

BARR, CAROLINE PARKMAN, M.F.A. No Damsel. (2018)  
Directed by Stuart Dischell. 42 pp.

These poems have been written over the last two years during the pursuit of my master's degree. Thematically, I explore the female experience and body in relation to the natural world and relationships with people around us, often through the lens of ekphrasis and persona.

NO DAMSEL

by

Caroline Parkman Barr

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2018

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Caroline Parkman Barr has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following journals in which several of these poems first appeared:

*Two Hawks Quarterly*: “Our Communion” and “Sunday Night Power Outage”

*Sinking City*: “*Venus de Milo with Drawers to Her Lover*” and “Blank”

My deepest thanks to my UNCG mentors, Terry Kennedy, Stuart Dischell, Ansel Elkins, and Emilia Phillips, for pushing me and my poems to do the most work possible. Additional thanks to Keetje Kuipers, without whom my poems would have never made it to the page. And of course, much love to my family for all their continued support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
BATHTUB TRANSMOGRIFICATION.....	1
YOU COULD DO ANYTHING YOU WANTED .....	2
<i>Venus de Milo with Drawers: SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MINK &amp; PLASTER</i> .....	3
FIRST.....	4
OUR COMMUNION.....	5
DEAD SEA.....	6
FOR MY MOTHER’S FEAR.....	7
<i>AISH</i> .....	8
<i>Venus de Milo with Drawers</i> HAS NEVER BEEN IN LOVE .....	9
UNCARRIED .....	10
AMEN.....	12
SOMEONE LIVES HERE .....	13
SMALL BODY, SMALL BREATH .....	14
NOTES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE .....	15
<i>Venus de Milo with Drawers</i> UNTO HER SERPENT .....	22
SUNDAY NIGHT POWER OUTAGE .....	24
MY HOUSE IS MADE OF SPINNING PARTS .....	25
FOR SOME TIME AFTER .....	26
THISTLE & WEEDS .....	27
THIS IS MY KUDZU POEM.....	28

CATHEDRAL CAVERNS TO THE TOUR GUIDE: .....	30
SUNDAY YOGA IN THE ECOLOGY PRESERVE .....	31
ABANDONDED CARS ON 1-40, NORTH CAROLINA .....	32
BEING SO CAUGHT UP, .....	34
STILL LIFE WITH BROKEN FLOWER POT ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR .....	35
BABIES DON'T KEEP .....	36
BLANK.....	37
<i>Venus de Milo with Drawers</i> TAKES TO THE POLE FOR THE LAST TIME .....	38
DRESS US IN BLUE .....	39
SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE SALAD AND DESSERT .....	40
FIRE/FEAR.....	41
<i>Venus de Milo with Drawers</i> HAS NEVER BEEN IN LOVE .....	42
MY SELF-PORTRAIT'S ALREADY BEEN DRAWN.....	43

## BATHTUB TRANSMOGRIFICATION

I plug my hair into the socket  
Watch my eyes change colors—  
Blue, then pink, then violet  
Or is it violent, like static on my skin  
Like water filled past my knees  
Like my name said into a glass of ice  
Smoke (there on the bathroom tile)  
Curls between my teeth and I wonder  
If you've ever seen real ivory  
Felt the bone of another against your neck—  
Charred trophies kept in a porcelain bowl  
I crush them, taste their powdered electricity  
Smear a cross of black ash on my tongue  
Touch me and you, too, will breathe fire

## YOU COULD DO ANYTHING YOU WANTED

You could eat a watermelon in the subway—  
eat the earth and eat all the people on it.

Millions of children eat breakfast at tables—eat maple  
syrup and ice cream and everything—eat without pausing for breath.

Trust me when I say: you will not care  
about topics like cutlery and why we use it,  
windows and why we have them, and walls  
and why need them.

Like how there are so many types of floss  
Like staying in bed till noon  
Like how people die, and we watch them

And how do you become a thing—molt into something tender,  
oddly lumpy, imperfect, maybe-not-young.

