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The poems collected here explore the complex intricacies and intimacies of relationships to their sometimes devastating conclusions.

MAKE A REAL WOMAN OF ME

by

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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Sockeye

Behind the seafood counter
the butcher runs his practiced knife
through scales that slough off
shimmering like prisms into
the garbage can. Precision designs
fillet after fillet, immaculate and
pink. I imagine how he might
make a real woman out of me,
fit the boning knife tenderly above
my ribs and work his way down,
skimming off the fat. Once will not
be enough to render my belly velvet
and glossy as fishflesh, the knife run
parallel to my spine butterflying
neurons away in quiet, clean cuts.

Again and again his knife falls,
reshaping my hips and thighs
until they are worthy of resting
on ice in his display case. He pauses
at my head, gleaming eyes reflecting
the stilled, stuck nature of a soul,
threatening to stare through me
the way the pound of paper-wrapped
salmon watches as the fish-man reaches
over the counter, making quick work of me.

Being the fat girl

in first grade means you are
friends with certain people –
Missy, who speaks in sign
language because her mom is deaf
and won't let her translate,
and Deborah who lives
in the trailer park and wears
the same blue-white floral dress
to school even in ankle-deep
snow. She invites you to
sleep over on Valentine's Day
and gives up her bed for
the floor even though
she sleeps three sisters deep
in a twin bed. You only spend
the night at her house once.
You feel terrible for taking
up so much space.

Redshift

We share the cream
space of the overstuffed
chair, my round hips

ebb into your own,
nothing else between
us but television noise.

In the way you hold
your breath I know
you are already leaving:

the mattress and box spring,
the hutch with its broken
door, homemade switch-

boards of blue and green
guitar pedals packed safely
in the copper bed of your truck

and you are driving,
your arm stretched out
the open window as

you eat up interstate,
feeling the way
air changes as you move south

from one hemisphere
to another. What else
is left but you

watching the way
my hand rests

between my thighs,

and you closing
your eyes, wishing
to be that hand?

Scrabble

Jackman always plays
scrabble with ulterior motives.
He likes to kiss the tiles
together in three-letter powerplays,
every inch is ominous. At this
distance there is no room
to cheat, but he lets me play
learn, as if I will. Jackman,
he chews the end of his cigar far
too thoughtfully, *snare*. He
breathes into my hair and I
remember I've taken off my shoes.
My mind is two-letter nonsense.
Ka earns me nothing but laughter,
I admire that chutzpah, baby,
Jackman has no concern
for subtlety. We are playing
on the same side of the board,
I'm sure that's against the rules.
This is the letter *I* dropped
in the wine glass, Jackman likes to
play *dirty*. College girls should never
leave their coats at the door. I
could tease those seven letters for
the win, but my vocabulary will
not save me now, *no*, he crosses
with his tiles and makes it *mine*.

New Albany, 6th and Spring

On a windy afternoon
I watch a girl
in pink (maybe orange)
from across the street.
Girl, in orange jacket
rides pink bike
in circles around
the parking lot
of the abandoned
Coyle Dodge.
Girl circles around
pulling behind her
a plastic kite that bobs
and swings wildly
on weak string,
then dips and crashes
into the cracked pavement.
Girl circles and circles,
pink bike and kite, then
turns and pedals
down the pavement
in want of hills.

Crawdad

I crept through creekbeds to hunt
you in the shallows, a waiting game
we each played – you,
just another smooth rock, me
a stubbled log, landscape in your
eyes as mine scanned the bottom
for your tell-tale puff, slow
backwards shuffle into the grey.
For minutes I stood, anticipating
your first move while my mother
sat at a picnic table and read
magazines in the muggy
Ohio River Valley summer. Then,
a dart between rocks, my net's
swift dunk, and you were mine,
wrestling my fingers with your claws
to inflict the sharp snap I
tried to avoid – as I do even now
on this city sidewalk, where you
lie like rusting metal in the sun –
no idea how you came to be
on a concrete street so far from
cold, creamy mud. No thought to
what direction points home.

