet and not the shape  
of my sex or my skull. I would wane each week around Neptune.  
Again I would be foreign, but settled in my orbit,  
my fortunes untied from my flags. No photo of my family  
would smother my chest with fears too old to explain.
I could want to live. I could let my breath save me, no matter how shallow it becomes when I fail again to notice as the floor presses back against my feet, as the sink water laves my fingers, as each thought lives its brief life, and as I enter each maze without myself. I could just be desperate. I’m desperate enough that I’ll take any reminder that I’m here.

An itch on my shoulder, an ache in my thigh. I try to follow Suzuki’s advice and sit just to sit, aspire without thinking of success. I make anxiety as dear to me as a child. I make room for silence. I keep my eyes trained on the wall. I let my anger dry out. I fail and fail again, and I pray the ritual suffices. I choose to stay because I can choose to stay.
All summer I wait for a body I can bear.
Consultations, evaluations, blood tests, phone calls.
What-ifs, planning, budgeting, journaling.
Only more waiting after. Three months of recovery.
Nicotine and everything’s canceled. I ask my friends
for favors. Feeding my cats, cooking. I wait and wonder.

I wouldn’t know, I spent my childhood, and yet.
A woman, a custom, accustomed, yet. I didn’t understand,
I could be, without this, yet. Shame, yet. My gametes, my facets,
my contrarian impulse, and yet. A bundle of wood, a would-be,
a cigarette. Or a bank, a wall against one side of the flood, a ditch.
Boy with a bird in her head, reset. What if I promise I won’t settle
my debts? What if I’m grateful, ungrateful? What if I beg
with each breath? Could I live to see my wanting save me?
I bet my body for my body. My sex becomes medical waste. An insurance agent behind a desk somewhere double-checks the paperwork. Purple orchids, yellow orchids, gifts. A machine vacuums blood from the surgical site. When the chaplain discreetly comes out to me, I confess. I ask the nurse on the night shift, “Is that the Moon?”

The night before, my mother texted “Sorry, no.” I blocked her number. I told only one of my blood sisters. When asked what I wanted for breakfast, I said rice. I used a spirometer to keep my lungs from collapsing. I regretted not meditating with the chaplain. I was told no. I was told no. I had no one to stay but nurses. My surgeon loved how the flowers only grew. Summer had passed and I bore a new weight.
Nothing persuaded me I could disobey and be longed for
the way my father longed for a second son, then just the first.
Before he drove back, he said: “Look at what I do, not what I say.”
We cried and I was embarrassed by our tears, muddy and inept.
He waited a while, expecting I’d be the first to leave.
I’d always been the child farthest away from home.

Like my father, I drew a line past the edge of the map and fled.
My father, who adapted, who heated hot water on the street
and sold it to hospitals, who became the second child to escape.
My father, who forgave his sudden daughter within the year.
I never questioned who had a greater need
for the triton’s conch shell. I never wanted children to spoil,
to spool from my door. At the end of a spiral, I found
the body I bet for, a chemical taste setting in.
I took on a form knowing I could still be refused.
I yielded to the scalpel. Three months later I tendered my signature, and my doctor’s, on a short application. One clerk politely shook my hand and talked about his daughter, the blue striped shirt she gave him. The next clerk looked twice. He went to the back office with questions on his face.

On a whim, I cut my hair short that morning. What would I yield if I didn’t trade for anonymity? If I didn’t make myself a smaller target? I thought I wouldn’t care if I looked like a boy but when the camera flashed, I smiled without letting my teeth clench, so my jaw wouldn’t square up. I paid and left, identified. The state made a record of my want and I persuaded myself not to disobey my longing.
I turned and out of thin air
discovered my mother's war-father, alive, in South Carolina.
He sent me two photographs. One of himself as a young man,
a parking lot portrait with a red truck and half-smoked cigarette.
A dog nestled in his left arm, its snout turned toward his chin
as if begging for a kiss. His smile, a sharp crease, a parenthetical.

