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The poems in this manuscript explore the adaptations one makes to sustain life after loss. Through concision and directness, this collection offers a study of the transformative quality of grief. The southern landscape provides a means for introspection and excavation of the speaker's fears, which compound and intervene throughout relationships with others and particularly in regard to the evolution of the self.

NEW BEINGS

by

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PROLOGUE

*To fill a Gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it—  
Block it up  
With Other—and 'twill yawn the more—  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air.*

*—Emily Dickenson*

## I. THE ELEPHANT'S CHILD

## The Same, Different

Tomorrow is today always.

The sharks I never feared  
now patrol the shores.

I once hoped somehow  
I would know all of the world—  
the ideas beyond

the blue fence of Atlantic,  
but I find I am as moderate

as I said I wouldn't be,

staring at the coast  
thinking tomorrow  
will be different.



November

The pumpkin faces sag  
like a chemo patient's,

spots down the temples,  
weighted, sloping cheeks.

Pockets in long black coats  
fill with elegies. Everything

that was is entropied and organized;  
Mother is dead and the world

travels its tethered arc.  
The farmers carve new rectangles

in the soil, each plot  
a blank face in the earth's geometry.

## My Father

My father is the pediatrician,  
my father is the psychologist,  
my father is the professor,  
my father is the podiatrist.  
My father is that seedy musician  
who lives across the hall,  
my father is the woman telling secrets  
at the local mall.  
My father is a novel. My father is a play.  
My father is Good Morning. My father is Good Day.  
My father is a stone dropped like a knife,  
he's a desert full of glass.  
My father is a fear I do not have,  
a fear I cannot buy.

## The Elephant's Child

My grandmother blamed my mother  
for my father's death.

*Come hither, little one,* said Kipling's Crocodile,  
as he shed his crocodile tears.

If only they had gone to church, if  
her son hadn't taken the job in North Carolina.

*Let me show you what I have for dinner.*

## Feminine

### I.

Edged still in the purple lines of a surgeon's pen,  
my mother's breast was a nippleless moon—  
one long seam rode its diameter. I didn't think  
of what it would be like to lose a breast, then,  
mine, only an echo of womanhood,  
adolescent fat on the top of pectorals.

### II.

My grandmother became guardian.  
On laundry day, flimsy bras hung like ghosts  
on the drying rack. We wore them  
to support something beyond supporting.

### III.

I hated training bras. I hunched down  
and took one off in the middle  
of earth science class. No one saw.  
I stuffed it past books and pencils  
into the smooth corner of my desk  
where it stayed until the year was over.

### IV.

When my body became a planet  
for young male astronauts,  
and love was a matrix  
pressed into a TI-83 calculator,  
the bra became a thin separator  
between a handsome high school boy,  
my curiosity, and our own clumsiness.

### V.

Each month in the shower, I study  
a self-exam card like my mother's.  
I can't tell if I am more afraid to find  
something or to not.

## My Grandmother's Guts

were Kansas cream of tuna  
on toast, and *because I said so*.

Her smile, a signature on a test.

She loved with a sense of déjà vu  
for the family she'd already raised, husband,

daughter and son-in-law now ghosts in the mirror

of my face. We held so tightly to the skeletons  
of before, vertebraed towers we tried to climb

back into: before winter, before cancer.  
The house became still as a room after

an experiment, where both of us, like dogs

playing dead—daughterless, motherless—  
waited to see which one would get up first.

## The Unlimited Deal

Sprint has the Plan. A *Plan for Work*.  
*Home. Everything.* Cheaper, if you do  
the math, than these weekly fifty-minute  
sessions. A network that promises,  
if you believe the pamphlet,  
two years of blonde men with happy dogs.  
who, like my therapist, want me to  
*get the most out of life's every moment.*  
Calm faces fill glossy pages. Concerns?  
Unlike therapy, they've got support  
with guarantees and online chat; no  
tea mug, no Kleenex box, no prescriptions.

But I like to listen to Chopin here  
in my clinic's waiting room, see  
the people trying not to hint  
they're there. The teenager  
shrinks into a magazine, a man  
tugs a paper cone from the water  
dispenser. I scan the Sprint brochure  
and decide to buy the unlimited deal;  
perhaps it will be enough. Maybe my  
full theoretical family will return  
and smile as we walk through Reynolda  
Gardens; our footsteps bending the green  
grass, full with the smell of magnolia  
blossoms. We'll walk a golden retriever  
we never had. *Abigail*, they'll call. *Abigail*.

