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This collection of poems maps the landscape of loss and love, and centers itself in the overlap of passion and grief.

NOT THE KIND THAT MEANS SPLENDOR

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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*for Helen*

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon,  
and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.  
So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

-1 Corinthians 15:41-42a

APPROVAL PAGE

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

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## Blue can be a place/ please can it be a place

when you die I will embroider you  
stitch leaves of blue through the thin skin

over your eyes          bead your tongue with bits of glass

not so simple as *feathered with stone*

mother          if I could unbutton your chest

fill it with things the opposite of light

a cutwork cloister where stitches chain & do not unravel into lack

can I be wearing your shirt & across  
mountains knowing that soon I will be hurtling  
gently toward you & both of us still in love with your breath & I do not yet

know about the graveyard of words where I can go to mouth  
the bone of your name & I have not yet  
gnawed it into that small shape

have not yet done the worst thing  
which was to leave you alone

# CHAPTER I

## Origins

I grew up in the South not quite white.  
Sometimes I'm asked *What are you?*  
before I'm asked my name.  
When my mother strollered us to the park  
the other women would ask *Are you their nanny?*  
as little bodies swung from monkey bars  
and the small girls in frilly white socks  
played the game where one is the mom,  
awkwardly rocking another girl her size in her arms,  
one is the daddy going to work, collecting acorns, building a house  
by drawing walls in the sand. One is the maid  
who ties her sweater around her waist like an apron  
and tidies up the house, using a broken  
pine branch like a broom.

My mother was nine the year  
that sex across race lines became legal  
in Virginia. When it became legal to make me.  
She had no idea she'd fall  
in love with a Korean man.  
She was young. She put her long  
blonde hair between two towels on the board  
and switched the iron on, spitting on it  
to see if it was hot enough. Wanting that stick  
straight look. Burning her fingers  
almost every time.

## The edge of Death Valley

We chose it because of the showers—  
hadn't bathed since Albuquerque.  
Days of desert road, sleeping sacked against  
each other in a tent like a tin can.  
Your red hair was crunchy. Mine shone, dark  
and oil-slick. Set next to the rv park  
was a squarecut pool fed by white pvc  
from a hot spring—a single bright artery snaking off  
over the hill, brown and cactus-pocked—  
pickleweed branching like dry coral over the pool,  
mineral and utterly clear. We slipped under  
the water to escape the gnats, eyes open,  
watching ourselves wave arms to stay sunk.  
The salt flats wait a few miles away.  
Tomorrow we will find the bushes rusted  
with salt like rock candy on a simple stick.  
Then we will let the heat shimmer our world awake—  
asphalt searing the soles of our boots.  
Tomorrow we will ration what we desire,  
lifting our reservoir to weigh its quench,  
wondering if we could drink the water from the car's radiator.  
Tomorrow I will not cry as I fall asleep  
for the first time since my mother died.  
We are sinking in water as warm as our hands,  
as if our touch had heated it.

## Self portrait as two-headed woman

She spends most of the day singing herself to sleep—  
her lips brushing her ear lightly,  
    dark hair sighing on breath,  
hazed and hesitant.

She is like the gold dissolved in the ocean—  
    a house of gold, floated apart—

one indigo night she might  
    sit up in bed, turn to face herself,  
        leaning in until she touches foreheads,  
eyes open, the glass of her corneas just  
    brushing.  
She may find her pupils are black like holes in a riverbank,  
glinting and unafraid.

—

Her forearms shudder, thick tears drip from her feet.  
    Each finger is a cry as she reaches  
toward you.

    Afterward, recomposed, watch her using forgetfulness  
    like a horn-handled brush  
    to smooth her hair.

—

Walking all day repeating odd phrases,  
whispering *proud navies proud navies proud navies proud navies*—

words that ring in the bell of her body—  
undecided and young. Perhaps one mouth echoes

the other, but this is a logic we cannot unravel:  
call it “Primacy, or Which Half May Rule.”