The other photo, my grandmother, head-and-shoulders in grayscale.
The long scroll of her black hair tossed behind her, thick bangs
clouding her forehead. Around her neck a silver chain, a round
silver scale. The crescent arc of her jaw. The plane of her cheek,
a sheet of light. Her gaze turns left, as if catching a daydream
or pulling a leash on the past. My beautiful grandmother,
who would lose every photo and every letter from her lover,
who formed from the refuse more than I could know.
My tongue unfolds like a ribbon from between my lips. I stretch my shoulders and jaw before practicing. My voice climbs a jagged yellow line on the pitch monitor. An application on my phone logs the payments to my voice therapist. Because I want to be held, to be capable of holding myself, I can also be pressed. Measured on a scale and guided.

A habit made of my forward hum. My throat taught to tighten and sound the right note. My chin dipping on each word, my words lengthening. The small muscles in my throat memorize new shapes. One for each vowel, then again in each language. I coax my windpipe to narrow the air into a stem. A woman is a worked material, a skewing. I turn the air over and over.
Still tender, I open my gown.
I hold the mirror as the surgeon takes out the gauze
packed inside to keep me from sealing up.
Yards of bloody cotton, unspooling as if from a magician’s mouth.
A compliment every time I pull apart the paper dress.
Wow, it looks great. “It” being the quality of the work.

Sometimes I’m proud of how well I follow instructions.
Open at specified intervals. Come in for follow-ups.
Cut here with a clean pair of scissors. Discard. Don’t move.
The six hours of surgery pass in a moment, like magic.
Like magic, I gain evidence that the eye can believe.
I can attach a price to my womanhood.
I can describe it to an audience in concrete, medical terms.
I can unfold the ribbon from beneath my tongue.
Every satellite in this system was skewed or consumed by Triton’s arrival and initially eccentric orbit. Even the seemingly regular inner moons re-accreted from the rubble. The outer moons, propelled into tilted and erratic ellipses, some of them pulled into retrograde orbit by Triton’s immense mass. The Neptunian sky dominated by an odd moon, a retrograde stray, a captured dwarf planet shrouded in a thin atmosphere and covered in cantaloupe terrain. Its geography, the result of ice breaking through the rocky crust in lumps and scarring the surface. During its long summers, geysers of sublimated gas burst through the ice and reach as high as 8 kilometers, scatter and streak in the wind, before settling as pink snow. At the frigid edge of the solar system, an almost living stone. I would give all I own to be that open and tender.
To my mother, who spares nothing for her sudden daughter, my body’s all loss, but I laugh and the ocean fills me. I exist and so I’m sentenced to joy, to joys yet named. My father told me once: everything suffers. The universe will always lapse from order to disorder. Pay attention and the color of the wall will change

but not every need will soften. I won’t be ashamed to be caught alive in the water that was supposed to drown me. I like my lips. I want to be kissed like a woman and touched. Like any immigrant, I’m tempted by the knowledge of what I could make from my yearning. Like any woman, I arrive at the present not as described. Every satellite in this system, I skew or consume.
For a mother who spares nothing for her sudden daughter, who doesn't understand, no matter how my sisters explain, words aren't enough. She would rather part with me, end the discussion, and worry from a distance. The distance shrinks her into an ordinary person. The distance could be gathered by a tool, a telescope through which awe becomes a matter of seeing clearly. Her dozens of rules, her hundred causes, her thousand fates.

Count with me. Fifty daughters and fifty sons, our folklore kin divided between the mountains and the sea. Fifty sisters, sea nymphs of Greek mythology, riding on the backs of dolphins. A hundred tongues, a thousand stories where the spirit succumbs, guided by fear and longing. We could pass each test of faith but not every need will soften.
Halimede

Pay attention long enough and the color of the wall will change. Even stones will move. I sent my father a picture of a jar of homemade đồ chua. Looks delicious, he said. I never asked what happened to his apprehensions. I never actually ate those pickles growing up, but figured I’d be richer having learned an old staple. I’m an unambitious thief, with only enough greed to take what’s mine, could’ve been, could be. He could just as easily not have accepted my decision, been affected by time only so far as to age and to die. I could’ve let this language lead me to abandonment, disillusion, could’ve conceded, finally, to monolingualism or detached study. I wouldn’t have claimed that a jar of fermented carrots and daikon connected me to anything. I didn’t think I’d try, once more, but not every need will soften.
Sao

Pay attention long enough and the color of the wall will change. Time does as it pleases with everything, even the Sun, the blue light that reaches slowly through the blinds, reminding me to witness as it hastens the day. As the inclination of this orbit decreases, its eccentricity increases, stretches into an ellipse. A distortion.