## Suspension

At dusk, a fiddle spider moves up the wall  
with thin graphite limbs. That night, her many-

eyed brothers and sisters inch  
across the ceiling into my sleep,

in one ear, out the other. I watch Gene Kelly  
sing and dance a dozen times

to keep me from a place where the fiddlebacks  
are as lasting and as poisonous

as cities, friendships, fear. I don't belong here.  
At the end of my week of nights on the couch

Kelly keeps pulling up the curtain  
to save Debbie Reynolds while I sing

*Good Morning* to the brown recluses  
and check glue traps. I worry a little more

and a little less. Kelly swings on the lamppost,  
I drowse. Hollywood sprinklers drop cold rain

as morning shadows fill the corner of my room.  
The policeman walks Kelly home.

## II. DIRECTLY



## As a Guest

I will tell you directly whether  
I think your mushroom clam casserole  
is edible or not. No southern *that's nice*  
or *I'll have to get the recipe*. At dinner, I will  
tell you directly because this table is only  
the wood it is, the wood of some young  
pine squared off into something  
deemed more useful.

Don't ask, because I will tell you when  
you have something in your teeth.

After cups of wine, I will tell  
you directly if I am comfortable  
in your inflatable guest bed, the one that sags  
in the middle before I've fallen asleep.

I have dreamed of you. And on the plastic  
mattress in your living room,  
the sheets murmur always, *I will tell you*.

## Tea

Sometimes I boil hot water,  
fill the kettle from the tap,  
set the stove to high  
to have something pending,  
something waiting on me.  
I like feeling urgent, needed,  
if only for a whistle and a hot eye.

I still haven't listened  
to your message. It says either:  
You can come or you can't,  
there's turkey for lunch  
in the refrigerator, or just call me  
when you get this. I never do.  
I take the teapot off the stove and leave,  
empty mug on the counter.

## Forecast

Puddles ice at their edges.  
I avoid the cold,

an estranged lover  
who still makes

my cheeks blush.  
Maybe the weatherman

will be wrong tomorrow  
and the last fires of fall and you

will return to green, not  
disappear to winter.

Curled leaves collect  
at my door and the furnace

breathes on. I imagine  
the warmth of joining

to the arch of a limb,  
exhaling oxygen

with no fear of falling away.

## The Week after You Left

A ceiling fan waves four  
unhappy hands

in a circle of penance.  
Maybe they are your hands,

or the taxidermied  
wings of a raven.

The resolution is as pale  
as a drop of milk

on the floor, willingly  
spilled. I leave

the bedroom door open. So  
the dog can go out.

## At The National Zoo

Over there, a small woman on a park bench  
eats frozen yogurt. St. Anne's Catholic

School ropes its pupils in lines of red t-shirts.  
A man tells a boy that the metal sculpture

of a gecko is the real thing. You and I follow  
the asphalt past the pandas and elephants,

you say you'll move south in the fall;  
I don't believe you. A peacock drags its tail.

Teens knock shoulders like ten-pins, scavenge  
for freedom from chaperones.

We never see the fishing cat, and  
at the next display, two otters dive and splash

in the artificial stream. They know each other  
better than we do. A mother holds

her daughter above a railing. Below,  
seven lion cubs flick their tails

and paw at the enclosure door.  
The tiger sleeps through it all.

As

Mrs. Standerfer took me aside  
in second grade to ask

if I would mind writing the words  
*death* and *die* on a spelling test.

My father had been dead  
for a year, as dead as

the paper, the pencil, the curve  
of the letter d.

I passed the test and tried  
to feel some great expected sadness

but *sad* was just another word  
that I could spell, like *dad*,

*dead*, minus the letter e.

## Postmarked

My letter will be late. It will not arrive  
in the mail with the bills.

My letter will be late, but no later  
than the evenings you tapped on my door

after a half-dozen tumblers of gin,  
silenced away over the cigarettes

only you smoked. I don't know why I let  
you in. My cursor is blinking and blinking,

a pulsing line both here and gone.

Nashville,

you could never be my Music City.  
You are aluminum rain, tin-toned mandolins,  
Christian fundamentalists circling the Parthenon  
in Centennial Park wearing blue blindfolds.  
You are the Cumberland, your slippery  
tail cutting through downtown. I could  
catch a catfish from your skyscrapers,  
sail with the weekend tourists to a table  
at Robert's Western Bar and dance two step  
with a Vandy frat boy. But now you are only  
a weekend friend, a once-lover, a July  
spiking tobacco in Springfield, an afternoon  
in the imitation gardens of Opryland. My  
cool nights are set away from your drawl, away  
from the airy fortune of the Vanderbilts. But  
my sleep still floods with your spiders,  
Johnny Cash songs and the Schermerhorn's bubbling  
chandeliers. You wouldn't know how to break  
those glass hearts, and I wouldn't pray for you if I could.