To do: go to the grocery store  
    buy artichokes  
    feel insecure  
    buy cereal instead

Look—you're making honey.  
Listen—you're getting ready for bed, just underwater.

You can't help it—that vague unease it's too good  
to be true: the ice cream, the butter for breakfast,  
the faces, flowers, face-flowers—

Note: language taken from *NYT Minus Context* tweets



*Venus de Milo with Drawers: SELF-PORTRAIT MADE OF MINK & PLASTER*

Each morning is the same  
    but I can't help but look again and again:  
skin smooth peony petal, vanilla-ice-  
    cream-cool; hair a ripple of milk pulled back  
too tight (though sometimes I forget the aching);  
    even my eyes are eggshells. I have only air  
where arms should be, dimpled seams  
    of unfinished making I'll never forgive,  
but the sling of this sheet hugs my hips  
    in the perfect place that says, *Hey,*  
*I can still be sexy.* Then, there are the drawers:  
    forehead, breasts, ribcage, stomach,  
my left knee—the edges to my curves  
    only someone else can open—nipples, belly  
button, each knob a puff of fur to touch  
    and pull. I'm told they're so, so soft.  
Everyone wants to look inside, and sometimes I let them  
    just to feel the rub and jolt, just to see their faces  
when they find my secrets inside, find their own.  
    My favorite part is when they shut me, shaking  
my spine so hard I almost crack—and for a moment  
    it feels some part of me could change.

## FIRST

Why is it the only blood in fairytales  
spills from the gut of a dragon or the gash  
in a knight's armor—but never in-between  
legs, never smeared on Cinderella's fingertips  
the morning after her fourteenth birthday?  
What did Rapunzel think was happening  
to her—locked in a tower without a washrag  
to spare? Did Snow White hang her blood-  
stained sheets on the line next to the socks  
and caps of her seven little men? There were no  
mothers to wipe their tears and fill hot water  
bottles, only stepmothers, witches whispering  
through a crack in the door, *you're a woman now*.  
Maybe they kept the stains a secret, the only things  
to have as their own. They laid in bed, hands pressed  
to their middle, afraid but somehow braver.

## OUR COMMUNION

She tells me: if you open it, you finish it.

The first time wine touched my tongue  
I was too young to know, in communion  
you shouldn't smack your lips and say *ahhh*  
when the priest tips the chalice back.

Now, 18, I felt the bitter warmth that tasted  
like Sunday. So similar in memory, I wondered  
if St. Thomas shopped at Kroger.

My friend put her finger to the bottom  
of the glass, pushing it up to find home  
on my mouth. Finish it.

This is what we have to do—open, swallow.

Two Episcopalians and their wine—I think  
there's a joke in there somewhere—drinking  
not the blood of Christ, but the fermentation  
of grapes paired well with fettuccini alfredo.

I felt like I should be kneeling, knees pressed  
into a needle-point scene of the Nativity or  
an ark. When I took that last drop and she released  
the glass, I wanted her to say: peace be with you.  
And I would say: and also with you.

DEAD SEA

Take me to the lowest point  
on Earth and float me hungrier.

You know what salt does to me.  
Makes me hungry. Like a deer  
stuck in a cycle of lick, I feel  
it burn on my lips as I lie back  
in cloudy blue. Here, touch  
my hair, it's crunchy, fading  
a whiter shade of blonde.

*Animal, vegetable, mineral—*

I'll take the latter. You can  
barely feel your legs here.

Only the sting of a two-day  
-old shave. Let's never leave.

I want to know if I'll swell  
or shrivel, sink with my insides  
turned pink rock candy, or simply  
erode—fingerprints first,  
then toes. Calcium sucked  
right out of my teeth. Tell me  
you love the taste of it, too.