Unnoticed by Voyager 2. Found by ground-based telescopes. Knowledge can constitute a kind of rescue for that which could cease before seen to exist. I can’t stand the disgrace of being one who forgets. Only an immigrant, tempted by the knowledge of ignorance.
Laomedeia

Only an immigrant, tempted by the knowledge of ignorance.
A fragment from a collision, an irregular arc,
a decision about attachments and detachments.
Our father watched as a cop intercepted a pedestrian
and robbed her, and he knew. Nothing exempted him.
He still thinks of our homeland as a pool of stagnant water.
He must be pushed to describe the fragrance, the texture, the father
he withholds, out of contempt as much as necessity

or lack of necessity. The necessity of his silence: damage,
gravity, price, exchange. The inconsequence of our knowing,
not having seen. He makes dear our non-witness.
If we ask, he will tell. If we don’t, he will work, wire, sell, machine
until the consequence of our not-knowing seems like a luxury,
yearning the symptoms of a sickness never endured.
Psamathe

The universe, once ordered, will lapse again into disorder. When formed, glass doesn't crystallize but remains thermodynamically unstable, hyper-viscous, though effectively a solid. The history of the universe could transpire and this pane of glass wouldn't flow anywhere. This doesn't account for recycling, a drop, the weather, or the fatal potential of violence.

Anywhere there are limbs, hard surfaces, gravity earning its name. If I'm staring out the subway window, passing darkness will return a reflection, and I'll think about whether I look like a woman, who else is on the train, who's deserving of what. Breathing will help, sometimes won't. Rehearsing my anger, taking violence underwing, won't. Or I'll think about what can and can't change, what can or can't be formed in me, yearning the symptoms of a sickness never endured.
Neso

In the water that animals are drowned in,
no boundary between body and sea will survive.
In all oceans, all waters. Wherever the current takes our prayers.
I'll skip the details—the inversion into a vaginal canal, et cetera
—derive from anything that changes a metaphor for change.
A calculus for serpents, outliers, artificial cunts, for a diagonal moon.

At its apoapsis, farther from its planet than any known moon,
farther even than Mercury from the Sun at its mercurial aphelion.
An eternity away and never quite free.
At its periapsis, almost as close as its sisters.
If I collapse time and look at the overlap, somewhere I'll find
a cursory joy, a random coincidence: a 26.67-year orbit,
from birth to surgery. Two island facts in the one body of time.
The universe, once ordered, will lapse again into disorder.
Hypothetical Moons

In 1974, astronomers will mistake an object emitting extreme UV radiation as an undiscovered moon of the planet Mercury. Detected by Mariner 10, the object will continue to move away from Mercury and will be identified as a star, 31 Crateris. The source of the radiation will remain a mystery, but the fact that extreme UV radiation can, in fact, travel through the interstellar medium will provide new information about how to search the sky.

You will have a form. Your body will be your only instrument for living. Its delicate assembly will be your means into the world and its shape will determine the border of your experience. The sounds that move through you, all you can hear. The forces against your skin, all you can feel. Your corneas will gradually thin until your left eye bulges like a cone, leaving your right eye to do most of the work of seeing. Again, and again, you’ll turn your head to judge the shadow of your jaw across your throat, the contour of your brow. Monstrosity, of course, won’t be seen, but perceived in the mind of the viewer, and that will always be out of your hands. This will be how you look.

Sometimes when you hear your own voice, you’ll think: it’s too late.

A stop on the way back. Your high school graduation vacation. The only extended vacation your entire family will take together. Your father will walk ahead into the Kennedy Space Center. He will be more excited than you’ve ever seen him before. The room, cavernous and bright, full of beautiful machines that look deceptively naked. Undone. You will touch a piece of the moon. This moon. Our moon.
In an apartment with no air conditioning, a woman will kiss you just beneath your collarbone and you’ll say: “That tickles.” You won’t mean for her to stop but she’ll stop. The sensitivity to touch will remind you that have no memories of being touched here, along your sternum, or here, and here. Sensitivity can also mean: you’ll remember this and you’ll feel less next time. And: the way someone touches you will tell you how they see your body. And: simple things will eventually stop being enough to force a smile out of you.