—

If we must say she is a like tree—  
    *pine, cherry, birch or myrtle?*—

then let us picture both halves:

the crown and its mirror  
projected belowground,

nut-brown birds twittering and the worms  
swimming through soil, gnawing away.

## The library of July

When I cross-reference your face  
in the book of summer I find also

*shifting pennies of light lanced through trees  
and to be pierced with rain—*

in the herbarium I consulted  
the folios of flowers, the drawers of dried birds

and the close-winged wrens called from their case:  
*we have cotton wads for eyes* and

*noli me tangere; quit this clinging.*  
For days I watched you across tables,

saw your pain rise and fall under your plaid shirt.  
Now what's left? This tender

ligature, this book of veins.  
Please do not think I have forgotten

how we walked across poorly painted  
parking lots, slipping through the sick pulse

of cicadas with the moon over our left shoulders  
like a single blind eye—those nights

when the world was warm and soft  
**as if we moved inside an open mouth.**

## Renunciation

So if my loss has thickly  
feathered wings—if a golden  
plate—if a star—if in a dark room—  
if cancer—if my mother's hands are still as two dead doves—  
if my father and I washed the white sheets  
twice, rinsing the last bitter stain of urine—  
if we folded them together, arms outstretched, moving  
toward each other so the corners met—

how deeply can we be cut  
before touching bone. What spins  
the small white web across.

Loss comes to me  
slight-shouldered—knot of light—  
something cold, unsound  
veiling the face of water—  
like this:

we have to break the ice  
to measure how thick it is.

## The absence of flowers

The hospital bed an unfolded page,  
her body irradiated and not

the kind that means splendor,  
and then the jars

of fluid like beef broth  
sucked from her lungs, everything

baring itself, the three bones  
of her knee, the thin skin

at the back of her  
skull, and sheets of film

printed with the white  
clasp of ribs and

that was supposed  
to tell her why it hurt

—

Your mother will die  
on a Tuesday.

At 3 am you'll wait for two men  
in ill-fitting suits to arrive.

They'll zip her into a white bag  
and one man will gather

her hundred pounds  
to his chest as he steps down the stairs—

the five of you huddling  
in other rooms.

Remember? the stairs that it took her half an hour to climb  
and the chair on the landing

and you couldn't do it for her, every white spindle  
of the banister like a lonely bone

and the pain that you didn't understand  
that one mercy

—

and how you sang  
tunelessly in the floral

waiting room until your sister

screamed at you to stop—

how your mother didn't notice the light

that crept from the bedside  
table to tremble on her thin left arm, how she  
couldn't speak

without gasping and found it  
easier to sing, how she hummed

her day to you over the phone—

what hurt, what didn't,

to the tune of the hymn

that asks for the song  
of a flaming tongue

—

He will ask for help  
going through her clothes

and hang the few pieces you  
want to keep in your closet,

carefully zipped in white garment bags—

each dress in its own polyester shroud.

—

She hadn't seen the stars in months  
and sometimes she'd confuse the streetlamp  
with the moon

and don't tell her otherwise  
if her arms are yellow  
in the hospital light

but Please  
you said Shave my head with your yellow arms  
you did it  
so God would listen

—

and that one incision  
never healed

and the stitches across  
its little mouth  
the nurse brimmed with honey again  
and again  
and where it opened to—  
underneath everything grew wildly—

and how it bloomed in the spaces  
where her body had held you—

Now you hold the waxy lipstick,  
the powders, the pencil

she used to draw  
on her eyebrows after

the chemo and sling her pearls  
around your neck.

You're hardening moonlight around  
what's foreign inside you,

trying to build milky reliquaries

—

for each letter of your mother's name.

What if you're mining your loss  
like a broken hillside, pulling out

the seams of silver—pencil lines  
written under soil—and if you say

you put your hand through  
the window more for the gesture

of it, will the wind stop hissing  
through that empty star?

