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What to Expect explores the complex and turbulent experience of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood and is made up of three sections of approximately ten poems each. The first section focuses on the sexual awakening that occurs in early adolescence, wherein pleasure competes with shame and traditional notions of modesty. The second section further investigates *what is expected* versus *what is felt/desired* and introduces some of the more threatening and potentially traumatic aspects of being a young woman in the world. The third chapter delves deeper into psychological landscapes of early adulthood, exploring themes of loneliness and loss, and ending with a sense of empowerment derived from personal agency and familial love.

WHAT TO EXPECT

by

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Committee Chair

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For Big Murph

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Kathryn O. Murphy 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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I.	1
Feast of the Aphids	2
Kissing Susannah (after watching <i>Titanic</i>)	3
Still Life with Domino Sugar	4
Kissing Meredith	5
Stranger, Daughter, Wife	6
Falling in Love with a Porn Star	8
Dock Ellis and the No-No: Chapter One	9
Dock Ellis Christens the Mound at Three Rivers Stadium	11
Kissing Louise	12
Corvette	13
II.	14
What to Expect	15
A Whale Explodes in Florence, Oregon	17
The Watch	19
Still Life with Oaxacan Figurines	21
Kissing Ioana	22
Another Lifetime	24
Questions for a New Lover	26
The Bone Saw	29
The Night We Made Love Instead of Simple Syrup	30
Kissing Mariana	32
III.	33
Rattlesnakes in a Dark Green Desert	34
Kissing Louise Again	36
Still Life with Valium and Butterfly Hairclip	38
Woman at 3 A.M.	39
Rattle	41
Still Life with Block Letters	42
Mrs. Thompson Considers Her Reflection in the Teakettle	43
Birch	45

The Peace of Being Carried.....46
Redwood Elegy47
In the Hummingbird Exhibit at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.....48

CHAPTER I

Feast of the Aphids

I picture myself as their stem mother:
a wingless queen who needs

no pollination. One nest in the center
of a shining purple aster, another

in the flushed astilbe's feathers.
Hyacinths tremble in my presence,

their violet skin slick with honeyed
sweat. I sleep in the white folds

of a peony, bathe at dusk
on the plume of an iris.

Beads of green blood drip
down yellow-striped lips, cling

to grass as dew. My moonlit daughters
lacquer each leaf with trails

of sooty spit, their abdomens swollen
hydrangea blue. As a crawling wave,

they carry me to the velvet wisp
of a hot pink petunia—my whole body

a tongue made to taste its sugar.

Kissing Susannah (after watching *Titanic*)

My bed is the backseat of a 1912 Renault Town Car
and beyond the cracked door, the Atlantic Ocean

spreads to the kitchen, where my mother makes dinner.
I can smell the shallots softening in butter.

My lips don't touch Susannah's, but, under the sheet,
my chest brushes up against her stomach

and our tank tops lay tangled to the side—
mine blue with white daisies, hers maraschino

red. A sudden pain in my nipple like a shot
at the doctor's office with eyes shut

and before I can cry out, her hand covers my mouth,
her voice warms my ear: *It's called a breast bud.*

The laughter starts as a stare and builds until
we shake like the dogwood's rain-pelted

petals. With strip-searched dolls, she'll teach me
what sex is, their plastic legs entangled

in her hands. Together we'll ponder Victoria's Secret,
the open catalog on her sister's desk,

and decide we want to be Angels.

Still Life with Domino Sugar

As she pushes the cart down the baking aisle,
she recalls the way he jimmed the lock

with a debit card, the tipsy smile
when the door clicked open—the night

they made love in the kitchen
of the United Methodist Church.

Some afternoons, she still waits for him
at the window into early evening,

shivering between the houseplants
in a skirt saved from her cheerleading

days. When his truck rumbles
up the driveway and the dog howls

in a flood of headlights, she settles
in the armchair, smoothing nylon pleats

over her thighs. He crosses the living
room to kiss her as he always does,

smelling of fry oil and sweat. Her nose
against his neck, she breathes him in

the way the dog tastes grass at the park—
searching for something gone.

Kissing Meredith

The only place we can be alone is the Master bathroom—
the rest of her parents' apartment dotted with bottles
of *Smirnoff* vodka and raspberry *Snapple*, our friends

shouting over Top 40 and beer pong. I chase
Meredith around the corner, down the mirrored hallway
to the four-poster bedroom, its marble enclave,

a little out of breath. She shuts and latches the door,
hits the light switch and climbs into the empty
claw-foot tub, beckons me to join her. Face to face

with two feet of polished white glowing between us,
we wait inside our clothes for this new heat to break.
When I try to relax, the faucet jabs me in the shoulder.

This makes her laugh and sends her inching
forward. She locks her cricket legs behind my back,
pulling me close. I touch the stretch cotton

of her leggings, the muscle of her thigh. Blue dusk
floods in through the glass brick window
above us and I can see the asphalt hair, the gap

between her teeth. As I reach for her round face,
my arm brushes the silver handle and cold water
rushes down from the shower head, drenching us.

