

ECKERT, CHELSEA S., M.F.A. *Man-eating Horses*. (2017)
Directed by Stuart Dischell. 42 pp.

This work features poems that dissect female relationships and gender, often while invoking the natural world and the human body. The odd and the fantastic appear also, prompting the reader to rethink the laws of their societal reality (especially the ones they take for granted).

MAN-EATING HORSES

by

Chelsea S. Eckert

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
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis, written by Chelsea S. Eckert, 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 Final Acceptance

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Stretching	1
I Don't Believe In Astrology, But	2
What War Does In The Crimean Peninsula	3
My Sister Fiona Who Once Bent A Steel Knife In Half	5
Caballo	6
A Tiger Mug Made Me Wonder	8
Last Night.....	10
Birth Control, Week Two	11
The Righteousness of the Four Winds	12
The Ladder That Pained Her	13
Eight Ice-Breakers For Talking To Sea Serpents Who Are Now Human Girls	15
The Question of the Moon	18
My Religion	19
In Front Of The Pasture, I Told You I No Longer Wanted To Die	20
Peering Over The Psych Ward Wall (From Within)	21
Valerian As A Cure For Insomnia And Gender.....	22
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik	24
Leaving San José And The End Of The World	26
Cicada	28
Two Weeks' Rain At The Exotic Animal Rescue.....	29

All Anyone Can Hope For	30
Photograph Of A Nude Woman, Broken Tree Branch Covering Her Breasts	31
Lighthouse Brother	33
It's Okay To Love Poetry More Than The World.....	34
Made-Up Myths	35
When I Think About How I Don't Want Kids	36
What To Say When You're Breaking Up With An Older Woman.....	37
Seasons in a World Without Clothes	38
The Cape House My Father Meant To Buy.....	41

Stretching

Pale men and women hurt us.
They're always *men* and *women*, remember:

they may or may not work minimum wage
or get bored at church and say nothing —

mother, lifeguard, neighbor with three-
headed dalmatians. But they all *transform*,

tossing off their skins like spotted capes,
invoking epithets made of their own image.

Homeric, lyric, they throw themselves
down at the temple of mortals' rights...

(You've never heard of these mortals.
Suspect them shades among golden coins.)

And then you: born into a barrel of flat ale
or a cask of funereal wine

into which the nectar-fingered tap,
these beings grinning from atop mountains.

Take your body home and love
it after the imbibing. I'm telling you,

this is important. Place your object-self
in front of a mirror, grow limbs,

roll fingers like the hair of a Gorgon
down your knees. Tell the stories of your stretching

there, sing the epopee of your atoms,
your molecules that, like *periokoi*, don't have names —

but neither did the waters that embraced
Odysseus when he decided to live.

I Don't Believe In Astrology, But

it's probably magnificent to think that if my concentration's busted
and the news on my screen twists into sun-storms of incoherence,

it's just the stars subduing my mind, bending light and thought
and suggesting a thousand opinions about libertarians.

Underneath this bright deluge I would lie supine; I would call
into work; I would use, as my excuse, *executive meddling*.

Then if my mother relents later, on the phone, and sends me
the last fifty dollars for rent, relief would sing through every gas

giant. Yet here my love would exist absently, stellar, coalescing
in far, dark reaches. That's the consequence of faith — that when

the heartbeat and trail of a planet intersect with your own,
you exist out in the incomprehensible night, and forget people.

What War Does In The Crimean Peninsula

The national anthem of the Ukraine is "Shche ne vmerly Ukrainy ni slava ni volya," sometimes translated as "Ukraine has not yet perished."

While we're here, while we're curved softer than triggers
on the blankets and you've got your hands around my hips, let's talk
about the mortar shells that buffeted the house last night.
We just bought this place

and, withstanding, it allowed us both a morning:
your gorgeousness, your thighs, gently heated metal — your fingers find my navel.
A few hours before the grand cascade
we were shaking the dirt off our memories. They whistled furiously

as they came up for air. These are our only arguments —
the ones your old boyfriends provoke when you mention them,
off-the-cuff, in a manner that utterly mystifies me...

They've patrolled the valley of what you and I know for a year now,
specters at the corner of the eye behind turf
that I don't want to keep thinking about, but do:

they've raised their hands palms-open over café tables, in cars,
tried to seem like your lovers. But they've never conquered old *Ukrayina*.

Russians, boyfriends!

I kept thinking about that, yes. Then the shells, and the walls rattling inward.
How swiftly I forget, one hour after another,
this fear nestled just out of sight.

I always like combat after it happens, I admit.

Anyone could put on these goggles of mine
and contemplate the happy violence
of the previous day. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about how brutally it exists

but how we never let it take its spoils because there are
pillows and, luckily, morning coffee.

You say now: come down under the sheets, they're bloodless.

I'll meet the radiation of your flesh. The trembling warmth — *okh*,
how it always clears away the fractured road and the smoke.

