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These poems investigate grief, trauma, sexism, and the intricacies of living with mental illness.

THIS WON'T HURT YOU

by

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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## I Don't Want to Be a Woman

who shakes when she's touched  
in the dark, but this is a fact

of my body now, like  
the face of tonight's moon,

bloody and swelling  
as our neighbors

pool in the street  
and tilt their heads back

to see its rust-opal  
glow. From our window

three stories up,  
we watch their watching,

lights out in the apartment  
to better illuminate

the scene below,  
both of us following

the finger of the same  
woman as she points

at the sky, your hand  
not holding mine,

my sadness  
an ordinary thing  
between us.

Elegy with Boy and Fresh Water

Matthew, where is your body?

I didn't see it in the casket, but I saw the swallow  
circling the church the morning we didn't bury  
you. The mourning girls in black and blue laced dresses light  
my memory still, their young faces, their small hands  
pulling each other across the lawn like water.

Your grandmother swayed in green water—  
so close to your body—  
when you swam in and out of her hands  
all those Augusts ago. The whole family swallowed  
buttered sourdough and apples, danced in the light  
of half-priced sparklers. We had nothing to bury.

Send us something to bury.

You died in the grass, but I imagine you lost in water,  
wheeling in abstracted light,  
the lake you loved a dark body  
you put on like a cloak, swallow  
like ice. Even in dreams, I can't find your hands,

your eyes. I stitch my life together with shaking hands;  
I sew blankets, hang curtains, bury  
photos of you in yards of cotton and thread, swallow  
my pill and swim through chlorinated water,  
learn to change my tired body  
with each stroke. You are a light

flickering in the hall at dusk. You are light  
as seeds of milkweed in my hands.

Your parents made ash of your body,  
wanted nothing to bury,  
carry your name inside them like water.  
My grief is ordinary as a barn swallow

diving into aster. Help me swallow  
this fear of too much light,  
teach me to cradle water  
like yarrow in my hands,  
give me anything to bury

in my garden, to cover with earth like a body.

## I Paint My Lips

red like chicken liver fresh  
from the body like clotted  
menstrual blood or the dress I loved  
but couldn't fill when I was sixteen  
and desperate for breasts red  
as the tongues of deer  
hanging in the garage  
after my father hunted red  
like my skin after wine  
red like my neck after sex red  
like the lipstick I wasn't allowed  
to wear when I was young because  
didn't I want to look  
like the good girl I was

Virgin

You're in a basement room  
with no windows.

The bedspread black. The dresser  
black. And Mary,

out of place in a plastic frame  
on the shelf, her paper skin

luminous like she burns  
beneath it. Already, the boy who led you here

unbuckles his belt. You think  
this is how these things happen—

a few beers stolen from his parents' refrigerator,  
a movie in his empty house,

him telling you how pretty you are  
so often he must mean it.

You think this—his hand on your waist,  
now on your hip, now inching

toward your breast—is tenderness.  
But I know the inevitability

of his body in the dark.  
In a moment, he will turn

out the light, and you will learn  
how small you become when a boy wants

what you don't, a lesson you will try to forget  
for years. But for now, you are untouched

on the bed, Mary watching you  
with downcast eyes

as if she knows what's coming.

As if she knows you'll never learn,  
as she has, to be grateful  
for what men put inside you.

Elegy with Black Fly Infestation

The can says *kills*  
*on contact*, but the flies  
seize and mutate  
after I spray them,  
thoraxes melting  
into abdomens  
like wax.  
One fly drags its body  
across the floor  
and leaves a trail  
of milky black  
behind it. Another  
lies on its back  
and twitches  
its legs blindly  
in the air. All the flies  
want to fly—their wings  
vibrate so quickly,  
some of them  
begin to spin  
in place, humming  
and whirling  
like children  
on a playground at sunset  
swinging a last swing  
before their mothers  
call them home  
for supper. Matthew,  
everyone told me  
you couldn't have felt  
any pain.