Meredith thrashes, fills the tiny room with her shriek—
hair plastered to temples, silk blouse clinging to skin.
Someone's banging on the door.

She lifts a finger to her mouth to say, Quiet,
mascara melting over the pears of her cheeks
and I can't look away from those brown eyes,

the flurry of lashes above them, even to stop the blast
of cold. Then, she folds into me: her head curls into
my heaving chest. Shivering. Wet. We leave

fingerprints on the porcelain.

Stranger, Daughter, Wife

i.

Zipped in apricot in the thrift store
fitting room, I can feel the woman
whose limestone hips first pressed against
this linen, craving sun-touch, turning
through the city, blessed in clouds
of steam escaped from underground.

Ten-dollar dress, well-loved, then sold
for store credit, soft as summer fruit,
smelling of cedar and sweat.

At first, I saw in the glass what looked
like a child let loose in her mother's closet.
Still, I smoothed my hands slow
down the sides of my body, again.

Let her scent work its way in.

ii.

You drove me to the baseball game.
We were late—your daughter in the crosswalk
between us, clutching our opposite hands

with her sticky fingers, early current of summer
flowing and sweat falling, overripe
sun alive a little longer.

As we checked for cars, she crowed
What if people think you're my Mama?

Quiet, but for traffic bumping over railroad tracks
too fast and the far-off pounding of the stadium
organ, keys climbing, crowd baited.

Before either of us can say anything,
she lets out a cackle,
sweet as a doorbell witch.

iii.

You said, *This is salmon, not apricot*
taking the fabric, taking me
in your hands and I let myself forget

the woman you married last June—
the willow bark of her legs,
the hives of her breasts.

You are mine now, at least until
new light finds you on the couch,
asleep under a jean jacket.

I can't find my underwear,
so I'm leave you without it,
ride my bike across town at six

in the morning, bumping over
loose bricks.

Falling in Love with a Porn Star

Even cornflakes make me think of her—
my daydream crawling from the mouth
of a raspberry. How gorgeous she looks
in the striped light of morning: gold
lamé one-piece sun-bright, black hair
spilling over bony shoulders. I drink
the sweet milk left in the bowl, lick my lips
as she mouths the silent words,

I want you to eat me alive.

Dock Ellis and the No-No: Chapter One

Los Angeles, June 1970

Acid sugar cube under my tongue
in the cab from San Diego, pulling up
to the brick house in Inglewood, girls in white

bikinis and gold bracelets, vodka thick and cold
in the freezer, beef patties smoking on the grill.
Electric Ladyland in the basement,

the purple scarves draped on the windows
to block out the sun. Closed my eyes
and let the love seat swallow me up.

Next thing I know, Paula's standing over me,
calling my whole name like: *Dock Phillip Ellis!*
Do you know what time it is?

She's holding the Sports section. Headlines crack
into pieces, spin on their axes. Her red fingernail
tap, tap, taps under block letters:

PADRES VS. PIRATES 6PM AT SAN DIEGO STADIUM.

I told her, *Baby, leave me be—*
I said the game's tomorrow. She was wicked
with that dark lipstick spreading

across her sweet, golden face. She took my chin
in her hand, looked me straight in the eye and said,
Boy, I'm not the one who's confused. And you better believe

she was right. I was high as a Georgia pine
and the day was lost like a quarter
in the couch. Lost like my ass from that team

if I didn't show up. I stood up too fast and the room
spun with each step. I knew what I needed.
To find my goddamn greenies, my Dexedrine,

my uniform, my wallet, a cab. To kiss my girl goodbye

and throw a handful of pills on the table,
swallow the ones that land.

Dock Ellis Christens the Mound at Three Rivers Stadium

Pittsburgh, July 1970

Fresh from the barbershop
with straight blade sideburns like garter tongues
and a pink plastic helmet of curlers,

Dock “Superfly” Ellis slings a few fireballs
to Jerry May, who snaps his gum behind the plate
til it turns to powder in his mouth.

This is Dock at work: hair twisted up,
perm setting in the sun, thousand-dollar snarl
asking a simple question: *The fuck do you want?*

He draws a circle in the dirt, gold chain flashing
on his neck. All around him, fans in white jerseys
pour through brand-new entryways

wearing his name on their backs.
It feels like the stadium, the City of Bridges
beyond it, was built just for him—

the Cadillac gladiator in black satin. *There's the wind-up,*
the step and release, the heat
leaving his fingertips like an exhalation, a downbeat.

The leather *thud* of ball against glove.
Dock turns to look at us—
drinks the camera down like a screwdriver,

stares straight into America's living rooms
with streaks of burnt cork under his eyes,
'til mothers turn away blushing

and shag carpets stand on end.

Kissing Louise

She zips me into something gold
and spandex and entirely wrong
for February. *Sit*, she chirps,

the dog tooth tattoo on her index
finger pointing in my face. Our flutes
of sparkling rosé fizz and wink

from on top of her dresser and I do
what she says—fall back across
the piles of red, blue, black dresses

scattered on the bed. She holds
my stockinged foot, stuffs it into
a leather sandal one size too small.