A bad night. You won’t remember if there was a reason, but you’ll remember going to bed thinking about the logistics of suicide, waking up thinking about the same, sitting on the couch for an hour considering how many boxes you’d need to ship, and to whom, in order to make the aftermath more manageable. Who to give your books, your spices, your cats, your furniture, your clothes. What to say to the living. You’ll believe that an hour spent this way doesn’t seem like that much of a problem.

Sometimes you’ll suppose that you’re only alive because this isn’t the body you want to be buried in, but by the time you have that body maybe you won’t want to be nothing. You’ll schedule an appointment for surgery. Your fantasy about cutting your genitals off will be calendared at a doctor’s office. This will give you something to look forward to.

The sweet and rich and acidic taste of tomatoes and tofu. Your sisters’ voices. The voice of the woman who might as well be your older sister. Genmaicha tea. Your cat climbing into your lap or pawing at the blanket until she’s let underneath and curls up between your arm and your chest. How much it means to be held, to be able to be held. How to work. How to be satisfied with what you’ve done. You’ll forget all kinds of things because you’re unhappy.
Happiness will require practice. Happiness will require getting out of bed, sleeping at regular intervals. Happiness will require asking people for help and accepting that they will be less interested in you after you talk too long or too frequently about loneliness. Happiness will require choosing something else to live for. What should you want?

31 Crateris, a hot star. Mysterious emissions. Radiation without origin.

Which will mean: you feel ten feet away from all your emotions except fear.

Which will mean: you don’t know what kind of help to ask for.

Which will mean: forget you said anything.

Night and snow. Outside, the stars will seem like the ends of threads hanging down from heaven. Maybe if you could find the one attached to your head, you could climb all the way out, like a spider on a line of silk. You could pull and send a message up: “I’m ready.” You could pull and snap the tether and fall away from everything.

Using an app on your phone, you’ll identify a few constellations. Ursa Major. Gemini. Leo. A satellite will arc across the sky. You’ll attempt to understand how far away the stars are: farther than your hands, farther than the clouds, farther than those blinking lights, farther than the moon not yet risen. Your body could never measure that kind of distance, so your imagination will fail you.
In 1887, the Belgian Academy of Sciences will publish a report examining every purported observation of a satellite around Venus. Many sightings will be attributed to stars. Chi Orionis, M Tauri, 71 Orionis, Nu Geminorum, Thera Librae. Over and over again: from an unimaginable distance, objects will be mistaken for moons. You will never see your body from the outside in real time.

On such a moon: your sisters might call you; you might call your sisters; you might have a conversation with your sisters; you might find the time to return to the house in the cul-de-sac in the country of strip-mall architecture, to pick up the loud dog that’s too excited to see you, to bake a cake for your youngest sister, to play nonsense notes on the piano, even if you won’t stay.

Your father will have a plaque from a project he worked on involving a NASA spacecraft, back when he was an electrical engineer. You’ll hold the heavy glass rectangle and wonder if the signatures were from astronauts, if they were real. Maybe he wanted to be an astronaut. The idea won’t have occurred to you before. You’ll search the basement and find a book you loved when you were younger. Color photographs of the planets. A few pages ripped, crayon marks in the margins. A camera pointed at Saturn. A person in front of a computer fiddling with the color balance. You could see the Rings of Saturn with your own eyes, if you had a strong enough telescope. In the basement you’ll also find workbooks your father used to learn English, including the one he gave you, insisting that you learn. You’ll dig through piles of outdated books on programming. Old television sets and endless cables. You won’t find what you’re looking for: a pocket-sized electronic Vietnamese to English dictionary, a machine with its own robotic voice for all the words you could, perhaps, learn.