Elegy with House Party and Nicotine Buzz

First cigarette and I am haloed  
in bourbon and milky

street lamp glow watching mosquitoes  
rise like strange tide in the light across

the street someone whose face I can't  
see falls into a hedge and

inside music gets faster  
my friends sing *take me*

*home* like a collective prayer  
and for a moment I'm not thinking

about the poem I couldn't write  
this morning about

Matthew's body the stranger  
pulls himself out of the hedge

and walks on I flick my ashes  
into cricket calls and go back

to pour another drink and shake  
my hips as if nothing could ever

hurt me fourth cigarette and  
night sways wild I want

to stroke a black dog as she  
passes but her owner says

*she's just not ready to be  
touched* and someone

laughs when I trip up  
the stairs and *can you believe*

*my cousin was crushed*

*by a golf cart*

is still something I've never  
said out loud

seventh cigarette and I stumble  
over an empty bottle

of cheap vodka in the street think  
I see Matthew at the end

of someone's garden path  
but it was only a trick

of too much whiskey again  
when I get home

I open the back door  
for my dog and hope

she'll come back  
when I call her

Propanolol Prayer

Ocean in me. Pool  
    in my fingertips,  
        blue and still  
    as sapphire. Lace  
my ribcage with foam, float  
        me spineless and serene  
    as anemone, make me  
a body without  
        trembling, a shapeless  
    mass of grace—no stammering  
heart, no skin to cut into,  
        no mind  
    slippery like an oil spill, thoughts  
unstoppable as water.

## A Chorus of Angry Women Storms the White House

Once a day someone asks  
how man will destroy earth,

but we know our bodies  
were the first landscapes ruined,

our torsos fields of thistle  
and cornflower uprooted

by snaking fingers,  
our limbs felled and split

at the veins like birch,  
yew, hemlock,

anything a man might defile  
with his hands.

We're told we're most lovely  
when we're quiet

and slender, that our bellies  
should grow with holy

purpose, that our legs  
should open for men

but not so often that it sours  
the taste of us.

How should we be?  
Tell us, are we rose

and lilac to cup  
softly in your palms,

or are we valleys  
you will fill, hills

to flatten into plains,

orchards to be tongued

and swallowed by your own  
gruesome mouth?

## Ode to My Diva Cup and What It Contains

Listen, if Jesus were a woman,  
there would have been no need  
for a miracle at the last supper,

just time to fill goblets at her leisure,  
loaves of challah for her to crumble  
into broth while her body

did the work of losing itself. I once  
prayed to be worthy of Sunday blood,  
but now I only think of Christ

when I pull this cup  
out of me, my fingers spotted  
with blood as thick and dark

as engine oil. I hold my grail  
to the light, and the blood shimmers  
like stained glass, feels warm

through silicone, smells  
like copper and animal and rot. The only body  
I've known to come back after death

each month is in this bathroom,  
snaking out of me, swirling  
in this cup like wine.

## Coping Skills

No, I haven't learned

to ignore the sounds in the alley  
at night. And the men  
outside the liquor store,

I'm still afraid of them,  
still imagine the terrible things  
they might do  
with their hands, feel the ghosts  
of their bodies darkening

mine. And because I'm tired  
of needing to be fixed,  
I stopped seeing that doctor  
downtown. Instead,  
I take the orange pills

every morning  
and sit on the floor, stretch my legs  
long in front of me, lift my arms  
over my head like  
the dancer I could never be.

I clasp my big toes and breathe in  
like Lake Michigan, gray  
and humming before a storm, exhale  
like the blue line train  
pulling away as I climb  
the last station stair, raise

myself tall and look out the window  
at the woman who waits  
for the same bus every day.  
How she rests her hands  
gently on her belly,  
keeps herself warm.

Venlafaxine Litany

Little white spheres, seeds,  
cells, dead shrunken

stars, opaque raindrops,  
sugar rolled soft

in aching hands, bone  
but more hunger,

a hundred teeth pulled  
and rounded into pearls,

milky lanterns unlit,  
untouched snow, coral

stripped of pigment  
and curled into itself,

mercury baptized  
in bleach, clouds

made fossil, bloodless  
insects ready to burrow.

Rapunzel, to Herself

They rip up blue grass  
and thistle below, throw pebbles  
at my window, howl

at the sky—  
As if that would stir me.  
One begged me

to throw down a rope  
or anything  
he could climb, even

my nightgowns tied  
together in knots,  
a chain made

of mother's pearls,  
my hair. They can't  
understand

how I love my locked  
door, my nights  
boiling onions

and sipping wine alone,  
moon silvering  
my bed, my table,

my tower  
and body whole.

Ariel's Sisters Call Her to the Sea

An unbroken line of fin and pearl,  
they arrived in the bay every night,

scaled bodies reflecting sunset  
like rippling water.

They brought oysters, wreaths  
of seagrass, coral and driftwood

sculpted into crowns. Whirling  
in the shallows, they sang

our grandmother's hymns,  
chanted my name until it became

a meaningless tone in my ear, chorused  
*sister, come back home.*

They grew impatient. Tore gulls  
out of the sky

and shredded them to pieces  
in their hands, beat the ocean

with their tails and stirred up waves  
as high as the city wall.