## FOR MY MOTHER'S FEAR

I drive down the highway in rain  
so thick I should slow down but don't.  
The sky's too dark for a summer  
six o'clock, and lightning cuts through  
ahead and I imagine the rip into asphalt,  
the split into tree. Its white-hot blanket  
over the hood of my car, curdled steel  
around me, the zing of electricity  
from steering wheel to elbows to pelvis  
to knees, the car spun out against the guardrail.  
And my mother told me this would happen—  
this getting older, this imagining the worst.  
She reads too many CNN articles on the dangers  
of cell phones, drinking milk, ill-formed sleep  
habits, microbes in the sand. *Everything is trying  
to kill us* and I nod silently on the other end  
of the phone, thinking she has too much  
time on her hands. That her worry is made of air,  
or something lighter. She warns me of shadows  
in my peripheral vision, of never leaving  
a key under the door mat, of speeding  
in the rain.

*AISH*

(eye-eesh)

Standing at my kitchen counter  
I try to saw a loaf of bread  
but the crust is too hard  
& the knife too dull, worn  
down from bagels & baguettes  
a day-too-stale, wrong-side-  
of-the-blade scraping across  
the cutting board. I press  
my palm against the toasted  
air-cracked bubbles, watch  
them split like blisters then give  
in to the soft beneath their shell,  
yeast blooming to perfume  
my wrists. Again I drag the  
breadknife across the golden  
crust, but there is only tear &  
rip where slice should be & I  
think of the Arabic word for *bread*,  
same as the word for *life*. How  
it's believed to take a knife  
to bread is sinful, nearly  
forbidden, seen as too violent  
an act. So looking at this heap  
of crumb before me, I wonder:  
if this is violence, what else  
can my hands do?

*Venus de Milo with Drawers* TO HER LOVER

You can open me. Unwrap  
these sheets and pull—just slowly,  
though, and lick your fingers  
first—pull my left breast  
out and find the note you wrote  
to your kindergarten love. All x's  
and o's and crayon devotion.

Reach further, the tube of lipstick  
your babysitter forgot in the couch  
cushions has rolled to the back.  
Remember how she taught you  
spin-the-bottle? With those dark  
berry lips.

Now, move your hand to my knee,  
Spilling over with the coarse-ground  
grits you knelt on for ten whole minutes  
when your mother caught you  
watching porn. You couldn't even pull  
your boxers back up first.

Scoop them out and find the broken  
condom. The back-seat night  
that almost made you a man too soon.  
This is what built you, these wide-eyed  
nights stinging red like a fresh tattoo  
only I can see. Here, kiss me. Rest  
your head on my ribs. I am not afraid  
of knowing you.

## UNCARRIED

my friend is crying  
on the phone her grandmother  
died and I can hear water  
rising all around her

the river raised  
to carry her home  
she lives in Florida now  
ten hours south

from her grandmother  
somehow dead there and her not  
there too and it isn't the against-  
the-current-ness

that has me static-silent  
on the phone no it's that I don't  
understand the feeling  
I did not cry for mine

I did not know her  
before her heart kicked  
sixty years old on the office  
floor she wished

she didn't know  
my birthday never touched  
my small pink hands I never  
knew the smell

of her perfume  
color of her eyes how soft  
her hands too late now  
no picture then

in my seven-year-old  
mind when my mother  
told me she was dead no  
I only cry at death

when it's animal



whether roadside fawn  
or first beagle named Beaux  
bitten by a snake

maybe this means  
I'm lucky I'll stay dry  
and grounded and uncarried  
never to be swept under

my friend is quiet  
now she asks me  
are you still there

AMEN (meaning “so be it”)

Ask me to sing a hymn and I will,  
high school choir sight-reading  
called upon to guide me  
(there is no  
memory here, no recognition  
of tune or chorus).

Ask me to recite a verse  
and I’ll stumble:

*Genesis-one-colon-two*

I’ve never had a favorite.

Once a friend held my shoulders against  
a wall and told me: *God would want you  
to forgive*  
and I said: *What do I care?*

At nine, my father no longer  
said grace before dinner  
or told me to say my prayers  
before bed—  
my soul kept enough.

So why, then, do my hands come  
together  
(palm-to-palm, church and  
steeple clasped, thumbs flush against  
the base of my breasts)

each time I shower,  
arch my back and tilt  
my head under the water?