—

Weren't you heaping bright flowers

every day and weren't they cold and white—

and where could you put them when

the petals dried, wrinkled like sick skin,  
and papered down—how can you rewrite

the flowers and why do the marks  
fall through the page and where was she then—

what haven't you forgotten and why

is there no one word that means

the absence of flowers and also  
a thin arm with broken veins—

—

Sometimes she'd wake  
with a half-cry—something

stifling her, a tightening weave,  
the threads to keep her safe:

our love's lonely and slow lacerations.  
She was trying to untie her gown,

drop the lilies from her  
palms, leave her body full

of only the coldest light.  
But she was born from a bloody body,

and you were born from a bloody body.  
You: just as veined and written in red

as you watch a sweaty man  
in a dirty t-shirt lower

the box of her  
into the hole—

to reach to the bottom  
of the little pit he has

to lie on his side, his whole arm

—

lost in the ground.

The port in her chest was a useful one  
plastic tapped into her skin after arm veins'  
siege and collapse  
and those small red & white cells  
stopped blooming inside her            so we could call her  
anemic            and full of unopened roses

—

What part was gentle

they scooped her womb out like they would a grapefruit  
serrated silver—membranes cut—

like thieves they touched her with gloved hands  
we told her she couldn't say No

—

Push the tube through that hole in her side  
circle the tender lung  
siphon the pulmonary fluid like gas from the most delicate tank  
put your mouth to it  
suck suck  
if you gave her a glass of it  
she'd trust you and drink it

## My father is a nightjar

fist-sized, gravel-colored,  
bands of white on his wings.  
He does not sing his whirring  
wordless song to me.  
So with kitchen shears I split  
him open, pin back the feathered  
flaps, clip thread-thin ribs.  
I pull them apart—  
bare a tiny tongue-shaped  
heart pulsing away.  
It asks wetly from the cavity  
*How far are you willing to take this?*  
His eye—the dome of a dark drop—  
pleads *Stop trying to touch inside my pain.*

## CHAPTER II

**“with the fling of iron, and the harshness of rending of silk”**

look in the cupboard                      all the glasses have fallen  
to confusing stars                      the plates are a nest of shards

and the spider in the corner has been spinning some  
small monstrous sac while you insist on feeding her

powdery moths plucked from porchlight & despite  
all this                      I tell myself the rooms will change for us

**while in the closet our shirts are tearing their own seams**



**“and while he told the sands of his hour-glass, or the throbs and little beatings of his watch”**

when I say without urgency  
*Her hair is cold so he knows*

*she's been out walking alone*  
*carrying her shaking hands you will take it*

to mean I have only been thinking  
in the present perfect continuous tense

& I'm telling you this so that  
if I say *She must accept the infinite*

*distances for him to be whole against*  
*a blown-out white sky & her eyes seem*

*several miles away you know what I mean*  
is *Let's make promises & feed*

*them like pets We can hold them still*  
***We can give them names***

**“without wings”**

so the branch that hesitated before breaking  
was the whiteness of the underside of her arms  
    he kept falling like rain  
creeping inside the fruit

walking the outline of an island  
                    she wanted him in slices  
snapping whatever stood in her way  
    whipped grasses      leaving a broken  
    path   all tender green  
her touch      such a perfect knife

**“where you shall find the rooms dressed up with melancholic arts”**

the windows stood around his room  
& no one told them to stop opening  
their mouths full of old sun which  
meant every stick of furniture  
crouched brilliant on the worn wood floor  
& if there was love it would do  
its dirty work here where everything is secondhand  
I asked the lamps to take off their shoes told the  
darkened oil paintings to stop  
shrugging into their thin yellow coats wanted to hold  
the room still for a little longer  
to remember the cries of light

**“colored like the first springing of the morning”**

she wanted to be something they could share  
to tell him about the ways she'd learned to burn  
& if he was someone who knew how to be fallow  
she wanted to let her dead mother lie quietly in the other room  
with a kind of opened throat smiling  
slipping back & forth between the girl  
**& her lover who knew when not to bloom**