From my window, I watched  
them give up and swim

into horizon. I couldn't tell them  
what I'd traded for this body

or how badly I wanted to dive  
into the bay beside them, glide

into salt again, lace my hair with kelp  
and urchin, sink into darkest blue.

For My Future Self, When She is Afraid

Fading from gunmetal  
to amethyst smoke,  
remember Michigan sky  
over spruce trees, first  
raindrops stippling  
the pond out back  
like the rows of tulips  
breaking through soil  
in mom's garden,  
how you ran from window  
to window with your sister  
to pull each pane closed  
before the storm,  
chorus of oak branches  
and windchimes and  
thunder shaking your ribcage  
like a premonition,  
and dad on the porch  
watching the smudged horizon  
for lightning, calling,  
*come outside,*  
*this won't hurt you.*

## Exorcism of Dead Friends

Brannon left by stepping off the edge  
of a chair or table or desk I don't know  
the specifics but I know the belt

around his neck finished  
what he started years before  
with a guzzled bottle

of rubbing alcohol and a desperate  
hammer of fists on my sister's  
door at 2 AM and the flash

of ambulance lights just in time  
to keep him alive I sliced  
into my own skin with the same knife

I use for quartering apples  
the night he died I couldn't stop  
until I drew blood until

I marked myself like I used to  
on Ash Wednesday when I was young  
and still believed another body

could save my own before  
they found Jenni dead  
maybe in her bedroom on a pink

silk blanket maybe with an open  
bottle of pills still in her hand I can only  
imagine because her parents couldn't

bring themselves to hold a funeral  
or publish an obituary so I pretend  
she left wrapped in something soft

and warm surrounded by orchid  
white light and gentle music  
and a vase full of primrose  
on the nightstand and someone

she loved pressing a washcloth  
to her forehead like a scene

from a movie with a sad but touching  
ending and I pretend not to be  
afraid I will go like Kristen did

thirty-one and blooming  
with the same cancer my doctor  
tells me I *really should have*

*been checked for earlier* as she frowns  
and makes tiny circles across  
my chest with gloved fingers hoping

not to find what killed  
my mother's younger sister  
when I was too small to understand

why people look different when they're dead  
and cried over my aunt's  
swollen cheeks and now

they found a lump in the breast  
of my mother's oldest sister too  
and we pray to each other

in heavy voices over the phone  
*we caught it early*  
*this time can't be like the last*

## Quilting Lessons

Waiting for my heart to begin its usual  
stampede, I watch Suzy stitch rows of geranium  
pink and cobalt blue triangles together  
until they become a hive

of gleaming geometry, diamonds  
melting into hourglasses drifting  
into pinwheels and pyramids and  
leaves floating in cotton like strange

finches. Bent over machine-whir,  
she doesn't see me hold my hand  
to the light to check for trembling.  
Earlier, we got drunk too easily

downtown over expensive bourbon,  
vermouth, orange rind curled  
on the edge of our glasses like  
copper wire, and I scared her

by revealing how often I want  
to open my own skin with a knife.  
Now, she stands behind me as I cut  
plaid into carefully measured

squares that we'll transform into stars  
with our hands. *Wait*, she says,  
and shows me how to hold  
the fabric taught when I slice,

how to build the sky piece by tender  
piece before I unravel it.

Resurrected from Sea Foam, Ariel Speaks

*Where the water is as blue*

*as the prettiest cornflower*, I began, but wanted  
dirt to crumble between my fingers, stone

not smoothed by tides, stems and petals in hues  
I couldn't see. My sisters sang of moonglow on sand,  
of figures moving without fin, of orange light

unabstracted by sea, the sun pulling away  
from the earth like a wave. I knew pain before  
I knew man. Oysters stitched

to my tail the morning of my fifteenth year  
by my grandmother, lilies entwined in my scalp,  
the first burdens. Everyone knows the story

of my life on the surface, but they forget—  
it wasn't his face, his eyes as black as a shark's  
that called to me,

but his ship's lanterns swaying  
in storm wind, the glitter of pink and yellow glass  
lit by flame, the bow illuminated

before its fall, mast and ropes twisting,  
unfurling in the fire like strange  
and tender eels.