## SOMEONE LIVES HERE

The spoons get dirtied  
twice before washing,

there's toothpaste drying  
in the sink, leaves collect

in the window sill—you see,  
I don't mind the smell

of an orange rind shrinking  
on the cutting board. The overcoat

thrown across the chair  
a springtime reminder of a winter's

snow that night in your kitchen,  
looking at the floor through a wine

glass, wanting it to fall  
from my hand just to hear the break,

and gripping tighter. You see,  
someone lives here

and it might be me—either  
my breath or the radiator's

on the window. The spoon still wet  
with coffee, the coupons half cut

and the scissors still in my hand.  
And smoke from a candle blackens

the bathroom tile behind it—who knew  
such small fires left a mark.

## SMALL BODY, SMALL BREATH

I used to think I was most afraid  
of drowning, of choking on a wad  
of bubblegum, of being pinned under-

neath the blankets until I couldn't breathe.  
But now, as I keep my car keys close  
in this night-lit parking lot, aware

of how near to my body his body  
would have to be for these small pieces  
of metal to become weapon, I realize

I have a new fear, a greater fear. One of  
hands, of followed to the bathroom,  
of *excuse me, can I help you with that—*

one that would take much more than breath.  
And sometimes I wish I was a lamb, so lucky  
to never fear their path to slaughter.

## NOTES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### I.

We message on Snapchat because if it doesn't disappear in ten seconds or less *it isn't safe, he could see*. So there, standing in baggage claim, I stare at the screen on my phone imagining the waiver in her voice with each typed word: *you were right, you were right*.

### II.

ANGRY: because I told her this would happen  
because she didn't listen to me  
because howhowhow could he  
because of course he did

HOLLOW: because he'd already hit her before I said a word

### III.

When we were twelve we passed notes in class ranking how cute each boy in second period was. Pink glitter pen reserved for only the most flutter-worthy. Circled names in red to signal kiss-ability. Purple underline for boyfriend material. Codenames strictly adhered to—what would they do if they ever saw? We couldn't imagine anything worse than laughter.

### IV.

*There are loaded guns all over the apartment.*

V.

She told me as I was getting back from a spring break vacation and I've never cried so much in public. I cried in baggage claim, on the escalator, on the parking lot shuttle—a man sitting next to me asked me if I had boy trouble.

VI.

GOOGLE SEARCH: my friend told me she is being domestically abused  
: how to help a friend who is being abused  
: how to leave an abusive relationship  
: domestic abuse shelters in Mobile, AL  
: driving distance from Greensboro, NC to Mobile, AL  
: flights to Mobile, AL  
: how to get a restraining order  
: why do men physically abuse  
: why do men emotionally abuse  
: why do men sexually abuse  
: why

VII.

In ninth grade her boyfriend of two weeks sent her a dick-pic and neither of us knew what it was, had never seen one before.

VIII.

NationalDomesticViolenceHelpline.org: “An abused woman is at most risk at the point of separation and immediately after leaving an abusive partner.”



IX.

*He says he owns me.*

*He calls me bitch, slut, slave, worthless.*

*He says he wants to humiliate me.*

X.

She's leaving in two months once she graduates.

She has a plan.

She's been making a list what to take with her.

We joke the KitchenAid mixer is top priority.

She's making copies of her passport and keys.

Our emergency code word is "zebra."

XI.

Senior year of high school we sat on the floor of a department store dressing room and took deep slow breaths to calm her shaking. A virgin, she'd said no, but he did it anyways.

XII.

“why is there another kitchen, spring light  
always darkening in it and  
a woman whispering to a man  
over and over what else could we have done?”

— Eavan Boland

XIII.

ME: What do you need from me?

HER: I don't know. I'm still figuring it out.

ME: What do you need from me?

HER: Just knowing that you know is really comforting.

ME: What do you need from me?

HER: I'm okay right now. I promise to tell you if I'm not.

ME: What do you need from me?

: What do you need from me?

: What do you need from me?