## The Cancan Dancers

They look so happy their vaginas  
probably smile; heads cocked,  
sprouting feather bouquet  
hats elaborate as orgasms,  
lifting, kicking, grasping  
their skirts, each fold  
and ruffle a moving target  
for fishing eyes. Their battlements  
lop off top hats of the shiniest-  
faced men; cartwheels turn  
worlds into white petticoats  
and black stockings, where  
the stage is both too far  
and too near to see what you  
want to see. Their full breasts  
hardly matter even to artists;  
only the curved heel, the leg split  
upward suspending the each  
clitoral secret, each ruffled  
private room, the fancy,  
the treble, the tenor of a woman  
who knows herself best,  
a woman who can flying split the air  
and land breathless on the stage.

## Late Twenties

Young enough to use contraception,  
and still chase the body of my teenage years  
through miracle diets and workouts.  
If I were 45, I'd have a blonde-tipped Mohawk,  
drive a truck and skate for the local roller  
derby. I'd be established. But now is the time  
for sophisticated hair cuts, a few grays, soft lips  
and IKEA furniture, things that can be  
built up or taken down and sold  
on Craig's List for less than \$100.  
Now is the time for friends who drink  
too much wine on weekdays, work  
jobs that will lead to better jobs.  
Student loans are due. It's the time  
eat Paleo or vegan, watch the news,  
and shop at Trader Joes. We'll celebrate  
this New Year's without a babysitter.  
I learn a sturdy pair of pantyhose will cover  
all manner of new evils, like my mother's unavoidable  
cellulite. My friends live in Tokyo or Buenos Aires,  
because this is the end of the time marked  
for unexpected exotica, speaking French or living out  
of a backpack as you travel across South America,  
dance at milongas or drink ouzo in a Greek  
discotheque. Our bones are still smooth  
with the calcium of our youth, and so we  
ride the bus, join adult soccer leagues  
and do our taxes, hoping for a refund. Each  
morning, backlit in the breakfast room  
listening to NPR and eating half a grapefruit,  
we wait for the break; or break waiting.

### III. CLOSER TO THE SUN

When Summer Isn't Summer

it's April. That  
wildcat month  
so damned hot  
you could kill

yourself. No  
one talks aloud.  
Summer growls  
beneath a thundercloud,

*Don't tell Me  
what to do.  
I'm pretty  
just as I am.*

A Brief Study of Flora at 530 Hedgewood Place

Rhododendron. Pine trees. Marigolds  
Papa and I planted in the red clay next  
to the front door. Persimmons, rosy and round

in the summer. Dogwoods. The cherry  
my mother planted when my father  
died, weeping pink blossoms. Bearded purple iris,

her favorite. Stunted magnolia, the tree  
in which I pretended to know how to read;  
Bradford pear, the tree I climbed to kiss

a neighborhood boy. A row of eight  
holly bushes Papa planted for Mama, torn  
out when we moved.

It's been twenty years.

A century of daffodils lift their golden hoods  
and I can almost feel the same warmth I felt  
when I was a few inches farther from the sun.

## Interview with an Apparition

*for LVB.*

*Whatever grabs your socks, Lloyd*  
might have said, upon hearing  
I would marry you. Or: *Does he*  
*keep his ears clean?* Do you?  
I've never checked. Lloyd might have.  
He might have driven his motorcycle  
across the flat and discounted lands  
of our center-country to look into  
your ears, look through the dark  
opening into the matter of your  
mind, to see if (and only if)  
on the prairie, if alone, you  
could build a flint-sparked fire  
to sustain the emptiness of love  
once it has gone past the human  
experience. *Don't call me*  
*Shirley*, surely, he'd say, and you'd  
shake his hand before he revved up  
and rode home to California,  
your palm warm from the climbing flames.

## On Dying

Slip into those summers.  
Nightgown soft. Thin. Bright  
colors and cartoon houses,

blue doorframes and honeysuckle.  
Mother cut peaches poolside, found  
a quarter for a Coke

during the lifeguard's break.  
We dangled scraped legs  
over concrete edges, breathed chlorine,

sank into blue. We dove  
along black tiles, clammed earthward,  
pretended to die; and in the sun,

we floated skyward like in our  
sleep, where we could fly.