My Sister Fiona Who Once Bent A Steel Knife In Half

Mama simmered with pride when you made the football team
back in the day. Every weekend that fall it was you, my sister,
knight-ballerina in those cleats, fists thrown up at the night.
How the boys stared at the spray-paint on the grass

with all the grief of a mourner — you outskilled them
every time, ran in a frenzy, endured the weather of hard
shoulders and kneecaps. How the other girls in the bleachers
watched you grin through the glorious pain, cradling

that ball against your breast. You, this champion who provoked
jealousy in the best of us, who we respected and feared
like the ghost of a father. Now I think they envy your death,
these girls we went to school with — the smooth piercing

way the tree-limb nestled through your chest as if it saw
your life and nodded at it in distant recognition. I don't know
what kind of tree it was, the one that made a canyon of you
and Mama's junker. In the county morgue they pulled

a tiny red flower, withered with pressure, from inside your lung.
The night makes an audience of the tree line while I listen
for the junker shuddering into the driveway, for you —
and Mama cries and lays her fists on the table, talking

about how God's nothing but a fat referee who tries
to find fault. Sister, when we were girls you would hang
upside down off the limb of any sycamore on our street,
your laughter wicked as a stop sign and twice as sudden.

Caballo

I.

Even then, I wanted a horse.
Those girl-hopes are immortal
and rest between the ovaries.
They do not bother you
unless you bother them
with a hand's dusty shake, nails blunted.

I was at Half Moon Bay with my roommates.
(We lived shoulder-to-shoulder
in a one-person trailer by the sea.)
Twenty years old and I had never had sex —
the thought rarely found me. I hated sand
because I was like the sand.

The horses — seven, eight of them — were boats
on the earth, their beach trails intestinal,
something bodily, sinewy. Aching
for the pregnant silk of flank and hide, I dove,
on a dune, into the body of a palomino.
I was faithful. I needed. I needed.

We shifted our tent elsewhere, unsettled
by dust. There I watched the riders go.

II.

Even before, I wanted a horse.
At seventeen, eighteen, nineteen — even before.

No sex. No need.
I would have settled
on arms around a happy neck,
a neck that worked
in military precision with flank, with hide,
through my intestines, my sand.

I had a best friend who lost her virginity
at this age, I think. Eighteen sounds right.
He was her boat on the earth. She was cold
water, too chill for the unprepared, and sad.

Her nails pried at the air
beneath her, and were bare.

When she speaks now, I expect her hands to shake,
pregnant
with cooling images.

Years later, I had roommates —
sinewy and brown, they often placed their palms
on my shoulders.
They called the ridden *caballos*.

III.

I have had sex
and I want a horse.
I want a horse.

My girl understands.
She tells me about the time a boy shifted her
to nausea, thumbed into her trailer
to undo her.
“But I waited. You need a kind of animal
patience.”

I love her hand on my pulse
as our boats shake the nails of the earth.
I am faithful
like the sea is dark.
I think my roommates would have called this a *caballo*
faith, a beach-sand faith, a cold-water faith.

Still: I think of my best friend.
I think of the girl-hopes between the ovaries,
underneath virginity. You need
to find something intestinal,
and you need to drive it, bothered,
into your body's
pregnant dust.

A Tiger Mug Made Me Wonder

Friend — oldest friend, disappeared friend — tell me:
is there a World Wildlife Fund for people?
Do you think we even deserve it? — what other creature
gets a rush of heat from the easily-chipped?

You thought I would like it. And I did, until
it started prophesying: *In imminent danger
of extinction within the next half-century*. No one wants
a gift of the far-flung, only the *now*, the close-to-now.

So I have a cup with a Sylvia Browne bent.
Or an ex-companion who performed a cold reading
on me. I don't think I'll be alright this Christmas.
The tiger on the mug has faded, the photo falling

to beiges. Anything I drink tastes immediate
and chill and gyrates in a manner that unnerves me.
What to do with my lonely cellphone? And unsent presents,
unnecessary ones, unwanted ones. No tiger

ever had to deal with that, I imagine. How to conserve
for winter without a second body to teach
you how, to teach how? — but your face, today, lives
in the water I've poured to swallow a pill or two.

And the eyes, your eyes — reaching into each flaw
of mine, the ones I never knew burned you out. Yet in the water
there are a thousand of your eyes and they all glow,
lit up, festive. Let me take you outside, here in this cup,

and drip you into the ground. Hydrangeas —
the neighbors' — sag over the fence like large mammals
in captivity, awaiting stimuli, any, any at all, even the awful.
A rush of fascination. *Something*. A letter? Even in death

the flowers are not attractive. After you flow
out I'll give the mug to the flowers, let it serve as a glass
bouquet for the centerpiece of this wildly public funeral,
this bit of open-casket earth as-of-yet unrestored.

In March the hydrangeas will grin like tigers
and like you used to. I don't know that I'll remember
the way your hands looked on my shoulders, clawed and defensive,
but I'll have lived through this year's cold.

Last Night

after I'd turned on the lights but before
I'd called out *ay, wake up, I'm back*, I breathed
in a top-of-the-mouth Budweiser scent
and, knowing, bent to my knees. I saw you

face down under the kitchen table, hands folded
flat beneath your cheeks like a front porch,
the shadow of the table's edge drawing
your knee from your calf, your foot kicked

out, pointed, old-sneakered, white-socked.
Paisley, earthy with age, curled around
those sneakers like wet leaves in a garden.
Paisley, too, bloomed on your dress,

your headband and bow. I didn't expect you
to awaken — I just had to count your parts,
your aspects. Your eyes: tremorous facets,
something interred in the yard, waiting.