*Venus de Milo with Drawers* UNTO HER SERPENT

Call me: long-lost child of Eden

of this wilderness that used to own me—

first: noon-dazed  
among fields

I waited for more bodies  
for anything  
interesting—

second: the molder and rust

a million minutes too many  
of green—

but then  
you passed across my feet  
but then: a beginning

*Come on, you dare, be a wild thing*

No hands to touch you  
so I lick with pomegranate seeds  
still in my teeth

swallow every ancient scale  
you have to offer

in this strange bed you call  
world

Wild thing? Yes: something red

Open the drawer—  
fill me with bottled thunder  
a dozen fish spines  
the hollow sound  
of *sin* in your mouth—

yank me hard  
from this endless summer

Give me  
something else to bite down on

## SUNDAY NIGHT POWER OUTAGE

There's something spectral  
about sitting cross-legged  
on the carpet staring into the center  
of a flame. Washed with darkness  
of a blown transformer, candlelight  
licks at unblinking routers, cable  
boxes and thick silence. In the wake  
of wifi, I whisper to St. Cyprian  
as my fingers slip through heat  
the way my mother showed me  
at the dinner table. Will you light  
the wick of my fingertip or ends of my hair?  
Will you set me aflame, my dear  
Cyprian, so I might slip under the door  
and into the street lights, burning.

## MY HOUSE IS MADE OF SPINNING PARTS

and you are one of them  
standing by the fireplace stringing  
Christmas lights from mantle to ceiling fan  
to wall clock to the back of my chair

each lightbulb a time you've seen me scratch  
my nose and wanted to scratch it yourself,  
a time I mistook the washing machine  
for your heart beating through the wall

and in this glowing room you put a record  
on the turntable, ask me to use my fingernail  
as the needle so we can't dance too close  
in the living room for the axis to bear:

your side, my side—the floorboards start to tilt  
(toward mountain, Pluto, parking lots, blue)  
and I watch the baseboards bend, flowerpot edge  
away from sill, furniture sliding

you ask me, if I stood there all night which way  
would I face: east or west or stove or bedroom  
or pine tree outside the window—I say:  
*I don't think I have a choice*

FOR SOME TIME AFTER

The carpet burns against my back

the lightbulbs are cool to the touch

and there's something about ceiling fans

I can't quite quit—maybe the dust like cigarette

—how the going-around

sounds like my name

chopped in your mouth

the moment you split my legs

on the floor beside the radiator

—how I still see their blades

spinning lavender behind closed eyes

phantom like the crawl of an emery board

breath on my neck

or reaching for a glass already emptied

(even the vodka has dulled)

eyes closed

the image of you

standing in the doorway

boxers to your knees



## THISTLE & WEEDS

Grease from a double patty-melt  
slicked his fingers and chin  
stubbled with pepper lifted from  
thick-cut sweet potato fries that made  
him think of his mother.

Like the tune the little boy  
in the cowboy hat behind him  
hummed into his chocolate milk.

Like the stop-sign silhouetted  
by the late-afternoon sun outside  
the window—they both said the same  
thing—*we're going nowhere, Ephram.*

He took one last bite before leaving  
change on the linoleum counter,  
bracing to stand. Hips kicking back  
like the horse's blow last Saturday.

He rocked forward into the steel  
tips of his boots, sturdy, yet unsure  
what was worth the going.

THIS IS MY KUDZU POEM

because you see, it's goddamn everywhere  
and every Southern poet knows it,

must let everyone know

how it makes them feel:

like anxiety, like mold, like hunger—

something like greed or lust

or both, it'll do as long

as it consumes—

and wouldn't you know,

it's green like good ol' envy.

Poor kudzu. So misunderstood.

Condemned to choke

the trees, water towers,

livestock, my childhood

swing set—perhaps

it just doesn't know how else to love,

how to contain

it's uncontrollable urge

to weave. And here

I am, with my uncontrollable urge

to be blanketed. How convenient.

This is where I remember

my poetry professor's syllabus—

*No kudzu, please, Dickey*

*already said it best.*

The focus of a father's mid-life

rage via a lawnmower;

something for a mother to stare

at through a kitchen window

and wonder where her life

went wrong—these are somebody's

parents already. Oh, if only

I could write about blackbirds instead.