Months later, from the same basement, your father will call you out of the blue to ask you for advice for the first time in
your life. He won’t have any idea what to do about your mother’s anxiety, the mysterious credit card bills she’s been racking up. Secretly you’ll wonder whether she’s been gambling, if she’s trying to get rich so she can leave your father. No one in the family will understand where the money goes. Your father won’t be able to confront her because if he does, she’ll have a panic attack. You’ll know she’s been having them less since you left the house, since the sound of you and your father screaming at each other faded in your memory. The threat of a relapse not of your own making will terrify you even more than the thought of causing one. Your father will tell you he wishes he could leave everything and live the rest of his life in a temple. You’ll feel like you’re listening to the cry of a mammal no bigger than your fist, desperate and afraid. Even he can seem small sometimes. You’ll tell him he has to do what’s right, no matter what. That her sickness isn’t his fault, you’ll say. It’s your fault—no, it’s not your fault. Whose fault should it be?

On another such moon: your father might call you a second time to tell you how things turned out.

On another: it won’t matter whether or not you wear makeup.

On another: with makeup on, you’ll attend the kind of family party that sprawls from the kitchen through the living room, across rows of aluminum pans atop fold-up tables in the garage; you’ll talk to your cousins in Vietnamese and nobody will give you that knowing look, that cavernous, open-mouthed smile.

A woman will grin as she passes you with her child. A traffic controller in a yellow vest will grin as he motions you to cross. A woman will tell you that you won’t be allowed to use that dressing room after you already were. A doorman will stare at you with a look of blank fury as you leave the hospital building. A woman will look you up and down on the subway and the right side of her mouth will pull back in disgust. A man will take
you across the store to the other dressing room. A woman will tell you to go downstairs to the other dressing room, that her manager is concerned what the female customers will say, and that she herself is on your side. No matter how many times your landlord’s secretary sees you living as a woman, she’ll call you mister. A cashier will at least avoid gendering you but will make a comment about not knowing anything about race. Your neighbor will compliment your hair and makeup and then call her mother out to look at you. You’ll start to wonder if you’re just paranoid. You’ll try to keep in mind that not every smile means contempt, that most people won’t even notice you. Who notices you?

On another: you might not be called sir.

On another: you’ll ask not to be called sir.

On another: you’ll let the moment pass and think about anything else that’s happened, anything that’s happening now.

You’ll look at photographs of yourself taken by another person. You’ll have taken enough pictures of yourself to know there are few good angles but many angles from which you could be seen. You won’t be able to imagine what you’d look like with a smaller face. You’ll consider losing weight. You’ll consider getting braces later—a short-term sacrifice, but for what? You could care less, and you should, but you won’t. Not when ugliness seems like a fact and not a word for the memory of what other people can turn you into. Your body will continue to fluctuate between what it wants to perceive and what it’s expected to perceive.

After getting home one day, you’ll take videos of yourself, hoping that the camera can approximate what other people see when they look at you, or at least show you a more honest picture of yourself than a mirror.
You’ll go running on a winter day when you shouldn’t. You’ll get three quarters of a mile through the snow before you stop. Snow on the walking path. Snow on the grass and on the road. Snow on the branches and on the banks of the ponds. In spring the cherry blossoms will bloom and you won’t visit them. In spring the hiking trails will be clear and you won’t make the trip by yourself like you used to. In summer there will be nothing to keep you from yourself.

On another: “Miss?”

Are you happy? Will you be happy? Can you be happy?

You’ll decide that you don’t want to pursue any other surgeries, not because you have any moral objections, but because you like your face and don’t mind a somewhat boyish figure. You’ll change your mind and say that maybe you’d be open to the possibility of smoothing out your jawline or your brow if that meant you would go unnoticed. You’ll be furious that you can’t stay the same without being gawked at, that if you glance up from your book or take off your headphones you might find yourself inside a cage, inside a display case, on camera. Your desires will be seen as less genuine because you’re hated. You’ll be told that if you weren’t pressured then you wouldn’t want to change and that means you shouldn’t want to change. Your desire to live will be your failure as a good woman. You will have no control over how people see you, and your lack of control will be a reason to deny you control. Now you’ll have to choose how to live. Out of spite or faith; out of habit or duty or chance; out of fear, or out of thanks, or out of nothing.
The summer before you start hormones, a woman will shout from her car that she liked your dress—dark blue and covered in galaxies and nebulae and erupting stars. The kindness in her voice will warm you. You'll pass two Pride flags on your way to get comfort food and you'll think about moving to that city. On the way back, a man will call out to you and make smooching noises and you'll look up and smile instinctively, before you understand what's happening, then look away.