Ghazal with Changing Body

At fifteen I bought tops too big for my frame, cried  
when Chris in PE teased that I'd never have breasts

like the women hung up in his locker—slack-lipped  
and lounging on hoods of sportscars, breasts

like promises spilling from black lingerie,  
breasts like perfectly oiled weapons, breasts

hungry as the hands of the same boy the next year  
when he darted across the hallway to grab my breasts

after Algebra, who laughed as I dropped textbooks  
and pencils and notebooks to shield my breasts

with both arms as if I could stop the world  
around them, as if I were a girl without breasts

holding herself like I had months before as mom laughed,  
*Michelle, there are better things to have than breasts.*

## Ode to Buffy

We all have our demons  
but hers are fucking real,

all sinew and terror and tooth  
lunging in the night

only to die by scythe,  
stake, body slam

onto a headstone, punch  
to the goddamn

heart. She's brave  
like a drunken

grizzly, blondbubblegum  
vengeance, the horror

horror hides from.  
And wouldn't it be nice

if it were true? If one of us  
could stop every monster

before it crawls  
from its grave,

before it slinks into a bar  
and takes a seat

next to some young,  
sweet thing, growls *hello*.

Women, Dancing after a Pitcher of Margaritas

We shake our hips like we mean  
to shatter this oak floor with gyrating  
curves, grind into each other as if

a shimmy could open  
the sky, could crack the foundation  
of this house and leave us

in a pile of smeared eyeliner  
and lip gloss and  
glitter. We didn't come here

to be seen, we came  
to thrust, to whoop and cackle  
and fuse into one

like a flock of hungry  
birds, to perform the sacred rite  
of body—see our hands

sway wild in the air  
like we're worshipping  
ourselves, our thighs slick

with sweat, our hair clinging  
to shoulders and  
collarbones and arching

backs—we are melting  
together like grains of sugar  
into syrup, gleaming like

newly unearthed diamonds. We dip  
and twirl each other  
into haze, shimmer in the heat

we created here,  
here where we unravel, here where we  
steam, where we animal.

Catcaller Anti-ode

I'll be the swallow gliding through August sky  
that shits on his ugly head, the splintered

glass he cuts his toes on, the thing with needle  
teeth and too many legs

he feels crawling on his neck but can't see.  
I want disembodied hands to slap his ass

at the supermarket while he sniffs cantaloupe,  
peaches that hiss *I'd fuck you, sweetheart*

when he fingers their skin. Give me  
his dignity. Fill his family portraits

with my bare breasts, paper his walls  
with my open thighs, my oil-greased

lips. Carve my eyes into his wood floor.  
Let him wake to the fullness

of my hips smothering him, drown him  
in the wetness he wanted to touch.

## Why I Cut Myself With My Embroidery Scissors

because I've already torn out every stitch  
I made this evening with needle  
and thread as pale and blue as the veins

in the crook of my right arm already  
unraveled each row of the blanket  
I've knitted for weeks and

I don't smoke anymore I've spent  
months counting the robins in my yard  
and this morning there were none

and I like the contrast of red  
snaking across gold blade because  
they found Maya on her bathroom floor

killed by the drug meant to save her  
and Matthew was crushed  
at thirteen in a patch of carefully

trimmed grass and this body is a problem  
I'm trying to solve because  
people sometimes find

glittering things beneath the earth  
but first they must dig

## Obsessive Compulsive Funeral

I bury the bad thoughts  
in my parents' backyard

cover them in pulled  
thistle and old polaroids

and tulip bulbs and wait  
until owl and cricket

and neighbor's cocker spaniel  
calls crowd the dark

garden then I mark  
the grave with the porcelain

doll I thought was a real  
angel when I was small

I light my mother's  
favorite scented candle

and throw two handfuls  
of pistachio shells

into the lavender air  
like some kind of stupid

rain I cross myself  
although I don't believe

in god and I shuffle  
backward from the yard

chanting *no no no no*  
*no* and *please please please*

*please* as if that could keep  
my demons in the ground

## Why I Don't Take Communion

So many times  
I've been told, *you're such  
a pretty girl*, as if

that could open  
some door. What I know  
of men, I learned

from their hands  
and mouths covering me  
in dark rooms,

from discount  
cigar smoke and gas station  
condoms, from the *no*

they won't hear  
when the lights go out.  
At sixteen, I wanted

to be loved so badly,  
I could barely speak  
to the boy with perfect

lips who sat with his mother  
at church every Sunday  
and sang *Gloria*

*Patri* with his eyes  
closed. How many  
selves have I been

since then?  
No god in the body  
left behind.

Boys Will Be Boys,

and boys will be impatient  
to touch you. Boys will corner you

on the playground and lift  
your favorite dress over your head,

eager hands circling your body  
as if you are a fire to warm them.

One boy will tell you  
you remind him of the animals

he's learning to kill. He'll say *you walk  
like a doe about to go*

*down.* He'll make a gun  
of his fingers, point it at your chest,

and pull. The next boy will talk  
of nothing but how perfect

you were when he first saw you,  
how he wishes you would wear

your hair that way again, straight  
and long and gleaming

like the illustrations of saints  
in his prayer book. Another boy

will find you at a party  
years later. He'll bring you

beer after beer, hold you when you sway  
on your feet, take you back

to his dorm, insist that you drink  
a full glass of water before you fall asleep.