CATHEDRAL CAVERNS TO THE TOUR GUIDE:

Come, bring your troops of girl scouts,  
fourth-graders, families waving the flag

of another country—let them tip-toe  
across my gravel lips and my limestone

tongue, feel the crisp cool of my breath  
on their necks. Every weekend I wait

for them, for you. Wait for the vibrations  
of *oohs* and *ahhs*, spark-brightness of cameras,

the drawl of your voice bouncing off my  
slick-rock throat. *Every crack you see*

*was cut by the 1812 New Madrid*  
*earthquake*—I can still feel the tremble

as your flashlight shines along my veiny  
rivers. How I wish I could tell you where

they lead. Now, enter my stalactite forest—  
listen to the drips, their echoes pooling

in my dimples, home to ghost crickets and lost  
pennies—*No, they are not made of wax.*

My favorite part is when you turn out the lights,  
let the dark velvet around us in such cold quiet.

If only I could touch you in this moment, feel  
your palm against each curve and ridge, a secret

no one else can see. But no, *repeated touching*  
*will erode* me, you've always been very clear.

So for now, I'll take this stillness before counting  
the footprints you leave behind.

The darkness somehow larger when you've gone.

## SUNDAY YOGA IN THE ECOLOGY PRESERVE

Following the roll of sweat  
down my spine, I release  
into *savasana* to join the dead

bugs and bones a layer  
deeper beneath backs  
of knees and exhales—

my tongue loose and elbows  
empty against earth's humming  
center. I wait for moss to crawl

my shins and lace my cheekbones,  
mushrooms to find home amid  
my eyebrows, a stream to end

in the hollows of my collarbones  
where tadpoles birth. I can feel  
my fingernails take root. Eyes fixed

on the almost blue veins  
of a poplar leaf, breath calms—  
I become green and rough with bark

just for a moment, just a still-lying  
second of dirt. Here, I am inhale  
and exhale and palm lines breathing up.

All leaf and twig. Something new.

## ABANDONED CARS ON I-40, NORTH CAROLINA

All adorned with orange stickers,  
numbered like yard sale tickets,  
or deer tagged and spared

from a stare down the barrel  
of a gun. Some with twisted  
white tee's hanging from rolled up

windows, as if to say *I'll be back  
soon*, or, *Here is the wick, light me.*

Most are moved within a day, but some

sit for weeks. Look for the familiar  
4-door blue, crumpled bumper, raw tire  
rims, ILLEATU vanity plate, Jesus fish

with legs, yellow racing stripe tragedy—  
mile markers overgrowing with roadside  
weed. But where are their people now?

A mile down the road, thumb hitched  
and tie beating in the wind. Walking  
through tall grasses away from town, palms

open to the rough. Perhaps they never left—  
simply pulled over, unbuckled their seatbelt,  
crawled to the floorboard, and closed their eyes

so tired. Let themselves take root—their hair  
tangled in door handles, skin melded  
with leather, lips crystalized with lost

french fry salt. I want to stop and look inside,  
to lay beside their cicada shell bodies and cover  
my ears against the 85 mile per hour hum.

Forget the back-and-forth, the time on the dash,  
the worry of the stove still burning, every list.  
But, no, I haven't stopped yet. Grip still firm

on the wheel. Waiting for the right day  
to join them—open the door and disappear.

BEING SO CAUGHT UP,

my back arched away against  
pine needles, softer still  
than your touch, I decide  
I can be your Leda. I watch  
the grey turn to violet swatches  
between branches, I watch  
unmarred by wet eyes. Wet hands  
part the curve of my lips  
before spreading earth and thigh  
with angel wings. I welcome a sharp  
chin—a grating careless warmth  
etching *love this* in veins  
aching *want you*—Yes, take me  
somewhere that tastes like blood.  
A sudden blow: knuckles  
behind knees, pressing leaves  
into backs of wrists. Have you  
done this before? Flecks of bark  
knot your hair, sticking like your mossy  
breath below my ear. Yes, stay.  
The trees hear my pumping hunger, see  
your fleshy paleness take again  
and again and again raw with the froth  
of you shimmering on hipbones.  
Leave your wings wrapped in shoulder  
blades, please, lace me deep. Scrape  
the pine red so I remember you.