Your lungs: a violation on the silence
of the room, termite-rattling, disrupting
spittle on chin, in nose. In physicality,
your physicality, your presence, I draw

my answers, often. I disregard the crushed
cans peering out of the sink, always, but
not your body, not your inert shape like a book-
heavy shelf that doesn't need my dusting.

Birth Control, Week Two

I'm drunk and stargazing on the back of my Honda —
drunk on champagne, heavily drunk, lead-drunk,
and the cosmos rolls into a single pulsing and gentle element.
Nothing yet spirals out of me. Not swollen breasts,
not oil from blackened pores, not a fierce appetite for animals.
Sleepless I've been turning out here, nibbled-at
by the blinking dark, aware of blood between my thighs
casting out rays, inopportune and unwanted.
How it's like radiation years behind, laying aches and doubts
that only a trip to the back-end of a grocery store can ease.

Mostly, the blood will ruin my new dresses. Yes,
here's me, worrying about dresses. Since when was I a woman?
Since when did the word *female* allow a glimpse of anything
but mild annoyance? But maybe I need this annoyance,
to nudge the chromosomes into doing their work and
fill like a living ovary. It's good if you ask the ever-searching
doctor, good if you ask the extraterrestrials hopefully
peering into me right this moment, noting the mind, heart
and body not in accord. I smooth my skirt as if to hide
the uncoordinated; the bottle is empty. I am wasted
like nuclear byproduct. Right now I'd love to launch into space.
Right now I could become slowly-living, a gentle element.

The Righteousness of the Four Winds

I. BOREAS, THE NORTH

This pristine life is one of struggle: writhing in a billowing stable against the thought of mares that I love, who bear my children, my sweet coltish sons. They die, my sons, as swiftly in war as birds stone-struck. Or they run, beckoned by the prideful, until their centers no longer hold, until heart attacks take them, until wine-colored blood seeps from their nostrils. I miss every foal like violets miss the sleep of winter.

II. ZEPHYROS, THE WEST

Sins become flowers. Once, I killed a boy out of love. Apollo was playing discus with him. Apollo! So I wanted the boy to hurt. I blew the glass and the clay back into his skull. Hyakinthos, I am sorry that you now drink only light. Oh, young blood-flower, I am sorry that I wanted an excuse to mourn you.

III. NOTOS, THE SOUTH

Why is it that the mortal kind regard life as a sort of crystal — unthinkably precious and always clear, if tinged just so with sorrow or joy? Hades cannot give me answers. Thanatos, I beseech you instead: why do these people cry out when my summer cascades across their fruit-laden fields to wither what was meant to be withered? To cast opaque what was never apparent? *Misfortune* and *fate* are not synonyms for *law*.

IV. EURUS, THE EAST

I am told I look sad. Mother says so, especially: *Your curls cannot hide your sorrow, nor your sweet piping, my son*. Ah, but what does the dawn know of the rushing of air, the music of it? When I lift my pipe, I love that the little ones weep for the sound's goodness. When my dark claws cities, storm-pregnant — when it claws towns by the sea — perhaps I am guilt-laden, but their wailing is so small.

The Ladder That Pained Her

I can only put thoughts in her head;
I cannot take them out. I can only imagine
the why and the how of her, the old comfort
of her flaws like lukewarm sea-level air.
I'm talking of this girl I dated once,
who had varnished-wood cheeks:
one time while we were making love
in her guy-cousin's guest room, the door
opened. He asked, in a moment's obliviousness,
what she and I wanted for dinner,
and she said to him, over her shoulder,
"She's not anything." That was me

she spoke of, and she challenged his stare
with her own. I have to imagine,
have to imagine, that the interruption
collapsed love on top of her —
yes, maybe she was in love with me.
We'd been dating for something like eight months.
It was time to know. She *did* know, but
in that moment she felt like she was climbing
a ten-story ladder. The cores of her fingers
hurt with fear and exhaustion.
Each rung was a bet: she could fall,
or perhaps choose to fall. Each rung

spun her in areola waves. Her eyes
had finally opened to me
as if she'd just discovered a record
of her own infant thoughts.
So the whole time she thought about missing
a sighing handhold — opening her fists,
sliding down, her belly *thunk-thunk-thunking*
against the sides of the ladder.
She'd done it before. She'd thrown herself off
the incline before, with all those undergrad girls.
And she did it now

as her cousin backed out of the room,
burying his face in the crook of his elbow.

I think it gave her a moment to inhale,
to take in all the starry and alien pleasure
that had surrounded her and I.
It'd been frightening for her.
That's what I choose to believe —
she'd left love on the roof like a child.
In the winter the snows would close around her
affection and in spring she could ascend again
to examine it, to bring it inside,
and I know I'll come with her,
if she asks me to help.

Eight Ice-Breakers For Talking To Sea Serpents Who Are Now Human Girls

1.

Say,
“Between us, who’s freer than water
curling down an arm? I think it’s you,”
as her arms stretch outward, waiting for a frisbee.
Her skin will shiver, salt-dipped.

2.

Say,
“In this life, who’s freer than water
curling down an arm?
We used to know each other —
it’s the oldest reincarnation tale.
In a previous existence I wanted to kill you
because I loved you
and I was a man who loved you.
I collapsed under violence;
I thought of you as a relenting creature,
strength-tamed.”

Tell her this
as her bikini strings seize behind her.
They’ll be tails, flapping like kite cloth.