When I'm strapped in, she stands me up,
says, *One last touch*, and paints my lips
with a little brush dipped into a tube

of plum-colored ink. Narrowing her eyes,
she touches a long, turquoise nail
to her cheek. The corners of her doll mouth

curl up. *Look at you*, she croons, stepping
away from the floor-length mirror
so I can admire her work. The dress

is too short and the lipstick's too dark,
but I don't dare tell Louise. I know
she likes me shy, submissive, waiting

on the shelf to be brushed, fussed over
and hugged close, one night at a time.

Corvette

Trace my aluminum frame
and stare into my wind splitter.
Wrap your hands around
my leather-bound wheel. Feel
zero charge into sixty in the time
it takes you to gasp. The fin
across my trunk? It's called a
wickerbill. It means we'll leave
tracks along mountain curves and
never look back. Don't believe me?
My father was a racecar. Take me
to the foothills so I can see
the lookout spot where teenagers
fuck in the tired backseats
of their parents' cars. Turn on
my high beams and watch
the animals scatter. I'll be your
cherry red armor, your tiger,
your wingman. Just think of that
waitress you like. *Mandy*. *Mandy*
in my passenger seat. Yellow
miniskirt, brown sugar perfume.
Bare legs on suede. She'll feel
dangerous inside me. And why not
scare her a bit, so she bites
her bottom lip and you can hear
her heart race over the roar
of my V8, 'til the hot rubber smell
makes her want to slip her hand
into the waistband of your Levi's
as you melt into another switch-
back. Take off my top and watch
the sun rise on the Fourth of July.
Show up to the party with *Mandy*
in red delicious heels that match
my custom paint job. Don't thank
God, thank GM. Thank America.
The air smells of thick steaks
charring in backyards, juices
dripping on the coals.

CHAPTER II

What to Expect

A close-up view of the little embryo reveals your baby is looking much less reptilian and much more baby-like: Even though she has webbed fingers and toes and her tail is just about gone, you start to see an upper lip forming, the protruding tip of a cute button nose and paper-thin eyelids. (Adapted from whattoexpect.com, “Your Baby at Week 8”)

I stand on the stoop next to my cousin's wife.
She's eight and a half months pregnant,
watermelon round, swollen with what will become

her daughter, Ruby Rose. But I've got something
in my womb too, something the size of a raspberry
no one knows about, a secret pulsing

through the layers of my body—the vibrations
of an unfamiliar presence with webbed fingers.
A heartbeat like a war drum: close and impossible

to trace. I take a long drink of gin and tonic,
relish its cool bite through mid-July. The city
smells of exhaust and melting sidewalk trash.

Air conditioners drip from fifth floor windows,
splash on sun-burnt scalps like filthy raindrops.
In a way, I envy you, embryo. You'll never have to

think about El Salvador's only hippopotamus,
beaten and stabbed to death by unknown assailants,
who climbed into his enclosure last night.

You'll never have to look through a subway window
at Union Square and see a man come in his hand,
smear it on the glass and grin as you leave

the station, his penis purple and wilting like an iris.
You'll never see a woman unconscious
on the sidewalk of her college town, her legs

splayed out in twenty-degree weather, her memory
lost as her handbag and house keys. You'll never
shiver as she throws her arms around your neck,

mistaking you for a friend. You'll never need
to shut those eyelids tight and realize
there are things in this world—on the side

of the road, in the basement of the frat house,
in a Google image search—that can never be
unseen.

A Whale Explodes in Florence, Oregon

November 12, 1970

Her body waits like a torpedo,
five tons of belly slumped
over a lift truck unable to hold
the weight—metal hinges creak,
tires sink in wet sand. A reporter
gestures into the black box
of a camera, clutches a microphone,
blue parka flapping against
his chest. Men in yellow hazmat suits
pack more boxes marked *TNT*
underneath her massive stomach.
Sheriff says, *Everyone behind this line,
and for God's sake, cover your ears.*
There's a sound like a bottle rocket.
A sky full of red smoke. A high-pitched
scream as the first hunks of blubber
hit the beach in rapid succession:
a hailstorm of whale meat, the crackling
spit of fireworks. A slab the size
of a linebacker smacks down
next to a family of five. Nobody runs.
It's almost as if the mess of guts
and broken flesh is just another Oregon
rainstorm—they wait for the end,
which comes, eventually. Smoke settles
after four long minutes and once-beige
raincoats hang on shivering bodies,
drenched carnation pink. Husbands,
neighbors, kids dripping with oily muck
all start to get sick, one after the other,
doubled over in the sand. The smell
is what pushes them over the edge:
a smog of rotting fish. Children's faces
painted red stir from shock and shriek
with tears. They run into mothers' arms.
There's nothing for the people of Florence
to do but pack up their soiled picnic
baskets and head home. In the parking lot,
a crowd gathers around a brand new

Chrysler, smashed in from the top
like it caught a window-jumper,
or a knockout punch from above.
Bits of glass scattered like a mouthful
of teeth. This will be known
as the day's only casualty.

