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The poems collected here explore the familial roots of mental illness, sexuality, loss, and the points where they all converge.

HELLFIRE AND WATER

by

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For my sister

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by CAITLIN ANN MCCANN 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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CAKES AND CURLING IRONS

One summer, I was sent to Grandmama to help *calm her nerves*. Apparently she wasn't sleeping, passing out while cleaning, setting kitchen fires,

reading out loud from her Bible so vehemently neighbors complained, said it sounded like metal striking metal. But she seemed fine to me.

From the bathtub, behind the closed door, Grandmama's blue nightgown hanging on the hook, I heard her baking cakes. She shuffled quickly, with purpose, with a confidence

she never carried outside of her kitchen. Grandmama was *top heavy*, built to tip over. She came into the bathroom, sat on the closed toilet lid

to *take a breather*. I remember her eyeing me as I sat in the cooling bathwater, grabbing my chin for *a closer look*, and I remember a wire basket

filled with makeup: I remember foundation that did not blend into my neck, eye shadow, mascara, *rouge*, and lipstick, an added weight to my face.

When she finished with me she started on herself, curled her short hair, forehead puckering when the hot barrel touched the skin just below her hairline,

leaving a burn the shape of a fingerprint. She teased out abbreviated curls—*the higher the hair the closer to God*—choked on Aqua Net as the kitchen timer went off.

I remember her waiting, considering if she should let it all burn, but she turned to leave, then turned back to me, dragged her nail down my face, from temple to jawline,

thick makeup gathered under her nail like frosting. Then she left. Shutting the door behind her.

Out of the tub, I pulled her nightgown over my head because *nice Southern ladies wear dresses*

with slips underneath, the pilled rayon pasted itself to my still-wet skin. I remember leaving

the marred makeup on my face as it was, like a blemish, like a battle wound, like a scar,

like a birthmark. Do not wonder if this is a conflation of events, a melding of stories, of tall-tales.

This is about baring witness, about finding the cause, the reason. This is about finding the root of it all.

SWIMMING LESSONS

I am now ten and a mermaid
the pool I almost live in
has become an ocean
the screaming and splashing of others
of Sister
gone
my favorite blue-green one-piece
turns to fins
instead of the sixteen-year-old neighbor girl's finger
inside my bathing suit there's a hook
lodged between my scales
the hook pulls
it's getting harder to breathe

THANATOLOGY

Missy made her first paper doll when she was seven. Cutting them from construction paper pleated into quarters. She created chains and chains of them, draping them across her bedroom. Over the mirror, the chair, the closet door, the dresser. She tacked them into her walls. When Missy was eleven, she began studying knots. Her favorite was the hangman's knot. She loved it so much she started reading about how a knot could kill a person. What it did to the body. The science of it all. Missy tied an old, dirty shoelace around the low branch of the oak tree in her backyard. Slipping the noose around the doll's neck, she secured the knot under its left ear. The doll dropped, suspended in the air. The knot tightened. There was no struggle. The jugular and carotid blocked. Blood flow to the brain reduced. The doll's body only supported by its neck and jaw. The dying was slow. The doll swayed in the breeze for almost twenty minutes. Missy wanted to be sure. She cut down the doll with her father's pen knife, brought it to her bedroom. She carefully colored its neck with red ligature marks, dotted the eyes with petechiae before placing it under the loose floorboard with the others.

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX: A PRELUDE

Chalky, yellow ovals on our tongues
like communion wafers—
Grandmama gave us the taste.
Uncle Tommy, just four at the time, was the first.
While Grandmama slept through the afternoon
in the dark house with the dark, wood-paneled walls,
Tommy slid into the seat of her gray Lincoln
parked in the oil-stained drive.
Sleeping was all Grandmama could do
since her husband died.
Pretending to drive away,
Tommy tried turning the locked wheel.
Grandmama's purse sat on the floor
by the brake. He dug inside
looking for loose change, but found instead
Xanax scattered with lint and broken peppermints.
He crunched them up like SweetTarts,
then bit into her burgundy lipstick.
Frothy spit bloomed between his lips.
My father found him
curled on the car floor,
said he looked like a clown gone wrong.