STILL LIFE WITH BROKEN FLOWER POT ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR

Too-hot honey & butter popped  
in the pan over blue flame, the carrots  
turning a wooden shade of brown

like the leaves outside the window  
above the sink full of soapy water  
& lime-crusting highballs, still  
smelling of gin & lipstick—

another pop in the pan: *I forgot the nutmeg,*  
the onions, the basil, the coffee grounds,  
the ice, the cigarettes, the bubblegum,  
the microwave, the smell of cilantro,  
the name of the song on the radio,  
the name written in the back of my shirt.  
I forgot September.

Then, there on the linoleum—  
terracotta splayed and bleeding  
black dirt. This brain turning  
into something I can no longer call  
my own. Something to wipe clean  
on the linen apron around my waist.

This cracked clay, torn leaf, so much dirt.  
Bird at the window. I stood looking at my  
hands, not knowing when it fell.

## BABIES DON'T KEEP

As in, they grow older,  
but hear it: *they grow stale*.  
As in, don't let their too-soft  
bodies sit in the crisper drawer  
too long. As in, put them out  
with the compost before their edges  
wilt and curl. As in, but don't waste  
them, pitch them into the yard  
for birds. As in, thank goodness  
for this daily pink pill. As in, I praise  
the shed of blood each month. As in,  
I couldn't imagine anything worse  
than such small hands growing  
so small fingernails, scratching  
their way into this world. As in, maybe  
when I'm older—when *me* becomes  
*I-could-be-a-mother-me*. As in, we can  
make a new one, when we're ready.  
But then, there's the doctor explaining  
*a hostile womb*. As in, too late. As in,  
my body the statistic gone wrong. As in,  
I the one too stale—something left wanting  
what they never wish they had.

## BLANK

You're like the earring  
I left at another man's  
apartment. The gold one,  
knotted like knuckles  
looking for each other,  
the one my mother told me  
*do not lose this*—you know  
the one. You're like it because  
somehow I'm not convinced  
it's gone. No, it's just at the bottom  
of my purse, in a misguided  
pocket, or stuck between couch  
cushions. Stuck like the *move to  
California* was in your throat,  
unable to ask. Stuck—you see,  
it's like that. Like trying to run  
but you can't get past the first catch  
in your ankles. Like that. It's like  
this man's breath on my neck  
but I still can't believe I asked you  
to hold my subway pass and debit  
card and my goddamn Chanel  
lipstick and expected you not to lose  
them all. Like that. It's like lying  
on the dock and feeling the sun pop  
each dusty skin cell into something  
I wish you would miss. Like that.  
It's like that. It's like taking a shower,  
but the shower curtain is missing  
and the air is cold and there's too much  
water on the floor so I sit down.  
Like me tugging my earlobe, blank  
and thinking of you.

*Venus de Milo with Drawers* TAKES TO THE POLE FOR THE LAST TIME

Look at me—my smooth white hips,  
the way they sling cold around powder-

slick metal, the way I whisper  
*Hey there honey, you look so sad*

in the ears of men waxed with whiskey  
and a taste for mink and plaster. Oh,

how they love to pull and tug, open me  
at my waist and slide in five dollar bills—

a twenty, if I'm lucky, and I am any night  
I dance to Peggy Lee, wear violet, paint

my lips black, and shake my bleached hair  
down slow. Yes, back then I could still a room

with a flick of the tongue and an arch  
of the back. They all wanted their Venus

*so bad, baby, so bad.* But now, my hinges  
rattle, my skin more cream-cracked, and just

last week a man dropped a quarter into my knee,  
didn't even want to touch my breasts. So tonight,

as the pink and gold lights slice across the stage,  
I slip off my red rhinestone heels and sink into

the splits one more time—but slowly, slower  
than they want, so I can look them all in the eye

to say, *You'll miss me.* They say, *You look so sad.*

## DRESS US IN BLUE

and call us *like-boy*. Call us bigger  
than this world we do not want. You  
call it *adventure* we call it *escape*.