The Watch

Summer of 1960

The day after,
Johnny Miller got to stay home, too.

We made a catapult from a mousetrap
and a spoon stuck together with tape.

Johnny'd seen his brother do it the same way—
nail the school bus with an egg

from up in the Jones' magnolia. We ran
to the ball field with our arms full of crap

to launch: marbles, bottle caps,
a dead mouse we found

in his garage. They all flew 20, 30 feet at least—
made big clouds of dust clear across

the diamond. We shot nickels straight
up in the air and watched them soar back down

to the dirt, where we squinted in the sun
with hands over our heads like shields,

trying not to get clocked. Johnny caught one
in his cap—that was how you scored a point.

When Mother hollered from the front step,
I ran home to find her in the parlor

we never use, twisting the green-stoned ring
she always wore. Standing by the hutch

in her yellow housecoat,
she looked like a little girl,

staring down at something gold.
A watch. I knew it was his.

Without looking up, she said to me, *Dennis*,
do you want this? There were bits of black tar

crusted on the face and I knew it was the one
he'd been wearing when it happened.

Her eyes were red and swollen
from the night before, when

we sat on the bathroom floor together
after all those people left the house,

my skinny arms around her shoulders
not doing much good. She shook with tears

and even called out his name. *Harold*.
It was a beauty—the watch. Bigger

than my wrist and heavy as a doorstep, still
ticking. But I was scared to touch it,

like it was cursed somehow, or rotten,
as if the tar that spilled from that truck,

his death, was contagious.

Still Life with Oaxacan Figurines

Lethal Injection Chamber: Florence, AZ

Strapped to the table under shards of silver
light, I close my eyes and envision a rough
and ageless man alone in the Sierra Madres,

pressing his nose to the gray-green bark
of a copal tree. Male trees are riddled
with knots and difficult to mold,

so he searches for feminine branches,
their soft scent of lime. He listens
for limbs that whisper like coiled snakes

and jackals, crouched lions ready to strike.
He cleans his machete on the blanket
underneath his saddle, slices into heart-

wood there in the shade, unable to wait
for the short ride home. As a kid,
I was crazy for his *alebrijes*: specters

freed with chisels and mallets as if willed
into existence—born from a heavy rain
of wood shavings, dyed with the carmine

insides of 10,000 beetles. Under this white
ceiling, the cross-hatched fist of the microphone
into which I'll speak my last words on this

earth, I recall their sun-dried color: chuparosa,
prickly pear red. As the warmth drains
from my fingers, painted tails burn

behind my eyelids like the Virgin, her shroud
of gold. The clock reads 2:56. The man lifts
my arm to his lips. In the gleam of his knife,

I see my reflection: the pulse of a rattlesnake,
venom dripping from my teeth.

Kissing Ioana

The hickey was bigger than a quarter
and purple like a bruise: a Milky Way
of red dots stippled on Ben van Meter's

neck. A relic of the afternoon he spent
with Ioana at the movie theater on 86th
and Lex. *Broken blood vessels,*

Meredith said as he passed us in the hallway.
The names they called Ioana stuck
long after it faded: *Blood-sucker, vampire,*

whore. On the way home from Spirit Day,
I climb onto the Peter Pan bus
and walk by row after row until I find

a spot in the very back next to Ioana,
who's drawing on eyeliner one-handed
in a compact. The tops of other

eighth-grade heads peek out over fake
velour seats—little red and yellow planets
floating in royal blue space.

As we turn from the parking lot,
she offers to do my makeup, digs
into a leather pouch for gold shadow.

Close your eyes, she says, taking my chin
in her hand. When she's done,
her fingernail scratches a trail of goosebumps

along the top of my thigh and our blue
Jolly Rancher tongues touch
just between our lips.

The wheels lurch over speed bumps
and I focus on keeping my eyes closed,
count out thirty seconds before I let

my lashes flicker open. Beyond the ridge

of her nose, there's a wide-eyed line of boys
staring at us over the seats, their braces

glinting. I shove her away as Thomas Silvers
wags a knobby finger in my face—
When did YOU turn gay?

Their laughter swells and carries
to the front of the bus, where the driver
fixes his sunglasses in the rearview

and fifty heads have turned to look.
I hear my name as a handful of whispers
and wish I could fall into the compartment

under the bus with the tumbling coolers.
As a hot storm brews behind my face,
Ioana, oblivious to all of it, licks her thumb

and runs it back and forth across
my cheek, as a mother might, working
at the mascara smudge she left

under my eye. I want her to—*Stop*,
I hiss, and duck out of reach, scrubbing
at my skin in the purple-tinted

window. Outside, late September trees
glow orange and Bear Mountain's
gentle curve disappears behind gas stations

and telephone poles. Not two hours ago,
we spread our blankets in the grass,
ate sandwiches in the sun reflecting

off the lake. Now, all I can see
is the mess of my face: flushed and puffy
around green eyes heavy with glitter

that promised to make me look older.