FROM THE OFFICE OF VITAL STATISTICS
For my grandfather

Certificate of death
Type or print in permanent black ink

this thing that cannot be undone

Name of deceased
Kenneth Lee McCann

*a name shared between father and son
a name I failed to earn*

Age
26

I have outlived you

Surviving spouse
Doris Hales

she married your cousin

Surviving children
Two young sons

he never told me what to call you

Burial Cremation Other
Burial

*I know it is true
the roses tell me they have seen you*

Autopsy Yes or No

Yes

*but why when they knew
for five months they knew*

Cause of death

Teratocarcinoma

*and this division of cells
where will it hit your son
the liver or the lungs*

SAFETY SCISSORS

Barbies lie naked, disarticulated
in my *Little Mermaid* overnight bag inside
the toy closet. Sister's dolls, neatly arranged
(heads flush with arched feet and so on),
are clothed and whole in a bag like mine.

Behind the laundry basket filled
with fast food toys, mine is the one
with old gum stuck on the bottom.
Mother always told me
Do not lie down with gum in your mouth.

If it weren't for the smooth strands
of long red hair caught around the handles,
Sister's bag would appear untouched.
I hid a chunk of my blond hair
among the dolls' tangled locks.

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX I

Everything I know about Xanax
I learned from Grandmama—

how to shake the exact number I need
from the orange bottle; how to break one

clean down the middle
when I'm running low;

how to flex my tongue
so the pill won't melt.

She called them her nerve pills,
except it sounded more like *nerve peels*.

When we were young, Sister and I watched her
toss the pills into her mouth like popcorn,

pushing them down with Diet Coke
sipped through a straw.

While we popped Tic Tacs,
swallowing them whole.

A GIRL AND HER VIOLETS

Using the Virginia creeper growing up
the side of her house, the mother fastened
her daughter's body, still small enough
to fit in the kitchen cupboard, to the hickory tree
in the front yard. She threaded the vines
through the edges of her daughter's body.
Sewed her to the hickory's trunk. Cheeks free
of that rashy toddler blush, the daughter's head
slumped forward, her chin resting against her chest.
From the picture window in the living room,
the mother kept watch over her daughter. Observed
the Virginia creeper slowly claim her.
Neighbors lined up in front of the hickory tree,
took turns tucking violets, picked
from the mother's flowerbed, where they could:
in the girl's hair, between her fingers,

through the eyelets of her white dress.

But the mother rushed them away.

Hissed at them. She clawed at the vines,

shredded them, only to find her daughter

encased in the bark. She traced the outline

of her daughter's face with her bloody and ragged finger.

Then lit match after match until every branch

within reach was ablaze. She set fire to the roots.

Watched the flames roll in cracking waves

over her daughter to the top of the tree.

She filled a wheelbarrow with the ashes.

Spread them over the flowerbed

in front of the picture window. Then locked herself

in the house. Over time, Virginia creeper

entwined with violets overtook the house

until it was no longer a house

but instead something wild.

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

Mother said I got it wrong,
cutting my thumb and bleeding
into the bread. *The bread is*
His body. She soaked up stray
drops from the counter and the floor
with the heel of the loaf, feeding
the body the blood it needed.
Unwrapping a Band-Aid,
she approached the wound
like an insect she had to kill.

THE HISTORY OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Their wedding portrait, nothing but a Kodak,
floated in the cat's water bowl:

She tore it down
its center, right through their touching
elbows, then released it.

Mother told me it was possible
to drown in a bowl of cereal.
A bowl of water is close enough.

*

The way Mother says *I stayed for the children*
with her chin up, lips drawn in,
makes it seem like she did something noble.

*

I question her sympathy.

*

I am not allowed
to show Father
more affection—
even when the affection is
fleeting.

*

Mother claims Father left us,
but it's her I remember throwing
Father's clothes out the front door.

*

Mother's art is reframing memories.

*

There was another before me,
I found this loss tragic.
Mother said It was nothing,
It only stuck around long enough to make her sick.

*

If she could, Mother would wear my skin
as gloves. My teeth threaded
through a ribbon knotted around her wrist.
Anything to keep me close.

*

I am bound.

*

Eat this. Mother forced the
communion wafer on my tongue.
I shrank to the ground, small enough
to ride on the back of an ant.
Drink this. She administered

the communion wine down my throat
with an eyedropper. I disappeared.

*

Every summer she proclaims:
If I didn't leave my kids in a hot car, then no one should.

*

I want to compare Mother to an animal—
a bear, a wolf—she is fierce in her love,
but all I see are the eyes of a person come unhinged.

*

Sister's survival tactic:
 If she can't remember it then it did not happen.
Mother finds this advantageous.

*

I got my clinodactyly pinky from her,
my propensity to not take care of myself,
my headaches and my soft stomach, too.