## Camp DeSoto for Girls, Mentone Alabama

Banned bikinis, morning prayer,  
no boys or air-conditioning  
made even me an Honor Camper  
for a few weeks. Atop Lookout  
Mountain, we wore whites on Sundays,  
sang *Create in me a clean heart* at vespers  
and *As the deer*. Each week of letters home,  
evening devotions, the pressure grew,  
a pressure to make the perfect mosaic box  
topped with a heart and cross, or stitch  
verses in maroon thread onto a pillow case,  
pray for others to believe in a god, one  
God, and be saved. Afternoons, I hid  
in the infirmary and skimmed *Ecclesiastes*;  
a rotating fan peeling up the edges  
of each page. *What do people gain  
from all their labors at which they toil  
under the sun?* The sheets were white  
and curt. Even the nurse who  
let me stay knew it might be too much  
to ask me to believe that there was more  
than the grit of sweat, the red pinch  
of a yellow-jacket sting, and the failure  
of shade in the height of a southern noon.



## Porch Chorus

You pluck your mother's guitar  
as evening curves along the rim

of our wine glasses. The mosquitoes,  
a caesura in each song, the punctuation

on our necks and ankles. You say  
the cicadas are coming, the cicadas

that spend seventeen years waiting,  
mating at birth then dying and falling

to the ground, a long anticipation  
of first and last minutes:

the pushing up of earth—the sound  
sharp and alive. They may come to sing

and die on our steps, their wings  
glittering in our candles.

## To the Paleontologist

Why do we worry about  
underwater love songs  
of prehistoric fish, their  
sound waves cemented—  
a delicious pattern  
that means less, now,  
than their bones?  
What if I could net the water  
from the ocean in my gut—  
all the slippery, crawling  
creatures of the earth? And if  
I held it in, the swimming  
salty shape, maybe someone could  
read the ripples of the earth  
left behind. Maybe you,  
maybe not you. Someone  
might chart their songs  
before I burst and the sea  
rushed home to caves  
and volcanic trenches  
in a billow of steam and air,  
pulling hot, pulling  
deep, tiding ancient,  
soundless pressure.

#### IV. NEW BEINGS

*Hence, both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact—that mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth.*

– *Charles Darwin*, Journal of Researches

## Inside Me

Timber from the Mayflower,  
ribbed barrels of hard tack and salt meat.

Hungry waves against the gray-green  
Appalachians. Love, I never

wanted to drop you to the bottom  
of Little River, tie your tusk to the

list of what you were not. But inside me,  
hundreds of worker bees zoom their infinite

wings, and music welds my bones together,  
a pack of desert wolves.

## A Conservatory for Wolves

Hélène Grimaud transforms Chopin into wild  
percussive hammers, the piano her anvil,

my feminine Hephaestus. When not playing,  
she maintains a conservatory for wolves.

With Alawa and Zephyr in my pack, I'm sure  
I'd feel the same as Hélène playing *Polonaise in A*,

pushing each chord into a bright military  
howl. I see eyes spark within the sound,

a stain of red and yellow. She tracks  
the final diminuendo: the world's

end. The night's end. She and I know  
at best, self can only be self

and wolves are never tame.  
I've played those same notes alone

wishing I could play them for you,  
my ring finger stretching to fill

the alpha male of Chopin's work. He  
wrote for bigger hands, and mine ache.

We are a pack of two, Grimaud and I,  
scavenging these grand staff fences

for what is classical, what is evolving;  
the polished whorls and loops of our

fingertips marking the keys with our final  
coda: *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here, like you.*

## Fortune

Gender, that odd combination  
of letters and numbers—  
the spiral of a sequence  
humping up and down  
in tandem saying  
in a godlike voice, *you're  
this* and *you're that*. What  
of that power? The decision  
to squash clay into shapes  
that will later need either  
Viagra or Midol. Thank god  
for microsurgical vasectomy  
procedures and tube tying, and all  
the sorts of hopscotch and hoops  
we jump to avoid progeny,  
to forgo the summersault into  
more mutations of what was  
never perfect; it was only  
what was. But what if all this  
was what it was supposed  
to be? Every cleft palate,  
male pattern baldness, dimple,  
each disposition to cancer  
or MS or chronic snoring something  
beautiful, like light. That broken  
code is a white slip in a fortune genome  
cookie where my lucky numbers read  
one, infinity, and nil, and  
the word on the back is either  
*eggplant* or *space shuttle*.