Another Lifetime

It's you
and the blonde I knew you would end up with,
her skin like a day moon in the passenger seat,
her small hand raised to me
under that pink pageant smile, an eager wave
I return with an elegant twist:
each one of my fingers twinkling.
As you roll through the empty crosswalk heading for town,
I watch your palm extend through the open window:
big and unmoving, held aloft
across your body, the other
hand gripping the wheel. Your eyes
meet mine for a second
and I'm glad I decided to put on these tight black jeans
and go bra-less in the green tank top
I stole from Urban Outfitters at age sixteen.
It's unseasonably warm for February
and I know I am beautiful
with bare shoulders, over-sized sunglasses,
hair bunched at the top of my head,
barely contained
in a plastic clip, shining redder
in the three o'clock sun that laughs at the kids
on their bicycles, the sweat gathering
under their backpacks.

You are beautiful
is something you never said,
is the kind of thing you're too cryptic to say,
too eccentric and shy, but I could smell it
on your breath as you bent to kiss my neck last winter,
a sense of pride that you had me
between your fingers, a greed that warmed like dark
wine, chilled like granite counter tops:
you had to have me right then, all at once.
The scent of your hunger soaked into my skin, became mine
to live with, alone in my bed with a vibrator and visions of your hand
gripping my neck. You drive off,
rumble up the hill in your truck and I keep thinking
of the lives I've stepped through—
one on the same side of a leather booth

at an Argentinian restaurant,
two rare steaks brimming with blood
in front of us, your hand
another lifetime spread across my thigh.

Questions for a New Lover

I. Have you ever fainted?

Once, on a Thursday morning in college,
I spent five hours getting this done:
*She peels up her jeans and shows me
the roller skate on her shin, its halo of roses.*
The guy was so heavy-handed it felt
like his needles were stitching their mark
into bone. It took so long—I had to go
straight to my Life Drawing class
to present my portrait of a wrinkled
woman with purple hair, our model.
On my way to the front of the room,
in a daze, I crashed my leg against
the sharp edge of a table and my bandages
flew off. I was bleeding yellow, black,
green, red, all over the linoleum.
From there, I saw the gaping faces fade
as I slipped into a pool of my dripping paint.

II. What are you afraid of?

My father hired this Hindu butcher to slaughter the goats.
The man would walk out to the barn real slow
like he was wading in water, carrying the blade

he sharpened on stone, always whistling
the same low tune. He spent hours in the hay, crawling
on hands and knees, singing to the animals

I loved, the baby goats I followed into the backwoods.
They chewed up clover 'til all that remained
in the clearing was the outline of my body, wilted green.

In the barn, the butcher cradled Daisy in his arms.
When she drifted off, he cut her throat,
whistling as the blood drained.

III. What's your father like?

He built us a house of red clay
and kindling. When he met my stepmother,
a rich girl from up north, he started
on a new wing. Took him ten months
and they're still in love, walking
on oak floors he laid.

Her mother despised us, the dark-haired
mixed-trash babies, hissed, *don't you dare
touch anything in the house*. When she caught
me with hands plunged into fox fur
hanging in the upstairs closet, she slapped
me across the face with an open hand.

My father heard the *smack* and came running,
took her by the shoulder, his knuckles
sharp and white. *If you touch my daughter again,
it'll be the last thing you do*.

IV. Are you religious?

When I was thirteen and spiraling
out of control, my mother drove us
to a church basement the next town

over to study the teachings of the prophet
Meher Baba. The smiling avatar
went silent one July and stayed that way

'til he died. My mother said
he didn't need his voice to preach,
just his hands, which apparently

swept skyward in large circles,
and his eyes, always dewy with forgiveness.
From his woven chair, he spelled out

messages on an alphabet board,
letter by vague letter:
DON'T WORRY. BE HAPPY.

That summer, I arrived at Camp Baba
on some land outside Myrtle
Beach and saw, through a tunnel

of back-bending branches, the curve
of a white bridge over the marsh. I swear
I had dreamed of that scene my whole life.

Four years later, they deemed me enlightened
enough to witness the prophet himself,
blinking on a 1925 film strip.

When I saw him, all in white
with that thick mustache like a piece
of black felt, I thought, *This isn't God,*

just another man who doesn't talk.

The Bone Saw

He hears a steel rattle like the lawn mower
he drove over a tree stump years ago.

White, glaring light and a burning
sugar-cookie-in-the-oven smell.

His voice tickles the throat on its way out:
I'm awake—

And the grinding stops. *Ten, nine, eight, seven,*
he welcomes the feeling of sinking away

from his body. When his eyes re-open, his wife
is beside him, flipping through *Bon Appetit*.