But surprisingly
 not my myopic sight.

*

She imagined I came out walking and talking.

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX II

Our first kiss was on Christmas morning.
Grandmama passed the pill to Mother
and Mother passed it on to me. I needed it
because my cramps were bad.

Before swallowing,
I prodded the Xanax
with the tip of my tongue.
Uncoated and porous,

it stuck there
like ice without the burn.
The penny-bitter taste spread, sticking
to the soft meat

of my gnawed-on cheeks.
It wasn't long before the Christmas tree
lights blurred softly
into the glass ornaments.

When I tried grabbing this ball of light,
my fingers slid into the air,
into nothing. I no longer felt
Grandmama's backhanded words.

They slipped right off my skin.
My head hung crooked
over the arm of the couch.
I saw the fishing line

tying the tree to the curtain rod—tied
because the tree fell
on me once already.
The clear line only visible

from this angle.
But the cramps were still there.
Grandmama said Xanax wasn't made
for stopping pain.

Mother didn't care. She just wanted
to do something to help
her daughter bleeding onto the couch.

THE HUNTER

She was a young girl from Phoenix,
but her lisp made it sound like Venus.
I imagined her being born
from the sand, rising out of the desert.

Her heat hardening her into a solid thing.
Something close to glass,
but unbreakable.
I saw signs of her origin

in the sand-colored freckles
dotting her sloped nose.
Once, at the playground near her house,
I heard her tell her friends

they did not have to worry
about going to hell. They could do
and say whatever they wanted
just as long as they accepted

Jesus Christ as their savior.
I fell in love with her then.
Her favorite game was trying
to make cars stop while walking

up and down her suburban street
wearing her tightest and tiniest clothes.
She got some of her friends to play.
But it was her I followed.

When she was alone, I walked slowly
behind the girl from Venus
as she swished her hips all the way
to the playground. I wanted to tell her

her hips reminded me of the metronome
on Mother's piano.
Red and black roses were printed
on her shirt. They peeked out

from beneath her hair with each swish.
Her hair was the plainest part of her.
Almost colorless, a dishwater blond.
But I imagined it smelled like roses

I could almost smell it.
She stopped in front of the empty playground.
I stopped beside her, snatched a fistful
of her hair. Yes, it smelled of roses.

SUGARCOATING

When Grandmama came home from the hospital,
her teased-out hair was flat

and unwashed. Gray roots painfully apparent.
The acrylic nails she loved so much

were chewed down to nothing. Thick scabs
marred her fleshy forearms.

As I remember it, as I was taught to remember it,
Grandmama's asthma put her in the hospital.
Asthma was always putting Grandmama in the hospital.

Sister and I tried visiting with Grandmama
in her living room. She preferred staying in

her bedroom. The lights out. Uneaten
McDonald's piled high on her nightstand.

Sister and I whispered back and forth.
We were glad we didn't have asthma,
we never wanted to get that sick—

AT THE KITCHEN TABLE WITH GRANDMAMA

Scratching your arms with wire hangers,
endless cleaning and baking
(your house smelled of batter and bleach),
the back and forth
between sleeping too much
then not at all—
I need to know how and when
this all started for you.
Did the voices rise with the dust
from your worn pillows?
Float to the corners of your room,
hovering there with the shadows?
Was there a color to them, a shimmer?
What did they sound like?
You don't have to tell me what they said.
Just answer me this:
Was their arrival soft
or did it start with a scream?

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX III

I will take my left ulna,
crush the bone to powder,
shape it into hundreds of tiny ovals
the size of a fingernail,
dip them into diluted
yellow Easter-egg dye—
whatever it takes to make me believe
they are the real thing.
My bottle is empty.

AT GIRL SCOUT CAMP

I was eleven when Krystal, the teenaged psychic,
read my palm. She pulled my right hand
close to her eyes, pressed her thumb
at the point where my life line ended.

*Your life line is very short, she said. This means
you will die of leukemia before your next birthday.*
Krystal dropped my hand, it fell heavy
in my lap, and left me in front of the campfire.

I saw myself bald, bones in a sack of gray skin,
a hospital sheet pulled smooth over my body.
Eva sat across from me at the campfire. The shadows
wavered over her face, made her deeply set eyes

appear hollow. She looked like the figment
that would carry me to the other side
when the time finally came. But there was beauty
in this terror.