3.

Say,
“We used to know each other, lifetimes ago.
You were a sea serpent
who wanted so badly to be small
that she wrapped herself tight, tighter.
The grains of your scales collapsed
upon themselves, became glass
the color of flora from the sea —
sharply green, like fish-eyes underwater.”

4.

The frisbee will twirl like a javelin
towards her soft belly, squealing.

Say,

“Look at you:
you’re five feet tall, no more than a fish’s eye,
fragile as kite-cloth.
It’s what you wanted to be, in an old life.
Your death-wish.
Your other wish was to slay me — oh,
we *knew* each other, because I sang blood-songs
on the sea. Stories of injury and valor.
You won. I didn’t drown, but died on the shore.
Returning to the shipwreck hero-fed,
you were enormous with the last of me.”

5.

Say,
“All this time, I’ve imagined stolen ships of myself
chunky against your toes.”

Her heels will dig into the sand. Continue.

“Shattered ships. Shattered
as light breaks
against mother-of-pearl or cheap glass.
Men often break glass,
if unintentionally.
I’m not sure if a woman could — I’m a woman now, you see —
but a few afterlives have tempered me.
Look at all the time we’ve had.
Hello: I am the hero, my blood’s
urge far away. Do you recall your reptile brain?”

6.

Continue.
“Do you like bald women?
Would you love
a haggish young lady who stands
on the shore and cries
not for the hero that she was,
cutting up the sea, but for the air’s rawness,
the unscratched place the sword
touches her between the lungs?”

If she gets you in love again
you’ll scrape out your hair with a half-shell.

Already you need her legs. They slither.

You could die under the pebbles, salted.

7.

As she tumbles down into the pebbles
and sounds raw, like something
broken, like driftwood
or bones in flesh, say,
“Listen, no one
is less enthusiastic about flesh than me —
beach laying dead against mist,
sponges that bend.
Muscle blanketed in scales
as lambent as a lighthouse’s call.
Flesh hardly keeps anything in, you know?”

Of course she does: she’ll roar, smile,
laugh out expletives.
The frisbee will be hers.
She’ll have stolen it from the air.

8.

Don’t let her laugh. Say,
“Let go of the plastic.”
Don’t let her laugh
at how small this thing is now among you and her
and her bikini strings.
She’ll have gotten what she wanted. Say,
“Reptile, there’s no basking
in this existence, no needless hoarding in flotsam.
Didn’t anyone tell you?”

She’ll writhe in the foam like a mad woman,
like water curling down an arm
or a shell. Continue. Ask,
“And can I help you?”

The Question of the Moon

When I stand in the middle of Burlington Road
as the hummingbirds sleep, concealing the blood on their necks,
the moon turns its lens on me. It draws me in where the road blends
into Birch Creek and the water is taut like a black horizon:

Do you want a husband or a wife? This is what the moon asks.
This is what straight voyeurs everywhere ask.
I could have ignored it — oh, I ignored it for years,
but tangible reminders of the question spark along the dark

landscape. Engulfed in dust, but not choking, not yet,
I see them: pairs in bed finding each other all across the universe.
Triads and more. So what of gender? What of dichotomies?
Let me wait among the birds. Let my heart flit in circles.

I begin to say *The hummingbirds that I adore* —
but animals are no replacement, and the love of a beast,
however small, a distraction. An avoidance. It is not enough.
There are choices. I inhabit the asking, and I rise

further, wombed in the moon: *husband or wife?*
Below, in the creek, turtles penetrate the hissing water.
Birch Creek always hunts, rolling around the brush like an exhausted dog —
it's a male's place, not predatory but ever-searching,

tossing over rocks, flattening soil, seeking an end, an answer.
And summer's tossed up tobacco some yards away
at the Whitefoot Farm, each plant a drop, soft enough to tuck into
for seven split lifetimes. The leaves curl forever, patient for light.

They breathe deep as the creek until they are swollen in the belly.
Where, here, is written the word *bisexual?*
At Burlington Road, the moon engulfs me, raises a riot of noise
to which my body cannot attune. If I could surge out, just once,

the silvery detritus would call up the day. There'd be the creek,
the tobacco. I'd meander the yellow line, coughing up
my interrogator's white sand. In this possibility, hummingbirds
would smack a defiant welcome on the trucks that pass, going and coming.

My Religion

Some late night program
spotlighted a hundred-and-five year old guy
from an oft-misspelled eastern *-stan*
who gave two keys to his health.
The first, his dog: an ancient
she-akita, sluggish as a turtle
and with the same vessel-like eyes.
The second: his telescope.
In his youth he had discovered a star
but couldn't recall its name.

When my best friend is drunk
she remembers more than just her name.
A purpose consumes her.
*The first spacecraft to escape
this solar system, she says,
will have little old me nestled inside.*
She has a dog. I doubt they'll let her
bring it along up there.
I don't want a heaven without dogs,
especially a dark heaven —
I was never in the church, but
that's why I left the church.

Through the television,
the old man agrees. His lips
move through the turtle-skin of his body.
The universe rests on the back of a turtle.
I'd give up the dog
if I could see the face of the turtle,
wide-awake and drifting.

Otherwise I'd grow into
a hundred-and-five year old man
who watches the sky. I would look like
a turtle on its back; I would pray
for my best friend leaving the solar system.
Then I would try and right myself
and go home to my dog.
That's my religion.