He loves the way she matches her scarves
to her headbands, her shoes. Today she's all,

what's that color? Magenta. She takes his hand
and kisses each finger, says, *How do you like*

your new knees? With all the breath he can muster,
he tells her what happened—sings the sound

the bone saw made. In the moment before
she faints, he sees the exhaustion etched

in the lines of her face. He longs for her
freckled arms, so soft in the chair under glossed

pages. When she comes to in the next bed over,
she imagines they're Lucy and Desi:

tucked in matching twins, just
close enough to brush fingers.

The Night We Made Love Instead of Simple Syrup

February 13th

Like a starved wolf, you watched me eat
a slice of millionaire pie
after the last customer paid his tab

and the heavy wooden doors locked
us in. I watched you that same way
for two years, wanting to be the red tie

flipped over your shoulder as you poured
martinis, the green olive between
your fingers. The words slipped

from my lips, *Need any help?*
while I stared at your mouth: more
offering than question. In the kitchen,

you dropped a handful of basil
into simmering water, fragrant steam
rising from the pot as I stirred

with a wooden spoon. How I've tried
to forget the shock and relief
of your palm on my hip, like a jump

before the elevator stops, the minutes
that dissolved like cane sugar, the silk
of your dark hair between my fingers.

The tip of your tongue under
my chin, the scratch of your stubble.
How I let you unwrap me like a present

as the syrup burned to sap
on the stove. The scent of smoke.
Our pulling apart, fluorescent

inches between us. The city
of upturned chairs waiting in the empty
restaurant, the message blinking

on my phone. The 11 o'clock news
on mute. The green marble bar
you wiped clean with a steaming cloth.

The circle of Carmènère silt
at the bottom of my glass. Knowing this
was the beginning and the end, I took

your tie in my hand and led you
to the hallway, away from the dark
windows facing the street. You spun me

around so my cheek pressed up
against the pink plaster wall
and the tower of phone books toppled

to the ground. As my body writhed
with your touch, I watched red
numbers on a clock become Sunday.

Kissing Mariana

The scar across her left cheekbone,
its white trail of rumors—
I heard she punched a Latin King
for cat-calling her ex. At seventeen,
I ached for such romantic violence.
On the parquet floor of her parents'
uptown apartment, a circle
of ponytailed girls in sweatpants
blushes around an almost-empty bottle
of Jose Cuervo. Liquor-warmth pulses
from my stomach to the outermost
curves of my ears. *Never Have I Ever...*
eaten a girl out. Mariana watches
from the fire escape. She pulls
on her cigarette, sees me looking at her.
The round darkness of her eyes
washes over my face, swallows
my stare. I crawl through the open
window in my t-shirt and socks.
She looks small inside her down jacket,
its fur hood a wide-mouthed cave
for her freckled face. *Aren't you cold?*
she asks. Behind her, Manhattan
is an index of cornices and streetlights
stacked under a red sky. I can hear
my teeth chattering over the moan
of a nearby car alarm. She crushes
her cigarette against the scaffolding
and wraps her scarf, its smell of honeyed
smoke, around my shoulders. She climbs
back through the window feet first,
her look a sprint across wet grass,
a challenge.

CHAPTER III

Rattlesnakes in a Dark Green Desert

Rob from Piedmont Natural Gas
tells me I'm lucky.

*I've seen houses snuffed out like candles—
nothing left but a chimney.*

Teacups rattle in the cupboard as he walks
across my kitchen. The long creak as he opens

the oven. Watch the back of his sunburned neck
as he searches for the source

of the leak. *Thing's about as old as they get,*
he says. I smile, lean against the counter.

The whole room's full of his scent: stale tobacco
and grease. He turns to me, still

crouched on the floor, says, *Most people
think gas rises like smoke, but really*

it sinks, down around the ankles.

After he's gone I lock the dead bolt, handle,
chain, and trace the spine

of my apartment—a pile of dirty dishes,
clothes scattered on the bed, philodendrons

hanging from the ceiling. I open the windows
as Rob said—prop each one up

with a heavy book. The air's turned cool
and smells of charcoal, new grass.

As it darkens, I switch on a lamp and draw
the heavy curtains, cut the foil from a bottle

and think of Rob in his white truck.

Three days I waited to call the emergency

number, pretended it'd only been one. Two nights

I dreamed of rattlesnakes in a dark green desert.

At my bedside, a moth makes love to a light bulb
because he thinks it's the moon.

Kissing Louise Again

Louise weaves her fingers with mine,
leads me across the restaurant
to the sushi bar, past neon fish tanks,

an infant screaming in his high chair,
a dozen onion volcanoes spewing steam.
In the mirrors on the walls and ceiling,

there are shadowy visions of the two of us
in our camelhair coats. I love the way
we look together—her olive skin

against my peach, the four-inch heels
that lift her lips to mine, how
we draw the eyes of each business

casual couple we pass, who raise
their eyebrows when they see us
holding hands. At the lacquered bar,

Louise smiles at the chef in the blue
bandanna, asks him to make us
whatever he likes: *Omakase*.

As he slices through a brick of tuna,
she pours sake into clay cups,
says, *This is the kind of place my ex*

used to take me—he knew we'd never be seen.
A platter appears in front of us: yellowtail,
red caviar, quail eggs in seaweed boats.