That night, in our cabins, Eva and I
could not fall asleep fast enough
to beat the cold. Eva climbed into my bunk
whispering, *Warm air rises.*

I pulled my sleeping bag over our heads.
The freckles dotting her nose
and the delicate skin beneath her eyes
softened her face. She held my hand,

traced my heart line with her finger.
Our breath heated our faces.
I kissed her.
And then I lived.

HELLFIRE AND WATER

She ran into the river. Crashed
through its still surface.

Floating on her back, she bobbed
in the small waves she stirred.

The torn hem of her once blue dress
rested on the surface like a cottonmouth.

The river, thick and warm
like the baths her mother drew,

softened the red mud and dried blood
caking her hands, releasing them

from her skin. Tipping back her head,
she offered herself to whatever forgiveness

the river could bring. The scratches
raking her cheeks stung when

the river entered them.
She welcomed the burn.

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX IV

The migraines started when Sister was born—
eight pounds of nothing much,
she changed Mother's life forever.

The headaches got so bad
Mother wanted to cut the nerve
above her right eye
with an X-Acto knife,
instead she took Grandmama's nerve pills.

And once I saw Grandmama praying
over Mother: her palms on Mother's creased forehead,
polished nails clinching gray roots,
slippery Southern words blessing Mother,
asking Jesus to take on this ache, too.

ROUGH HANDLING

It was something I deserved,
Mother's hand slapping my mouth.
I felt nothing,
my lips turned in
between my teeth,
the nerves safely hidden.
I thought this must be
what a countertop feels
(or doesn't feel)
when it gets smacked by a palm.

I also deserved the soap
scraped across the bottom
of my front teeth,
the switchings and spankings,
drives past social services,
the time she popped a balloon
right out from under me.

I reenact it all
just to make sure
I was right.

THE SHARING

Sister was afraid of needles
but sharp things never bothered me.
I sewed us together anyway,

compromised with large stitches
and a darning needle. From our hips
to our shoulders, careful not to pierce our lungs.

The stitches did not last—
I blame the push and pull of it
all, and Mother never taught me how to sew.

When Sister went away to school, I had to learn
how to be alone. How to walk and eat
and sleep. How to keep my neck straight.

With my fingertips, I memorized the ridged
smoothness of each pocked scar
running up my side. What was once our side.

I lay awake at night
wondering if she did the same.
During my studies of our shared scarring,

I began to feel the stripping away
of even the thinnest layer of her skin.
The piercing and drumming of ink.

The rubbing away of the delicate patch
covering her rapid pulse when the man
she loved wrapped his hands around her throat.

And then I felt nothing,
save the prickled numbness of blood trying to bring
feeling back to skin.

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX V

I have tasted the bitter melt
on my tongue. Mother
doesn't let me fill the prescription
anymore. The pieces I have
are not mine. My sweet
something borrowed. I break
what I'm given in half.
Just to make them last
a little bit longer.

Who does the pill tell
to build the wall
breaking apart my panic's
heavy assaults?
Is it the soothing hue
of FD&C Yellow No. 6
and D&C Yellow No. 10
calming me?

I wonder what I could do
if I had more.
I worry about what I would do
if I had too much.
I ask one last favor—
always be enough.

FEVER

The car's tires sounded like death moans
when he came to a stop on the damp street
in front of my house.

His shadow whipped by the window
like a malformed insect.
Seeping through the cracks

like oil, he entered through
the spaces between the door and its frame.
The curled, dried bodies of caterpillars

snapped sharply beneath his feet
as he walked across my living room.
I could not move at the sight of him.

Leaning into me, lips cold
against my ear, he gave himself to me
in whispers.

*

And there he lived
inside my head.

But the pressure became too much—
a simultaneous coming together
and splitting apart.

Slick with cerebrospinal fluid,
he pushed through the split bone.

Dead by his relentless wanting,
he took my head home in a grocery bag.

Something to remember me by.

But when he opened the bag,
there were only roses.

He put them in a vase without water,
collected their dropped petals in a bowl.
Saving them.

*

He would later regret not protecting the petals from the dust.