And when you wake at 2 AM

to him inside of you, he'll push

you down again gently. He'll say  
*don't worry, I was safe. Go back  
to sleep, you're safe.*

As if My Body Could Protect Him

Christmas day, and my nephew leaps  
around the room singing

*did you know the sun  
is just a star, did you know the moon*

*follows us, did you know  
you can see Mars if you look*

*really hard at night—he is in love  
with the sky*

and what it holds.  
He climbs onto my lap

and leans into me and whispers,  
*I think there could be*

*a hundred suns* and he throws  
his head back and opens

his palms toward the ceiling,  
trying to find them.

Thirteen-year-old Boy Now Only a Body

because the dark  
and terrible night because  
the vehicle's inevitable turning because  
the hard earth  
wanted him cold

because the steel  
frame rained down

on his head in the blackness  
because his body  
was rended just so

because of how sweetly  
the young grass  
held him

because he flew  
and he flew  
and he fell

and the man on the news  
said *killed on impact*

the man on the news  
said *no seatbelt no helmet nothing  
to be done* because

the cattails parted for him  
because the stillness of the air  
before he was thrown through it  
because his hands grew stiff  
in the grass  
in the dirt because  
he saw a door open before him because  
he stepped through it

## What I Didn't Say When You Asked Why I Needed a Bird Tattoo

because without wings my body was incomplete  
because its hollow bones because its feathers  
blue and perfect hide the brilliant veins  
a boy once called *scary ugly* because birds fly  
hundreds of miles south to stay warm  
but I sometimes want to give up  
when there's no coffee in the morning because  
nothing in me is light enough to hover  
above ground because this bird  
means spring and so often I forget about tulips  
because I wanted to know  
my skin could break and still become  
something beautiful because every time I've looked  
out a plane window I've wished I could see  
my own life as small as the bungalows  
and cross streets and soccer fields falling  
away from the glass as I rise  
like a myth into darkening sky

## Poem Without Apology

I am self-indulgent, and yes, I want wine. I want gallons  
of milk carried in on golden pallets and poured  
dramatically over my chest, I want to celebrate the river  
that will trickle out of me tomorrow in unpoetic clumps  
of red like berries unbodied, I want clay to smear  
across my forehead as a sign of my largesse, and yes,  
my beauty, my belly trembling above this salted bath  
like a sleeping cat, my stretch-marked thighs splayed  
open, meandering blue veins at my knees and elbows, the scars  
like strange twigs I etched into my own forearms,  
because yes, I have tried to die, and yes, I wear  
the memory of that self like oil beneath skin, but see  
how I wash myself now in pomegranate and bergamot,  
in francincense and sweet orange, see  
how I raise my water-swollen hand and spread my fingers  
wide like someone might if she was perusing  
apples at the grocery store and glimpsed a friend  
she hadn't seen in years down by the tangerines  
and gestured as if to say *hello*, or like someone  
might if she were readying herself to swim  
to the center of a very deep lake, or like someone alone  
in a tub, attempting again to grasp  
what the body can't hold.

Poem Made of Unsolicited Comments

that flower's nice, but get too many tattoos and you'll look

easy now, I didn't mean to offend, I just meant

those hips could get you killed, sweetheart

and I know you don't trust men, but you

and me should have fucked after that party

when we shared a cigarette, I got a little hard because

you look better from behind, girl, you

could be more beautiful with longer hair

and I know you hate men just because

I can't stop staring at your boobs, but

you shouldn't hate men just because

even if you lock your door tonight, I'm coming in

you shouldn't hate men just because you

look like fresh meat, you look

like something I could sink my teeth into

Elegy with Appalachia and Serrated Edge

I drive through a mountain's belly for the first time  
and forget, for a moment, about daylight  
on the other side, about the closed casket at your funeral,  
my father's voice breaking over the phone  
when he told me, my sister staring at her hands.  
The poem you wrote about the oak in your backyard  
erases itself, the hermit crab you held in your palm  
on a Lake Michigan beach shrinks back  
into its shell. And the story of your father opening  
his door at midnight to a policeman, to the news  
that there was nothing the paramedics could do  
for your body, vanishes in the stone tunnel like a boat  
into horizon. Instead, I see you, years ago, diving  
beneath wave after wave and resurfacing each time,  
raising your arms high above your head and shouting  
*I'm ok.* Your death is a knife I hold close to my chest  
each night and find beside me still every morning, gleaming.