You'll try to describe pleasure even though you know you'll fail. What kind of bodies deserve to be pleased? What kind of bodies could you imagine yourself pleasured by and pleasuring? When you want pleasure, would you allow yourself pleasure? If your skin were less blemished? If your keloids were barely noticeable? If you looked like a woman? If you looked like what a woman wants to look like, what women are told to want to look like? If your flesh were cut from marble or beaten like copper? If you wait until you're less flat-chested? If you exercise until the outline of your torso is concave on each side? Will you accept desire then? Will you still take rejection as a signal that you're not ready, that you're still not woman enough? Will you feel guilty for cultivating an appearance that makes you no more deserving of pleasure than you were before?

On another: no one will think about killing you, the idea of you.

On another: not even you.

Numerous people will hypothesize the existence of a second moon around Earth. It will appear in a Jules Verne novel, an article on a potential second satellite best detected by small telescopes. These appearances will send amateur astronomers in search of a second moon, small and fast. Kleinchen: little bit. Despite many reported sightings, no such moon will be discovered. About 1,100 active human-made
saturates and 2,600 non-functioning satellites will orbit the planet as you wonder how many more days you’ll make it through. You’ll tell yourself to try again, to wait, to witness how things change, to want less and be grateful for more, to look for the sake of looking and not in search of what may not exist. You’ll consider setting up a camera to record yourself. To see what you look like when you disappear into your anxiety. If that could give you power over your own attention.

Your cousin, when you meet him for the first time after coming out to him, will expectantly ask for details—of what? of how things changed? of what happened? of how you knew. He’ll express his support. Later, when you put on a show about a lesbian couple on TV, he’ll shoo one of his nieces out of the room because it’s too hard to explain that queerness is acceptable. You won’t say anything.

When you correct someone who misgenders a trans person, you’ll be told to please keep correcting them. That will be your job. To pay attention to their mouths. These dull failures won’t always hurt. Instead they’ll be reminders that you can still be seen as a man, in any context, which is useful information for risk analysis.

What will you look like when you’re in pain? What will pain look like for you now that you feel little other than fear? What kind of face will you make?

A year on hormones and only occasionally passing. At the post office, you’ll be called ma’am, even though you’re not wearing makeup, only a bra beneath a graphic T-shirt. While you’re waiting for the elevator on the way to a reading, a woman will say: “You are very beautiful. Excuse me, you are very beautiful.” You’ll smile and thank her. She won’t sound any less honest and you won’t care whether or not her words are genuine, but you won’t feel anything either. You’ll try to
cherish the moment by writing it down, giving it attention. After months of meditating almost every morning, you’ll barely be able to control your focus, but you’ll maintain the habit. For its own sake, because you must, or simply out of compulsion. A proxy that lets you justify the desire to stay alive.

On another: yesterday will stay yesterday.

On another: you won’t ask permission to be content with your body.

You won’t have any idea what your grandmothers will think, what your extended family will say about your father, who had one son and three daughters and now has four. If your grandmothers refuse to speak to you, as your mother did, will that count as a loss? If you went for years without hearing her voice anyway? But then who would you learn Vietnamese for?

One of the therapists writing the psychological evaluation letters in support of your surgery will tell you to brainstorm ideas on how to handle important family situations. Events where you would be invested in attending, where you would need to have a positive, or at least acceptable, experience. Who will support you? What would you need to get from those events? Would the loss of a language count as such an event? Would the limiting of imagination, of your ability to conceptualize a future with your blood family, require a survival plan? Should you account for giving up?

On another: you could let the hand brushing through your hair continue. You could enjoy it for longer, while it lasts.
The Moons of Mars

Phobos

The panic-moon orbits closer
to its primary body than the width of the red
planet. It moves so quickly it rises from the west
twice a day to cut its shadow
into the shadows below—a fighter jet,
a lion’s mouth low to the ground,
heads full of flame, exposed teeth.
My mother collapses onto a pile of sheets.

She spends the hour screaming for air.
Her heart echoing the sound of hooves.