KNOCK AND TURN

gulps taken from the faucet cannot be measured sleep with the flower-side touching my body do not put the cat in the kennel the noises have to come from somewhere put a bowl over the bug then a book over the bowl cannot kill things that make too much noise when flattened woke up gasping Father told me he had a tumor on his spine when I expected the liver or the lungs not those finicky pearls I never dream of Mother how long until this shadow turns into someone real how long until the voices outside my head become the voices inside my head how long until I stop living inside the barrel of that gun of those guns

THE HISTORY OF SISTERS

Without her

I would have choked

*

First memory:

Slicing my fingertips open
on the intake vent in the hallway

*

Then my blood on her

paper-thin eyelids

Sister cooed beneath the blood's warmth

*

What does she think about at night

*

We drank

from Mother until she had nothing

left to offer us

*

but air

*

Just because we begged Father

if you loved us you would stop drinking

but he never stopped

*

does not mean we were unloved things

*

We covered our eyes

with white carnations

When we peeled away the petals

*

we were caught staring down

the barrels of three guns

*

I know it hurts Sister the worst

*

I feigned prayer

in front of candles

in front of Mary

*

in front of the gravestone

for all the unborn children

What did Sister send

*

into Mary's pleading hands

*

Sister aspires to be

a wife and a mother

I try not to hold that against her

*

She let me tie her to the tree in the backyard

but never consented to the bees that rose
from the ground to take her

*

We swallowed dimes and tumors

to shrink ourselves

We would not be caught

*

when we ran away

*

Those coins and tumors did nothing but

harden our livers

and swell our guts

*

Sister can flatten her stomach

with an Adderall a day

I take a Xanax

*

to forget what I saw in the mirror

*

Just because we let the cat die

in the linen closet does not mean

we will turn out like our parents

*

They cannot convince us

the cat knew we loved him

*

I recall nothing before Sister

THE GENETIC HISTORY OF XANAX VI

Xanax isn't always there for me.
On those nights, I know it is with Sister.
But I can't get mad. We never made
any promises to be exclusive.
I can handle it on most nights,
but on nights like tonight,
when I need it and can't have it,
I twist my quilt into a nest,
reinforce the sides with pillows,
and bite into my left wrist.

NAMING

My nail polish
called Wine Strong
looks more like dried blood
like the flecks caught
under my fingernails
the night I pressed them
into her back,
she above me
with her pocketknife smile—
let's call it Shade of Leaving.

PRESENT DAY SAINT

Mother turned from me when I said,
God does not exist. She feared the lightning,

sharing the electrical current, falling with me
into the fissure ripped through the yard.

I needed Mother close again. I prayed.
Turned away every meal she made

until I heard Him. I finally heard Him.
God spoke to me in subtleties. Guided me

to give away my belongings, shear my hair,
type letter after letter in His name.

Having proved my devotion,
He introduced me to His Son.

Seated on a bench downtown, blood trickling
from His scalp, Christ gave me the ring

of His foreskin, and we were married.
I showed Mother the ring and the blood

pooling in my palms. She saw nothing.
In my bare room, Mother wrapped my hands

together with gauze, swaddled me
in a cotton sheet. She left me

in the dark, prostrated on the carpet.
The ring pulsed around my finger.

TRANSFERENCE

Grandmama dipped pacifiers
into emptied-out jelly jars
filled with sweet tea,
popping them into the mouths
of every baby she ever held.

On my birthday, she called to ask
when I planned on making her
a great-grandmother—
Twenty-seven years is gettin' up there.

But she would not like the woman
I raised it with,
or how it would be made—
with science and glass,
an outer-body conception.
Not done the old-fashioned way—
man bent over woman
on an odd day of the month
in a bed of puppy dog tails, for good measure.

ANATOMICAL VENUS

To understand the body, one must fall elbow-deep into it...

White sunlight filtered through
the floor-to-ceiling windows.
The dull bulb swinging above
not enough. The operating amphitheater
was empty. Except for the Venus.
She supine on the table
as if in ecstasy. Neck arched.
Eyelids half shut. Cheeks blushed.
There was no soul there.

Lifting away her waxen abdomen,
(No blood. No stench.) I dislodged
her hollow womb,
filled it with soil and the seeds
of a mock orange shrub. I poured
water into her womb, rinsed
the dirt from my hands
beneath the stream.

The end of her ropy
intestines hung outside
her body. I knotted the pink ribbon
from my hair to the loose end of her entrails.
The ribbon matched her tissue.

Her long, brown braid, wrapped
twice around her arm, brushed against
the floor, collecting dirt. I twisted
her braid around my wrist.
Tighter and tighter until
her hair ripped from her scalp.
I balled the kinked strands
into nests for the rats.
Something soft for their wire cages.

Using my thumbs, I punched
her brown glass eyes from their sockets.
Then put them in my mouth.
Tested their roundness
with my tongue.

Learning all I could,
I removed her face
and the layer of muscle beneath it.

Nothing left but her skull,
I no longer recognized myself
in the wax.