In Front Of The Pasture, I Told You I No Longer Wanted To Die

The horses, their heads dangling, didn't look up.
You asked, "Whose farm is this?" Beyond the fence,
mares comprised the whole herd. They were coffee-colored

and looked edible, the way some minty and coniferous
forests do after a good rain. If I could feel hunger again —
and I was hungry then — I would've offered up

those horses to any deity who looked over his arm
long enough to pay me attention. What gluttony nature
provides my dark heart. "Are *you* ever sad?" I asked,

and added, to assuage my temper: "For stuff like this?
For animals like these. These horses." To be honest
I had stopped writing letters to myself. I had eaten

myself. I would've said at the time that you had eaten
me, but that wasn't the case at all. One of the horses
broke off from her windy gossip and, I think, regarded

us with open affection. You know I used to look
at you like that, darling? But you just replied,
"Whose farm is this?" For certain, I didn't know.

Peering Over The Psych Ward Wall (From Within)

Chanting
sequía, sequía

the *niñas* trace the earth with their pinkies
in front of the trailer park
across the street

The trees died languidly a year ago:

palm leaves brush
against one another
with the harshness of wind
under sweating arms

I have chosen to forget all my songs
with the pills I was given —
no one writes about dry seasons

In the brittle grass
ticks hide where the *niñas*
played and one on my palm becomes
a comet of blood
as I crush it against the brick

I examine its starry
remains, my awareness
jumping rope

chanting *fifty-one fifty, fifty-one fifty*

without a melody and yet so loudly
the *niñas* stop
to look up at me
They wave

fingers curled as if meaning to catch
something parched from the air

Valerian As A Cure For Insomnia And Gender

Women need more sleep than men —
this has been confirmed by science and
my neurons tremble in need.

Eight hundred and fifty milligrams
for two weeks will arrest my liver,
but that's how bad I need the rest, the time

away to consider the men in my life
who are so well-intentioned and true.
I want to be part-man, half a man,

even as I am afraid of their finger-joints,
the pressure of their bellies on mine,
their insinuations low on their voices.

How much more they know than I do —
look at the dirt tucked under their nails.
I want that for myself, for every woman.

I am a drought of energy. Sometimes I want
to cut off all my hair, to declare
myself a husband to thousands, if only

to feel full and comfortable. The chief
of every thought, mine and others',
astride a horse, trampling flowers, saplings.

I would divorce myself from femininity,
but — then — that's not sincere. I only
keep myself awake, thinking of duality.

They don't mean it, these men, but I think
they drink the valerian dreams
from my breasts, the dreams that stand

apart, droop like hydrangeas sideways.
When the stars rise I see the lavender hands
at the sides of the boyish girl I want to be.

She knows botany: she knows the way plants
hold eggs in pistils and sperm in stamen, gentle
and pollen-gold. Best of all, she is *believed*.

That could be me, should be, if only to escape
the terrible suggestion on the wind —
that blooming in two separate directions

will make a person buoyant, float
independent of the garden's spectrum.
Yet hydrangeas flutter in pots, unmoving.

I am definitely poisoned now.
It's been six days since I've begun taking
these capsules; I am pale like a petal

before it falls onto the kitchen table.
My wrists twitch. My fingers close around
nothing. Maybe they can change, these men

that are lapping at me, that blow through
a room like autumn air darting
through leaves. And down in every root

the soil is never bad, after all.
Someone made it that way,
someone who did not understand

the enormity of identity —
the way it unravels like a blossom
newly-planted that cannot contain only

male or *female*. My slumber is grasping
and desperate. I'll remember to stand
upright, casting branches onto the horizon —

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

This one American guy grew a flower
up in space, the first: a zinnia.
Exhausted lights cast exhausted life
onto seeds nestled
in a series of plastic boxes, and only one
blossomed. Terribly,
I might add — it could've been tucked
into the buttonhole of a faded coat on a
faded man.
It had no color. Where would it learn color?
From the spacious rendition

of “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik”
pumping out of the headphones
hanging above it?
Must have been some scene,
all that sterility sobbing with the music.
It should tell you something about
the belligerence
of this black glassless ceiling
we're talking underneath right now,
the unpeopled and desperate quiet
between the stars. No wonder

that flower fell apart
in the American's hands:
it was so damn sad up there.
You need to see what I can do with light
here, and lower your eyes.
I can grow a zinnia in the backyard,
mime that American suspended in the air
looking like Him in *The Creation of Adam*.
No lethargy, no heavy metals —
a pinkish blossoming filling up
the air.
This is the extent of me;
this is what I can give you,
even though it's heavy metals, really, that built us.
Not little zinnia songs of the night-divine,
but all the chthonic thoughts from people

along the earth.
We're pretty damn impressive, colossal
like warm rock. Believe me:
I love with an earthly ambition
that escapes the atmosphere of those
with headphones on.

Leaving San José And The End Of The World

May 2015

I.

That city knew about the extinction in my stomach.
Crops would soon fail *en masse*. This was the end —
to glance out from the theater's doorway meant summoning
anxieties in the shape of drought, of failure's possibilities.
Concrete had prevailed; dust throbbed on windows
and on the leathery reflection of valley hills.

II.