I can't imagine not wanting to be seen
with Louise. I want her cherry red dress,
her bare arms spiraled with tattoos

that spin and multiply in the fun house
mirrors stretching back forever
in this faux-mahogany landscape.

I know what she's saying.

That she's been here before: to this
overpriced Japanese steakhouse,

to the no-longer-deniable moment
in a relationship when it's clear
there's an unequal distribution of love.

I finish another cup of sake. She dabs
at her lips with a cloth napkin, leans back
in her wooden chair. I know

she's thinking of him, missing
even the way he kept her a secret.
In the parking lot, she helps me to the car—

I've had too much to drink
and nearly slip on black ice. I cling
to the first time she kissed me:

in the parking lot of a different strip mall,
on the salt of another storm.

Still Life with Valium and Butterfly Hairclip

Night: water rushes through pipes, laundry turns
in hot circles—a zipper catches,
coins fall from a pocket. She hasn't eaten
since breakfast, feels the warming weight
descend from her neck to her ankles. Bending
for the silver wings she knocked
from the dresser, she lets the creaks of the house
lure her back from wood-grained depths,
where walls dissolve into thunderstorms
and boxes stacked in the attic
tear through ceilings bruised with rain. Palms flat
on the cold window, she says
goodnight to the pecan tree, its fallen leaves,
the thick rope still strung
from its longest branch: a tireless swing.

Woman at 3 A.M.

She hikes up her dress and climbs
onto the dance hall stage,
where the blur of the crowd

becomes the swaying of her hips,
and somewhere in that vibration,
their eyes meet—as if for the first time.

He's never seen his wife like this,
watches her grind into some shirtless
dancer glistening with sweat.

She's drunk—yes, but happy. Confident.
After the show, he finds her under
the marquee. *Baby, where are your glasses?*

His fingers brush the skin around her eyes.
I don't care, she spits, disappearing back
into the swell of bodies leaving the club.

He searches the emptying dance floor,
each water-logged bathroom stall
washed in red light and finds them

next to a tip jar: stepped on, missing
an arm. Across the lobby, he spots
the tattoo on her shoulder: a peacock

with a hundred, blue-green eyes.
He waits for her to turn and smile,
for her thin arms to snake around

his waist, but all she says is, *I wish
you hadn't found them.*
He's had enough of this person,

not his wife, this person who drank
too much bourbon and wasted his time.
He brushes past her, down the dark

street with keys in hand. A woman

at the bus stop shakes her head, calls out
as they pass, *Honey, it's gonna be alright.*

She feels too young to be a wife,
not at home enough in the world,
always following the blur of his

white shirt. He's walking too fast,
losing her in the gray-green light
of the parking garage. The words

spring from her mouth and echo
against concrete walls: *I can't wait
to leave you*—like a promise,

the pleasure of future parting.
Leave you. Like a marriage,
a car full of boxes.

Rattle

Hours toss and turn across evenings
like cramped limbs swollen with energy.

She still remembers her first craving,
the ways she learned to fill the pit

of her hunger: a note slipped
in her locker, a pair of stolen panties

under her skirt, a quick fuck
in the stairwell, another

bottle of gin. She longs for the rush
of blood through her heart.

What she wouldn't give for a cigarette,
a handful of Percocet, a stranger

with rough hands. But all she has is
a window, white petals pressed against

the glass, and endless, rattling quiet.

Still Life with Block Letters

Just dark. I can see the family
in the house, their tray-tables, dinner
plates, the episode on the television,

those big wooden letters
in the daughter's bedroom window—
AHN. I imagine her name might be

Amelia Helen, or Astrid Hope.
Each time I pass in daylight, the man
is outside trimming the hedges,

wearing yellow-tinted sunglasses
and a khaki vest. I've seen him
install solar panels on the roof,

paint the fence a forest green, trellis
tomatoes, power-wash the red brick
walls. He never says hello, but I know

he knows who I am. I linger on the corner
with my hound: dog treat in one hand,
rope-leash in the other, and praise him

when he looks up at me, the treat
falling into his waiting mouth.
The streetlight flickers on.

I can see I've waited too long
for the outline of a girl's face,
half-hidden by lace curtains.

Mrs. Thompson Considers Her Reflection in the Teakettle

A blue linen dress with pearl buttons,
the wave of white-blonde she irons
in the antique mirror each morning

after her husband leaves for work
and the girls have hurried out the door
with their lunches. The perennial smudge

of Look Out Red on her porcelain cup.
She digs a cigarette from the pack
hidden in an old oven mitt, opens

the window over the sink. *Is this it?*
she wonders, always around this time—
ten in the morning, when the day

stretches long like an oily cat
with claws sunken in the screen door,
lazy and expectant. She stares

at the pink stove she never asked for,
the little gold watch with her initials
monogrammed on the inside, the metal

cold against her wrist. The piece of paper
tacked to the fridge with *MOMMY*
scrawled over it in green Crayola.