## Cemetery Walk

The boy's Zippo lighter clicks twice,  
open and closed. The girl cracks  
a beer, and the two walk down  
the tended streets in a humid darkness.

"I want to be cremated," says the girl,  
"Me too," says the boy.  
"It's funny, don't you think?" the girl  
laughs and looks away.

The light pollution from the suburbs  
recedes from the top of black hills, glints  
off headstones.

They walk and puff on cigarettes,  
trailing smoke like capes.

## Chickasaw Lane

You wash turnip greens by our kitchen window,

the rhododendrons curl from the cold;  
I've gone out to get my oil changed.

On our graded road, the edges are so sharp  
I could split a tire in the gutter between mountain

and pavement. And that's what marriage is,  
a comfortable fear in exchange for the home

we always wanted when we were small,  
a snowy school day, an Oreo milkshake

at the Soda Shop, a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary photo  
in the local newspaper. My car door closes

over your rivulet of thoughts. It's dark and  
your hands are cold.



## What We Give

It's been months since we last had sex.  
Your feet push into the mattress

as finch-like sounds escape my open mouth.  
With each generation in nature, Darwin found

that an offspring's beak would curve more  
to break their shell, that the skull elongates

to develop olfactory sense, chromatophores  
camouflage an octopus in the reef.

What would it mean for me to have a child  
bear half my DNA? To claim

the thin fingers and long legs, my mother's  
cancer, my chronic depression?

You draw your head to my chest  
and I rub the width of your back. The other

silent sequences lie beneath the sheets,  
the warm depression of our bodies

in the mattress. The fears  
of all the things we wish

we couldn't give, given to each other.  
Could our daughter one day forgive me

for wanting to be a mother?

## On Poetry, After Reading Rukeyser

*“There has been a great deal of political talk about security in this century. Growth is the security of organic life. The security of the imagination lies in calling, all our lives, for more liberty, more rebellion, more belief.” – Muriel Rukeyser from The Life of Poetry*

More liberty, more rebellion, more belief,  
more rhythm, more form, more control  
over the culture where we are asked to sing

and not sing, to dance only as a child,  
and to grow ugly and old and feeble.

Muriel Rukeyser wrote after a war  
when living poetry was atom bombs and genocide,  
the poetry of a new kind of death,

no more years of long, blissful extinguishing,  
but short bright bursts ending with shrapnel  
and gunfire.

How could poetry sustain this warfare?  
A gash of something inside American  
culture reminds each mother that

rebellion is liberty and belief is a story  
we tell ourselves to cover the grief  
of the people we've lost.

## Cold Blooded

The nurse asks if I've always had low blood pressure. I want to tell her that my blood is just tired of all its pumping, refreshing, moving from ventricle to toe and back, fighting the ever-thumping battle between gravity and time.

It's easy to forget the work one's body is always doing. Every second, our blood continues onward with an immunity from the thought that someday the work will be over, the war will be lost, and they will sleep in the trenches of their country's arms, for warfare ends the same in all histories.

I want to tell the nurse that I haven't always been like this. That skyscrapers weren't always on fire, that nuclear plants weren't always leaking. I want to say I have not always been so cold. But it's been so long. It's been so long I can't tell.

Lyn

Everything is her, even the neighbor's iris  
you transplanted around your condo,  
closed fists of purple and blue light

in the dark unfamiliar soil.  
Each day I grow more into a dead  
woman's body, the same face

and voice, a view of the night  
sky from a higher latitude. I am not  
what I am, the bulb of a pulled iris.

And you, guardian, gardener,  
are the maker of sequenced  
darkness. You raise the daughter

of your dead daughter while your bulbs  
spread beneath the ground, silent  
as the bats you watch fly at dusk.

## New Beings

*for WG*

Who's to say evolution happens  
only over generations? My grandmother  
is a new being each year. The mean  
of her life moves on a sliding bell  
curve. *Not enough data.* Her study  
recursive, undefined. Yesterday  
she was a bar across my bedroom window,  
the flaccid limbs of my dead mother.  
Today she is my golf-playing confidante.  
How did her cells reinvent themselves?  
In the stretch marks of days, light and  
curved, my body reminds me of my  
own adaptations: even my skin is shaping  
itself around me. We play cards and she  
tells me to learn violin, that she  
will still have something for me  
when she's gone. I tell her not to waste  
her money on a future where she will not be.  
Outside, a clay-colored sparrow  
builds a nest near to the ground. Each twig  
finds its place, curved and brittle. No  
adaptations prepare beings for loss. Inside,  
I cave in her lap. We are a pile of bones.