Her organs, rubble beneath her skin.
Look at what I did now. I shouted

and the air was thick with ghosts.
Every reason she has ever run,

children beside her. How naked and skeletal
we are in fear. Because our bodies understand

the possibility of war
quartering the sky and hunting its blue,

she can scream, just like this, in the quiet afternoon.
Before I would have called an ambulance,

but the horror in me subsided.
I watch her shudder and wail. When she can breathe

again, she covers the memory of her fear
with grass and with leaves.
Deimos

The pieces of ceramic on the kitchen floor demanded a confession. I stepped into the living room where my father lay on the couch. Perhaps because I cried I wasn’t punished. Those were the days I spent watching the moon of dread linger in the sky for three days at a time. I remember the position of the bed. How I lay on my stomach, fully clothed, and faced the backyard. The swing set. The tree out of which I carved a square of bark. Were my hands beneath my chin or splayed before me? My father raised the bamboo broom. Its cellophane wrapped handle striped with blue and yellow. Or was it red and green?

My father once described his childhood as militaristic. He said people can be forced to think anything. I could have thought of anything as I waited for the next blow. But I thought about when it would fall. That’s fine.

It’s normal to expect to be struck. It’s normal to be struck. Years later, I walk down the street in a blue denim dress past a half-grin that tells me I might not be a person and I could be punished. I would have to wait and see. It wouldn’t be strange. I could be hit by anyone and it would not at all be strange.
The Moon of Eris

Dysnomia

The discovery of the moon of lawlessness, yet another around what was only a dwarf planet, raised questions about the common rule that could explain its existence.

When I came out to my father, the year had just begun. After it ended I learned it was the year of the monkey. My year. My father asked why I need his support. He told me I'm not Vietnamese because I don't think like his people.

Let us fail. We failed. I'm a daughter, a satellite, of discord. He couldn't meet my demands. He said a cup isn't a cup because it can be broken, its parts further divided. I'm not unlike him. I believe in his idea of emptiness. My emptiness. My non-inherence, my no-self. Karma and not justice.

I wasn't born like this. I'm like this. Unsafe because of my desire to be a woman like a woman.

I want to suffer in an orderly fashion, in days and in seasons, with causes and conditions. I want to earn my death. Its pointless good.
The Moons of Haumea

Nāmaka

A year’s worth of rain
was wrung out of my mother
to form me.
Whenever she calls, she asks
if I’ve eaten. Even when I was a child,
I understood some of the terms
of consumption.
Cooked rice, uncooked rice. Bowl, salt, sugar.
In a nightmare,
she chopped
her fingers into slices of lạp xưởng
over a bowl of rice.
In my earliest memories,
the smell of acetone evaporating.
I love my debt to her
as much as I love her hands.
A good child, I thought, shouldn’t waste
a drop. I keep myself a secret.
Whether or not I turn out a mistake,
I’m certain already I’m a coward.
Let me be a coward.
Objects formed from the same impact
make up a collisional family.
A dwarf planet, its moons and asteroids.
A family in which the parents
are immigrants is an immigrant family. A piece of stone broke off
from my mother’s mouth
and I emerged, like a petulant monkey,
from her speechlessness.
I needed to be bound into a predictable orbit.
I had a place to be shown,
a bed in a line of beds
against a wall where a house gecko clings.
When my sisters went back to the homeland,
I stayed to study for tests.
Because a year is a year,
when I went back alone
to touch our shared soil,
it wasn’t the same soil.
Is it too early to tell if I’ll get a good lonely life?

I believed my father
when he told me only family lasts.
Before the distance separating me from my body
became greater than the distance
between my body and theirs.
Before I learned to shape the dust
into an offering
that would tell me who owned my restlessness.

Without the two marble lions
too small for their posts by the entrance,
without the plastic monk
reciting his chant at the altar,
how would I know which door was mine?
The Moon of Makemake

S/2015 (136472) 1 or MK 2

What happens if I do want children?  
One hundred eggs to divide  
between the mountains and the sea?  
When the doctor went over  
the consent form,  
he told me I should assume  
irreversible body  
changes. I’ve snapped  
off all my ends. My blood pools  
in a valley and travels  
nowhere else.  
I could have frozen the possibility  
of a child with my mother’s eyes  
but I couldn’t wait.  
I didn’t want to pay. I ended  
a history of reproduction  
perhaps four billion years long  
with an aesthetics  
against instinct.  
I can never be a mother  
and I can be a mother  
to anything but a child  
with half of the memories  
that conceived me—  
like any woman I can work from the body  
an outcome I can’t control,  
a portrait of a moon  
as dark as charcoal, a life all its own,  
a series of marks showing  
where I choose to hurt.
The Moons of Pluto