Is this it? In the teakettle, her skin
takes on a silvery hue. She imagines
herself as the White Witch, wrapped

in fox furs, watching Edmund eat Turkish
delights—one sugared cube after the other
melting on his tongue. A cloud of exhaust

blows in from the street. Tonight,
she'll nestle between her daughters
in their lamp-lit bedroom and begin

a new chapter—the one where the Queen

wakes from a long slumber,
her body buried in ash.

Birch

I spend two months with a phantom under my apron at work,
buttoned into waistbands, humming in bed: my low, blue
flame. The waiting room television cycles

helicopter landscapes: black bears fishing
ice-trapped lakes. I don't know my own blood type—
flinch when the nurse pricks my fingertip

without warning. I'm a smudge of red on white paper.
A brown paper bag and a packet of instructions.
At my kitchen table, I rip the pill from its plastic,

place it on my tongue. The chalky, bitter taste. I swallow
and wait. Listen to the snap and fizz of a can opening.
The click of the lamp going dark. A sharp pang in my stomach

jolts me awake, sends me to the tile floor of the bathroom,
crawling to the tub, where I strip off my cotton pajamas,
let the water run cold over my body.

Eight weeks I simmered—now I'm free as the birch
out front: I took an axe to the climbing vines,
but still they cling to the bark like a colorless net.

The Peace of Being Carried

For my mother

As a child, I couldn't grasp why you drifted
so quiet in the sun with eyes closed,

light as an oak leaf caught
on the pool's surface. I wanted

what's impossible on land: a running jump
into turquoise space, cannonball crash

and speech bubble blossoms.

Even as I questioned your stillness, I ached
to understand it. Splashing on my back,

I fought with the water: kicked and slapped
until I felt your hands beneath

my body, heard you whisper, *Breathe*.

Now that I'm a woman too, I've seen
the peace of being carried—senseless,

bodiless, moored to my own breath.

All and nothing, like being
inside a new womb. I was a surprise,

a clicking into place after years
of trying. You prayed for a constellation

family (loud, piano-gathered,
a hand-sewn quilt), but all you got

was me. I've never learned to float
as you do, between air and water

like an offering with outstretched arms
and never even a twitch of panic.

Redwood Elegy

In the upstairs hallway, she clings to the wallpaper
as rose water, amber, bergamot.

In the narrow kitchen, smoke cuts through her
sweet musk; browned butter and Western omelets

crusted in the skillet. Strong coffee and old lipstick.
In the basement, she's a cloud of dust unearthing

a leather box, its yellowed photographs. *Mi hija*,
she'd say, *let's get out of this house*.

She calls to me from Mount Tamalpais,
where trees reach from earth to sky through fog

and terrible stillness. Crossing the bay, I taste her
in the air as salt, marigold, rust. The redwoods

come into focus from every direction: too many
to breathe in at once, sight lines of heaven light

taller than the human eye can climb. Families, tour guides,
languages threaded into their silence. Invisible

in the crowds and camera flashes, I press
my nose against the grooved bark of a tree, feel

its ridges, crawl into the cave of its ankle.
Staring up into dark, I can smell the tomato and garlic,

the starch on her hands from when she'd make us
spaghetti sandwiches for the journey.

In the Hummingbird Exhibit at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

For my father

A green bird hovers above red rock,
disappears into a thicket of ocotillo.

Dashes of color flit around our heads,
dive between branches, rise
to the netted ceiling, scatter

like flecks of paint: blue topaz,
magenta, tangerine.

You grab my shoulder and point
to the cactus beside us—*Remember
that one, Kate? Jumping cholla.*

My ankle like a spiked bat
in your lap as you pulled the two-inch
spindles from my flesh.

How could I forget? It only takes one time
to learn what not to touch in the desert—

seatbelt buckles, the horned toad,
the blood that shot from its eyes
when I brought it in the house.

Your hand still gripping my shoulder,
the words I knew would come spill
softly from your mouth: *diagnosis,*

prognosis, atrophy, months. There are tears
in your blue eyes and my whole body
feels far away, trapped under rock.

You take my sun-warmed hands in yours.
We watch the birds, the fierce choreography

of their rituals, until it's time to pass
back through the curtain of long rubber slats,
the anti-chamber and two sets of doors

that keep them inside. As I help you
to your feet, a sliver of purple lands
on your shoulder, decides you're its flower

for a moment, then shudders from sight—
a piece of dust blown from a band of light.

I read that if a hummingbird lingers
near, it brings with it the power to achieve
something impossible. But when

a sliver of sunlight kisses
the wrinkles of your neck, tickles
your skin with the tips of its wings,

what does that mean? The ruby-throated bird
lifts from the cotton of your shirt, floats

as close as it can get to the sky
and I wonder where it would go,
what it would do in the world,

if it could. Drink chuparosa in Oaxaca?
Steal thread from a red skirt drying on the line?

When the sun staggers behind the Catalinas,
the hummingbirds hold their breath.