**“she desired to know how to die”**

that summer love was a pit to fall in

    I took you out back  
showed you the holes I'd dug           & you called them beautiful  
you stepped down into the throats of earth  
I told you to wait there           gave whole days to sifting soil  
while you practiced your love belowground  
making yourself gloves  
                    of stone  
the colder your touch the more I wanted it

**“for we die but once; and therefore it will be necessary that our skill  
be more exact”**

the hours—how does he spend them

yesterday he tried on different names

& what did the clothes in the closet say

sometimes the light falls suddenly &  
purples its knee

will there be another one bruised like this

I wanted to believe it

where did the light go with its many blades

I told him *The bright world is always trying  
to break through*

**“the thousand thousand of accidents in the world”**

if he is bright as a dove's neck  
& tells her puns about Super8  
motels if he remembers a delicate  
machinery while she picks the seams  
from her best dresses (if across  
the street workers at Industries of the Blind  
are making pens attached to chains  
& 6-ply cotton mops) & she—loving the third-  
person-ness of it—wonders if *Safety* means  
*Death-while-in-Love*—considers all the constructions  
she could delicately destroy  
& though he is far away he holds  
her restless while she asks for rooms without roofs or walls  
where no one says *Can you help me*—that directness

**“and they that live longest on the face of the waters are in perpetual motion, restless and uneasy”**

is this the poem where he holds  
her for hours while the disbelieving  
moon taps at his window & when do the clothes  
in the closet wake up & point  
did he stand in refrigerator light  
& if his shoulders tighten as he moves over her  
if the strings of muscle in his shoulders  
are the shapes river water takes as it sweeps over rock  
is this when she says that lonely word  
or when she asks what converses  
in the dark of his jaw  
can she kiss the synapse-speed of him  
& still think he will pull the pearls of her  
spine apart he creeps inside  
the four rooms of her heart he does his best  
to remember the prism of her  
**he holds her so tightly no light gets in**

**“not as nature gives us rivers, enough to drown us, but drop by drop,  
minute after minute”**

she will consider his gaze    a colorless moth  
the kind that flutters about the eyes  
                  of sleeping birds his arms  
like the hum around a thin glass rim  
                  & the scent    of clipped rhododendron leaves

she asks he stay unknowable in morning hours  
while the day drops around him  
not any shade of blue            in other rooms

                                  she reclines inlaid  
with pieces of a summer night  
he set them in her sternum behind  
a small piece of smudged glass

skin snicked apart    a space made  
he didn't care how much it hurt    & she loved him for it

**she keeps on living &            he switches on the fireflies**

**“to be buried in the lap of their kindred earth”**

sometimes she tried for him

a mostly pretty thing  
a kind of panting with porcelain skin

if you hold your eyes  
in your palms like almonds  
delicious like that

**like being fucked like not waking up**

**“though thou breakest me in pieces, my hope is, thou wilt gather me  
up”**

please do not write again  
to tell me how you brush  
at the stars & they never bloom  
I've been taking pills  
    & steps  
what I mean is I'm not sure  
where this ends except  
both of us similarly shattered  
the story of how to be broken      an accidental map  
like how I can only really listen to music  
if it's on in the other room

## **CHAPTER III**

## Seven kinds of longing

That evening the pecan  
tree was lanced  
through with a hundred  
lightning bugs' whispers  
of light—the low-down  
zodiac of summer nights.  
Five blinked through  
the open window  
into my room,  
their glow like  
the squeeze of a bright  
hand—not in celebration,  
not to signal climax, but  
a voiceless call  
before the beloved  
is even named.  
That is how  
it was with us—  
peeling ourselves into  
stars before we ever touched.  
The sky darkened  
over us, and I  
could imagine we'd  
singed it with  
our aimless brilliance.

## The Sea That Has Become Known

*For full indeed is the earth of woes, and full the sea.  
-Hesiod*

Metal rovers plumb  
the white depths above  
looking like insects  
or microwaves on treads.  
Now I've gone and done it—  
put a microwave in a song  
about the moon!