Nix

My mother says I could be smothered
by a ghost in my sleep, held down by a shadow.
I wake up before my senses, aware of nothing
but darkness, and I pretend

to know everything about where I came from
until I have a body in four dimensions,
meaning impossible to see in its entirety
in three dimensions. Because I am a fool

I have an idea of a self. Because I imagine a self
I can contain desire in a fiction called
future. For example: woman.
The self I think of as inherent.

A story can be told about what happens.
The story is not what happens.
What happens requires a body. I have no theory
for what makes a body emerge from the night.
Hydra

My parents fell in love eventually.

A child, my father decided to leave his birth country.
My mother rarely spoke about the relatives on her side.

My mother gave birth to me by C-section.
Sometimes this moon sets in the north and rises in the east.
Hardly more than a child, my father left his birth country.

One of my sisters told me she imagined taking a knife to her thigh.
I was about the same age when I first said I might be depressed.
I felt guilty playing video games the next day.
Sometimes this moon flips upside down entirely.

I don’t remember why I pointed a knife at my father.
My youngest sister worries about the oldest getting married and leaving.
The oldest fell in love with her high school sweetheart.
I’m jealous she doesn’t feel like she’s in danger just for being alive.
Our mother told me once: not in this house.

Surprisingly, my sisters don’t feel that I abandoned them.
Because I’m self-centered I think I deserve to be punished.
I shouldn’t say I have a favorite, but one closest to me.
Happier when she could finally get away from the house.
She tells me our mother will come around eventually.
She promises she’ll save us all—isn’t that precious?
Kerberos

My father would stomp his feet to scare the two dogs tied to the patio door. That was his way of making demands. Silence and obedience.

When my mother became infatuated with a puppy, she replaced the old dogs and made the rules so he could stay. She and my sisters cleaned his feet every time he came back inside. He yapped all day at nothing. When my sisters kept forgetting to let him out into the yard, my mother gave him away.

They cried and texted me and I told them it was their fault. I felt bad for him—anxious without company, always indoors, constantly agitated by any unfamiliar experience. A few days later, my mother brought him back. I've seen my father pet this dog, which wasn't the first time he had touched something alive so gently, but I remember how remarkable it seemed. I took too long to admit the impact he had on me. A few years ago he started meditating and at the same time I did too. I thought it needed to be quieter. My head.
Charon

I fall headfirst into the legs of a wooden chair. My father rushes to me. The blood-river opening at my forehead carries us out to another year, to the house where I would learn that the body is its own boundary. He stands in the hallway before me. Behind his figure, the closest moon of the dwarf planet Pluto faces always its larger companion. Neither can turn away. They are too close in mass. Locked as craters disappear into craters. The distant light of the sun on my father’s skin, pale as ice. His expression changeless, his arm raised, ready to rush me, to throw like a disc the bowl in his hand. Its ghost on my cheek. But I don’t believe in ghosts. Only the present. How the future must be haunted. The sounds of bells and chanting lead us to an altar and now his head hurts. I think he can feel the pulse beneath. He sits at his desk again. We’ve moved, again, to a different house. We don’t look back but we never get to leave. We bow like traitors against the wind. We take the time to breathe and we only get farther from home.
Styx

On the banks of the silver river  
I wash my hands with starlight.  
I have no choice but to stay on this side,  

a kind of alive.  
I stray off the path and up the slope  

for a better view of the sky.  
The afterlife, I thought, might look like this:  
a forest on a mountainside,  

the earth as red as the mud in the village  
where my father’s father was buried,  

the names of his children inscribed  
on his tombstone. A cousin told me  
about a book recording our names. I asked  

if it was only the men and saw my own  
erased. Or worse, kept  

for longer than any trace of its lie.  
Nonetheless, having a body can be convenient  
because a body can be touched.  

This is what I get. Here and now.  
I try to be grateful.  

I point the camera up,  
trying to capture an axis of heaven,  
its stain spiraling out beyond my reach.  

One of the planets  
I mistake for a star.