In early spring I'd found a queen bee convulsing
on the sidewalk, she that was a symptom of dark newness.
I panted. I hadn't even ordered my regalia yet. I wanted to peel
off my tank-top, but I didn't. It was a bad neighborhood —
only one sprinkler twirled its feathers a few houses down.
It chattered to me like the last bird of its kind.

III.

In my last photographs, the skyline lingers, reflected
in the folds of a black gown. There's no caption:
what to remark about the graves of cold-water fish?
Crosses of unruly fungus laid on the foreheads of hives?
Liberated plastic bags? And all of them obscured
by a squawking distance that sounds like myself eating
carrion — or, frenzied, lapping at a single raindrop.

IV.

Mercury roiled in the Guadalupe, casting the waters
gold-green, translucent, the color of listless crawfish
who never fought back when I poked them, stick in hand.
The river swayed with a dying ease past Mexican fan palms,
two hundred and thirty miles dreaming breathlessly,
devouring at last the distance, the years, the *years* —
and me, I'd never gone fishing there. If I could have swallowed
the future in the poison, in fish-flesh, I could have conquered,
been *la reina del mundo*. But I never even bothered wading
while billboards above cheered me on to eat and be happy
as they did at graduation dinner, suspended over Applebee's.

V.

Your aunt asks you about the green in your plans:
what next? How are you going to consume your life?
If there is any green at all. You gather your hunger
and hope that the seasons clear the carcass, the bones
of you and all the careers you were told you could have.
Blowflies scatter, as if from a fire, around your feet.

Cicada

The world croaks and hums and smells *just* of rain.
Sleepless with sweat, I stumble in vague July distress
and find five discarded skins of something bean-like
and fragile by the mailbox. The leavings form
a broken *H* in the browning grass. I'm sure no one
noticed these imagos' waxy husks after they twitched
away — no one ever notices. That few cultures worship
the cicada is a true mystery, perplexing me as much
as if I discovered my skin could peel back and reveal
a healthier form. What other creature, in a seventeen-year
pause, leaves so much evidence of its boisterous
renewal? Photographs are so intangible, an attempt
to contain wings in a jewelry box; imagine sleepless
nights while the lid clacks, while its inhabitants
frenzy for release into something more ethereal,
heard but unseen? It's always been hilarious, how
we bluff about the control of time. I suppose the minute
flakes in my ten-year-old mattress count for something,
but they will never coalesce into my young image,
into an adolescent who sings for the good future arriving.

Two Weeks' Rain At The Exotic Animal Rescue

Mebane, NC — Winter 2015

Lions pushed together into straw-nested shelters,
ears distressed against their skulls. In the storm

our white tiger became terracotta. Few smaller
creatures stirred visibly, and even the black eyebrows

of the caracals — sharp knuckles on their skull —
softened under the abrasion. They looked disturbed

in the far-back shadow of their wooden den.
We lived just down the road, us keepers, for moments

exactly like this — to steward each perturbed
creature, like the leopards who, under this mean steadiness,

whined, their jaws low and foaming, their mouths
a dark delta. They could climb with the ease of kudzu,

flee groaning into the surrounding farmland if not
for their enclosure's steel roof, but now they only

followed me along the fence, shoulders dipping,
desperate. Water collected on their whiskers in pearls.

I could've pressed my palm against that chain link
and these beasts would've been like stray dogs, licking —

well, no. The rain sparkled, rattled inside my chest.
My vision grayed. I stayed too long, leaning on the fence,

and my boss called me back, sharply: *You know not
to do that, not with them.* Yes, but I was an ark,

and, like its builder, had no thought but my purpose:
to smuggle the leopards away into summer.

All Anyone Can Hope For

I got to thinking that night about how dirtied my heart
felt, and about the 120,000 people that die each day,

and how I wanted to blend into them, facelessly.
Back then it was like me to consider suicide while eating,

slipping on a t-shirt — while driving. One day I passed
a doe near the entrance to route 70. She lay crooked,

half in the breakdown lane and half on the grass.
Once, twice, she lifted her head, a metronome of leather

and flesh, and then I couldn't see her anymore.
I didn't know if she'd been struck or if she just napped

there like a stupid obese dog, knowing how silly
it would look to others. Which — I thought back then —

might have described how everyone viewed me.
I could have stopped, or helped her, I guess, but I didn't.

I noticed her: this, I figured, was enough. A quick
salute from me to her. An attunement of rhythms, brief.

She became a pulsing atom in my rear-view mirror
and was nothing. To keep one's hands away from suffering

seemed like the natural order of the world. And
in the reflection of a stop sign miles away the doe

met my eyes. She told me, I swear, that anyone can hope
only for a footnote in the mind, for a statistic vague as noise.

Photograph Of A Nude Woman, Broken Tree Branch Covering Her Breasts

I.

Fear germinates not because others have the power but because you do. The aspen hugs your body; yellow glows under your chin.

Anyone who will be a woman is scary: she can run her fingers through the soil of the world where dead happiness and flourishing pain lie adulterated and dig it all up, everybody's memories, all that may or may not have happened. Fictional detritus, real dirt,

anyone who will be a woman or who is a woman or who was one, tucked between halves of robins' eggshells and saplings that quiver.

II.