I've launched some things  
up there as well:  
coat of colors,  
bitter herbs,  
the letters I didn't light,  
used tissues, a plaid scarf sodden with tears.

That's what they're talking  
about when they say  
the moon is full.  
A bright knob  
that I'll reach up  
and pull  
if I'm brave enough  
or liquored up—  
button of tears  
or a brilliant bullethole.

## Thirst

the white tomato flowers    are too clean to touch  
she plucks suckers    stakes the manic sprawl  
mixes pelleted pigs' blood    into the dirt—

—

offering others            so her fruit will ripen

she was born with a hole in her heart—men  
white-armored—

          listened coldy to it            fluttering like a nicked moth

the rust drip            fell to her feet  
reddening her soles            it flattened her tip-toe dance

filling the complexity of her ankle

she watered herself

          darkly            until the doctors plugged it up

—

she found the sink    by its sound  
dripping            keeping her awake

the bowl cradled    a ragged pearl  
a bar of soap water-swollen    white-bloomed to  
twice its size

**flaking layers of glycerin    and ash**

**The island city**  
*for Emma*

Last year I shed my delicate chains  
of light, arrived bare-necked at your door *the poet said,*  
*peering with her friend—an activist and a doctor—*  
*into a small café made to look*  
*like a thin alleyway in Greece—*  
*striped awnings sloping from muraled walls,*  
*bougainvillea thriving in the olive-*  
*scented dark. The friend replied*

I wanted to reduce myself to a single flame.  
You knew me then, thin-armed and equivocal.

*They stepped over the threshold together;*  
*the poet held her friend's hand, stroking tender bone.*  
Shall we call that your story?

Back then I would have asked you  
if I could live in your heart,  
curled up, slight, stretching a hand  
through your vena cava on waking.

*The café ceiling is splattered with stars.*  
I want to learn one truth to tell you—  
a phrase repeated like sunrise  
across your closed lids.  
*Cobblestones crudely painted across*  
*the café's concrete floor, this foundation*  
*rests on the skin of the island city*  
*like one scale on the back of a beast*  
*that breathes with eight million mouths.*  
Will you hold them all? *she asks.*

I've spent years developing a capacity  
for pain. Now with every pulse  
**I feel myself dissolving into praise.**

## Letter to a young girl

My darling with your tantrums  
and long dark hair—  
I was just remembering last Thanksgiving  
when you asked me why we only celebrated white people  
coming to America: Chris Columbus, John Smith,  
the Pilgrims. Have I told you  
that the pilot of the *Santa Maria* was  
called El Negro? A black man  
charting the early crossings to this shore.  
The other routes to arriving here.  
Remember the coyotes ducking  
border guards at night,  
silently spinning tires  
across sand, men stuffed into their  
empty gastanks. And young girls  
with small hips and almond eyes  
brought across the Pacific to brothels on the plains—  
renamed *Cherry Blossom* or *Pearl Dragon*.  
I thought of the fat bellies of ships  
on the Atlantic full of fettered men and women  
and what kind of holiday that would be.  
I bet you could almost make it festive—  
construction paper chains  
bound at our wrists that we break every year  
before sitting down to eat.  
Construction paper crowns on our heads.

## Prayer

You set it flowing:  
the river below the river—  
swift and silent as desire.  
Just to dip a hand in it—  
to hold a fingertip to my mouth—

still chilled. To be all undone,  
secret swaying like arms of waterweed—  
almost weightless in the rush to the sea.  
To be swept along.

## A light broke from heaven

I want to stop letting birds into  
every poem, folding you  
among clutches of flecked eggs  
and their nests of wool and human hair.

—

When you call me  
the tremor of the phone in my hand  
  
is nothing like the gasping of a little wren.

—

The wafer did not float down to my tongue  
like a feather. Some hand  
placed it there—cuticle-ripped  
and darkly veined.

—

When we speak  
we obliterate the birdsong.  
  