Our voices are dagger so we open  
books and sing, hurtle through kaleidoscope,  
iron, vine and yell— *Eat me*.

Yes, dress us in blue and see what you get.  
Girls clicking their heels elsewhere, melting  
all that's green. Watch us fly—carried by dust

and storm and thread, rivers of our own  
making—these oceans of stone and jungle  
cannot hold us. Catch our wrists

and you'll get glass. Lock us in dark  
and you'll get, *Told you so*. We'll leave  
by night and come back ice, speak in animal,

let heads roll, never let you tell a lie—  
is this what you're afraid of? Tell us  
to grow up and we'll say, *No*.

Tell us to stay young and we'll say, *No*.  
Dress us in blue—we'll do what you  
wish you could and better.

## SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE SALAD AND DESSERT

Have you ever looked across  
a restaurant and caught the eye  
of a stranger the moment you both  
put a forkful of spinach risotto  
in your mouths—felt suddenly  
you two had shared a strange shifting?

What choice now but to fight, to hurl  
that china bowl straight at their head.  
To pay each other's tabs, to buy a one-way  
ticket to Amsterdam, to invent a secret  
handshake, kayak the world's largest  
glacier lake, knit a pair of matching gloves,  
graffiti the underside of a bridge, aim arrows  
at apples, learn the violin, scream into a tin  
can telephone—what choice now but to say  
*hey, you* and fuck against the faux-brick  
back wall of the Macaroni Grill.

This isn't what you had planned.  
You were looking forward to cheesecake,  
a second glass of merlot. And now you're chewing  
eye-to-eye with a man who needs a shave,  
wondering if it's ruder to keep looking  
or to be the first to look away. If the looking  
would be forever, who we were now.

FIRE/FEAR

He sees flames growing  
from the center of a baseball  
split open in his hands,

or maybe his father's hands  
having forgotten to dampen  
the wood burning stove,

or maybe the hands of a friend  
heavy with a revolver waiting  
to spark. He sees heat everywhere.

Everything is fuel. The paper  
he writes on—or no, he types—  
but still, the ink is flammable

and when he writes his fingers  
burn, must dunk them in beer,  
asks me to lick the foam, afraid

one day I'll say *no* and put a match  
to my hair instead. Afraid  
of how often he sees the cat's

tail as a wick. Of a classroom  
full of smoke, students sitting still,  
a gun in each of their mouths.

—*for C.C.*

*Venus de Milo with Drawers* HAS NEVER BEEN IN LOVE

Every night I have to release the bees  
from my ribcage or else their hot-humming  
burrows bone-through. Each one a new  
*hello, a get home safe, let me look at you,*  
*why are you so late, I could have loved*  
*you, maybe*—each stir nectar-sweet, sting-  
bitter, and urgent rattling my hipbones  
knob-loose, shaking me awake to say: *pay*  
*attention, you did this.* And I miss them  
when they're quiet, know they've fallen  
still by lip and hand and warm sleep. Morning,  
and I scoop the honey from beside my heart.



MY SELF-PORTRAIT'S ALREADY BEEN DRAWN

-after Pablo Picasso's *Portrait of Sylvette David in Green Chair, 1954*

I'm combing my hair into a ponytail  
Over & over my fingers rake my scalp  
The elastic's in my teeth  
Eyes focused on the crack in the bottom  
    Corner of the mirror  
The smooth can't be too smooth  
My hands never know when to stop  
A shoulder aches  
Blonde strands lint my black cotton blouse  
Last night's wine stains the edges  
    Of my mouth  
Then the twist & loop taut at the crown  
One loose wave soft at the temple  
Smoke curls from the ash tray beside the sink  
The cat whines between my ankles  
I brush the fringe from my brow  
And there's silk against my neck  
A blue handkerchief scarf tightening  
    With each bowed chin