I know you. I remember you, lady. I remember your breasts, find them and find them everywhere, like a weedy zodiac revolving:

in the speckled movies my girlfriend and I make under comforters, on the manuals that show how to examine the nipple, the armpit — how to discern masses of your darkest self, bursting into blood. And I find them underneath low-cut dresses in pale ads at the mall, peculiar, graceful, upright to the air as if they were heirs to empires.

This beyond the forest where the stars roll their wrists, fate-casting.

III.

You sweat, the paint of it along your forehead, your collarbone where the bulbous leaves color you. This is a photograph of pain and the one on the other side of the camera wants to examine it, I imagine: off-screen, you are holding the branch up, it's clear,

hoping to end the session soon, collect your exposure, fall apart in the car home because, bust-bared, you were the Godhead, the endless library of mothers and sisters and careful aunts existing —

if only in the twitch of someone's chest. My chest, my mind, divides without pain. I find your breasts and I remember finding them and I remember everyone else finding them, those clear wood moons.

IV.

My mother, in the bathroom. I was four, seven, eleven. She wiped

the day's filth from underneath her shirt, along her ribs. Neck, shoulders, rolling belly, along the side of the breast, the nipple. Dirt and ink, all of it; she, smudged in blue, delivered newspapers, and brought the extras home after Christmas to shove into the stove.

She never wore a bra and told me that when she was young, women burned them. That never happened — I've read about the myth. Though she swore on it. I bet a thousand ladies like her would bare their harvest of flames and ash, if you asked about it. Queer or not.

A bonfire of possibility: it's what we are, and too awestruck to use it.

V.

Down the snowy cover of the aspen, dew races, just perceptibly, towards you. You squat in front of the saturated tree. You are trying not to breathe between your teeth. Your shoulders hurt. Above you,

between the leaves, a squirrel, shadowed, cannot tell where you belong. In its finite taxonomy your hair might speak of willows, your feet of hollowed trunks. Your breasts of seeds. And a mallard duck smells smoke. And a bull trout reaches the end of its river, flowing

with it into the storied mud. This is the split: you are the forest and not the forest, common and uncommon both, drawing up lives back to the woman who first left the cave to view herself under clear night. In the gray she discerned her breasts, her daughters, her nieces.

Lighthouse Brother

My twin is a front-yard lighthouse replica:
five-foot-eight, gaudy in that nautical New England style,

both of us sprawled in the grass, out of our element.
In our oldest family pictures, he moodily watches the road,

embedded in the amber of dead stalks, untrimmed weeds.
His mind is so stationary; I think he has never been happy.

Sometimes still I stand in the yard and cast awareness
out to the shore, and the dust on the windows squeals

with brightness, aquatic-neon, shiny like the glow
on a leaping ship. Without shoes on my feet churn

in foam and the sea beneath the foam. Momentarily,
fleeting, but it is enough — it's always been enough

for everyone I know, to think across distances
like a navigator divining the angle between water

and curling star in the old days. To dream. My brother,
the lighthouse, is a realist, claims he is,

disowns the fantasy: "I'm here," he says, "I'm inland, shining
on no one, doing nothing." Beloved,

understand — a faintness of mist and salt, a storm's
flash of scale, unsubstantiated, is why I do anything at all.

It's Okay To Love Poetry More Than The World

which I bet you didn't know, cousin —
you, just twelve, staring at
The Collected Works of Emily Dickinson,
the wrinkles in your forehead quivering
like an intent dog.

You, outside, and it's summer: every
toad, wasp, and dragonfly skimming
over your hands and thighs, you swatting them
vaguely. You in the yard reading,
hunched over this yellow tome, rubbing your eyes.

By *the world* I mean all that's past your front door.
Every summer stalk that pries lewdly
at your lower back, every tree frog or lurid mockingbird,
leopard slug, slug mite. I promise
this place, out here, though sun-flooded,
is dimmer than the churning inside your skull —
I promise you can think this way forever,
drenched in the most important words:

*The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door...*
Little girl, while everything blooms and twists,
you'll have your inner companions. Your heart
is made of paper and it crinkles shut
when you close the book.

Outside the kitchen window, the leaves
are spotted with birds that die drably.

Made-Up Myths

I never knew if my grandmother was a white woman
with stolen ideas of race, or an exiled Hopi as she claimed,
but with eyes like turquoise she annoyed me
with her loveliness at twelve years old. I didn't share
her voice, smooth as the polished chain
she wore, or her hands fragile as wing-bones,
laying atop my own as my parents roared
upstairs: a mishap with the joint bank account, or something.

She said, "Nothing you are involves your mother
or father — that is, you're nothing like them. There was a boy
that the Sun fathered long ago, but the Sun was jealous
of the way this boy could move across the sea. The Sun,
he was fixed, and he raged, sparked fires, refused
to admit the boy's heritage. The boy never knew, and never
needed to — he was as human as you or me."

She sat back, puffing two Marlboros there
in the dining room, the smoke impenetrable and blue-gray.
I coughed and decided I hated her, and demanded
to know whether she had bequeathed me a made-up myth
to bolster me the rest of my days. "Your stories
suck," I told her. And she said, "Does that matter?
It happened, and so did you." Now she is dead
and I have no pictures of her from that time. It is so difficult
to find her in my dense hands, my colorless face.