I kneel to pray, and the lights  
above me are nothing like doves.

## Lovers and the B-theory of time

She said "I want to watch the animals,  
the ones with gorgeous  
fur and narrow mouths."

He snatched moths  
from the ceiling, shaking  
their wingdust over his plate of eggs, while  
she continued to draw her map,  
tracing in marker  
the blue of veins across her thighs. She wanted  
to turn herself inside out, to reveal her  
hidden structures.

"What makes a river holy?" he asks as he slices  
persimmon after persimmon, searching  
for the sunset with the slimness of his knife.

He keeps trying to forget the texture of  
her right knee and the four freckles on her upper lip.

Later he will pass the evening  
back and forth with her, looking for what  
**still needs a master or a name.**

## Still life with longing and a dragon

For an hour the train refuses to lumber away,  
but at every breath I leave you. A woman in a purple sweater  
lowers herself next to me,

and types with two fingers, writing fantasy.  
Her Pale Knight rattles.  
He pauses to hold out a mailed hand.

A maiden in diaphanous sleeves  
is lifted from the divan.  
We slip under the interstate. The woman

plucks away; the action rises;  
the knight touches a white breast like a gibbous moon.  
I pull a loose thread at the hem of my shirt, unravel

the serged seam—bending to cut its thin cursive with my teeth.  
I smell the woman's stale breath on every exhale.  
Past cypress swamp choked

with deadfall, bark gone—skin-slipped  
and smooth. The maiden tosses  
a falcon into the sun.

A girl keeps on peeking over the seat;  
I try to smile back.  
We pass Towel Town and Discount Shoez.

Broken safety glass sugars  
this platform and the knight drops his breastplate  
into the rushes on the castle floor.

The windowglass is sunlit and warm as skin. I lean my head against it,  
watching six kids play soccer on a dusty diamond.  
Her hair is moonlight on the wolfskin rug.

We pass red awnings, a carefully kept yard planted  
with plastic begonias, and a swirl  
of silver knights

taking a jousting tournament very seriously;  
the great ladies are politely bored. One heart

is lanced through, splinter-stung and stopped.

No one blinks. From here a Quonset hut looks like a tin can, half-buried.

The maiden drops a single tear.

Next the knight bites the maiden's curving neck in a backyard

piled with playhouses and muscle cars on blocks.

A teenager sits in a wheel-less Camaro,  
stroking its chrome

as if it were a horse's neck. The girl in front of me walks

her pink-crowned princess kitten doll  
across the seatback, making it

bow and lick its paw solemnly.

She is the priestess of its fate as  
shadows lengthen, sharp as knives.

He rides toward a dragon, leagues to go  
and already in his hand the broadsword, unsheathed.

Gravestones lick the sunset,

holding under their tongues

the wormy boxes, the satin, the bones.

This small platform has a slate roof

and globe lights like stoppered suns.

Benches without backs.

Dragonfire blazes the valley,

peeling white paint from porches,

and I think the maiden will cut her moonlight hair  
on a moonless night and offer its length

to the dragon, though it cannot swallow back its fire

or honor her gift. The woman

next to me types and sighs.

The knight is always riding away.

The maiden is always desiring.

And the stones of this castle refuse to burn.

## Withdrawn

With my burning thirst  
my empty womb  
I imagined myself an anchorite

alone unloading the dishwasher  
humming tunelessly  
sweeping the house bare

love seeping out of everywhere  
surely some of it  
reaching heaven

I could give you stories  
the desert the darkness  
the arrow and ecstasy

the voice rumbling below sound  
the bright flash every time  
I blink, as if the world

rearranged itself  
every time I look away  
bodies that break through, throwing

longstemmed lilies over their bright shoulders  
like shepherd's crooks  
as they speak to me

in the language of light  
which I can hardly comprehend  
then they are gone

and I persist,  
distilled into a cry  
scribbling *transform me*

over and over until it becomes illegible  
paper silver with pencil marks

## NOTES

The quoted titles are sourced from Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651).

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