When I Think About How I Don't Want Kids

I think it's mostly because of their bodies,
 their malleability without form like a square of cloth
unmade. How fists bunch them and find the tears
 and stitch them with needless thread. It's because —
I think — of the way my sister, once eleven,
 handed a mason jar of golden dollars four-years-saved
to her father and asked to buy "a husband-
 suit" for herself. I wasn't conceived yet, or even considered,
but the unknown molecules of me heard the rip:
 the flat of his hand skimming across the top of her head
in a half-threat. The opened jar, fear-dropped,
 skittering across the linoleum, leaving those yellow
buttons that she was ordered to pick up, and how
 she did so, sucking her teeth to stop herself from whining
about it too much. The effect across time of tacit rules:
 my atoms shivering with a certain fear I still feel now.
And if I had children I would have to explain,
 shaking like change in a rolling jar, how he was wrong,
how she was right, even though I have no evidence
 for it. How a sash lies on someone's waist the same way
whether the waist is tapered or not. How the threads
 are nameless until someone points to them with a name.

What To Say When You're Breaking Up With An Older Woman

A bike is the most honest lady in the world —
you swerve in a frenzy and fall, and you're aware
how it's *your* fault for steering her astray. If you learn
her handling, if you learn the smooth guide of her seat,
she is your companion in *terra incognita*, and you will
never want anything more than she can offer.

It is not good to want anything, I've found. Not even
to be younger. I discovered your true age while laying
on the inside of your arm, calculating the numbers
behind the lines on your face, those meandering roads.
Forty years old — but oh, my God, the confident
way you draped your arm across the back of my couch.
You expanded in my space. We laughed over reruns
of *Maurry* and dumped burned popcorn outside the front
door, waiting for the birds to scatter over the pile, searching...
I was dazzled by new paint. Come and get your clothes
back. Your sewing machine, credit card, tire pump.

Just one thing: pedal over here on your Huffy, please.
I don't care so much about the way your grip twitches it,
the naivete in your smile as you drag it up the driveway —
I want to watch the wind blanket it. How it drives
off-kilter, refuses for yards and yards to succumb
until it curls inward, wheels churning at the gravel.
I loved the equine grace of your legs pumping as you
raced toward me, but then I fell in love with your bike.

Seasons in a World Without Clothes

I. THE SUMMER

Our clothes left us then:
ripped jeans knotted up
with empire-waist dresses
and summoned the wind,
contorted into it,
became condors.
Pencil skirts dripped
off of thighs like blood
down a leg.
Panties cowered underneath
the brush. A fedora bit
a man who attempted to cover
his penis with it.

No one seemed to cry.
But everyone sweat
as only naked people
sweat, slept in houses
that seemed,
suddenly, too expansive.
We slept like only
the cursed sleep.

We all staggered out
of our houses, bare,
toes turned inward,
each one of us fleshy
and amorphous.

II. THE FALL

*Go ahead and find
your boxers in the hills
that burn gold. Go ahead
and try.*

*Get it out of your system:
scale trees for shoelaces,
telephone lines for hair ribbons.*

*The cobwebs
in the library's corners
trap single gloves that wandered,
searching for their other,
in the breeze.*

*Underneath us, denning
creatures hide pendants
and earrings, teeth-killed.*

*If you think
you're truly preparing,
we can't stop you.*

*But remember you're not
lonely —
remember we're in this together,
this exodus of our
skins.*

III. THE WINTER

God, we thought
it was the end —

everyone was dying,
we thought —

our houses were warm
but there was no traversing
the fragile snow
with our own fragility.
Nothing
to do for the blueness
of fingers.

And yet

when we could catch
skirts and graphic t-shirts
we used them for fuel.

Sometimes.

Imagine
a dying net of a sweater
(depicting a raccoon)
burning in the stove and
a woman weeping for it,
her dirty hands
flickering across her face,
smearing dust and mud
and ashy sweat.

IV. THE SPRING

When you
unravel
frayed threads
off the antlers
of a docile stag

near a pond
drowned in
tiny lilies,
nude
reflections,

the threads
smell and feel like
warm clay
having hardened.

The Cape House My Father Meant To Buy

he couldn't, because the neighbor
shot two dogs on the front lawn
while he was working out the down payment.

It was a Winchester: jellied blood
clumped on hydrangeas as he, inside,
talked numbers with the Realtor.

And the corpses of the mastiffs
near the driveway, heads cocked back
at an unnatural angle, eyes half-moons.

My father high-tailed it out of there,
left the seven windows' gleam
and the new porch, all mahogany,

in the rear-view mirror. He didn't even stop
to see this armed — man? Woman?
Bitter adolescent chewing tobacco?

How my father grieved.
We didn't have animals ourselves
but we *did* have honor, he said, later,

so how could we live on a property
where those tiny histories had concluded
without even a dramatic last pant?

*Imagine handing the property over
to her — mumbling to my mother,
he tilted his head toward me — knowing*

something had died here? I never saw
the dogs but, seven and obsessed, scribbled
them all over my diary: their expansive

faces, fantastical winged bodies fragile
as children's, the vessels of their sloppy
mouths, waiting for affection.

I remember just a while after that
my father went on a business trip
to California that lasted him six years.

I asked where he went, often.
He worked so hard. When my mother
turned on the sink to pummel

my inquiries under watery noise,
I returned to the drawings — the dogs
tumbling forth toward my father,

their beastly throats pink and floral.
My father's face shone in white: he looked
as if his own death approached — so final