Being the fat girl

in third grade means you
spend your time sucking
in, become the “artistic” kid
with an eye for trapezoid
puzzles. Mrs. Engle lets you
spend every recess inside
coloring mandalas so you
won’t get another kickball
to the face. She makes you go
to lunch, though, where Jacob
leads the table in a point-and-
shoot game of *you’re skinny and
you’re skinny and you’re skinny and*
his finger holds the silence
on you, moves on to Nastasia,
who only eats pistachios
and tapioca, *you’re skinny*.
You stare into your baked
potato, three pats of butter
filched from the cafeteria,
and eat only one.

Songs the Ants Sing

follow the blue track
of my veins
up one arm down the other
straight-file black-beaded tremolos
like lines of lead on my skin
come crease at my collarbone
scattered feet tapping
threading into strands of my hair
living deeper than roots
crawl
down shoulder blades bruises
fresh
and tender-waiting
or find a scar to fill
with trisected bodies
my blood staccato with vibrations
with colonies running on repeat
night and day

who knows what happens if
the queen dies?

Peridot

Mama carries a groan
on her lips deep
as the valley, lets it drop
when she hears the news
from Nosie girl who says
the snakes been coming around
Peridot again and causing
trouble. Mama nods
while she flips flatbread
on the rock with her fingers,
brings them to her
mouth to suck away the
heat, gives me those eyes
that say listen up now,
pay attention – we're planning
funerals for next week, Nosie says,
and can she borrow shoes for
her little boy? She doesn't have
nothing worthy of a viewing
and she get them back before
he goes in the ground. She shoots
some look at me, some pity,
says you learn from me,
girl. Don't you marry
a native man. You lucky
your daddy even had a job
when he was around. You
watch yourself, Mama says.
I know you hurting Nosie, but
you know better than to speak
of the dead. After supper,
Mama stands against the
evening hum, runs
an old pine brush

through her hair, black
and flat and long as night.
She's careful not to let it catch
the dust. She eyes my six months
belly, says, you better watch
you girl, that child will learn to walk
before she can crawl and babies ain't
nothing to play with. Nosie did, I say.
And look where it got her, Mama says.
Her boy was only four, but least
he got out before we did.

In Labumba

bees crowd
the afternoon
heat swift
as a breeze that
might have swallowed
them yet only
slides around
in pockets allergic
to black and
gold alerted
and sweet
as red sugar and children
everywhere
occupying us
not in frenzy
but overwhelming
number

Peace they hum
you aren't
our enemy this isn't
your war
but
the buzzing in
my ears
never ceases

Mary King's Close

I never exhale,
 only draw breath
in on the heels
of mud-soled shoes.
 The cobble's dark
stain my victory –
 I am *home*
 to them,
 culling the clamor
from their old town
to build my spine of rock.
 My tight-pitched walls
knit thick with doorways,
 windows wide enough
 to sling white cloth
from side to side.
I temper their warning,
 whisper *call*
the medicine crow.
 Feel them shrink
into corners at the sight
of his black beak,
 mothers wailing
 when he walks away.
I fill my growing spaces
with their tiny babies,
 swollen cheeks,
 still lungs.
I watch their bodies
roll downhill for decades,
 a loch of bones
 grown heavy.

Being the fat girl

on the volleyball team
means your powerhouse palms
never let the ball meet net,
steel forearms hold the line. It means,
no matter how many balls you set
against the brick of your house,
how many perfect spikes you throw
at practice, your parents come
to every match and watch you
benched, indefinite water girl
in too-tight black spandex shorts.
One day you slam the volleyball up
over the roof of your house
and never go back to get it.

Undertow

Hair long in the hazy summer
before he cut off his ponytail,
My father reads in his beach
chair, skims the page
with one finger like he will try
to teach me when I'm older,
but when I'm older
I have no patience.
I see a six-year-old trip
into the surf, out
of reach of sunscreen,
furiously treading water
like they taught her in swim class.
She doesn't realize her feet
can't touch. I turn towards
the teenage lifeguard flirting with
the lemon quench girls, playing
at untying their bikini strings
with fingers sticky on their tanned
skin. He doesn't see the girl
scream in a tangle of saltwater
and brown hair, how our eyes
lock as I read the panic
in my own face. I want
to let her drown, tell her *this*
will make her stronger.
I pretend I can't hear her shriek,
lost somewhere between the sea
and the sun. My father bolts
from his chair and sprints into the sea,
I feel the bruises on my arms
as he pulls her from the water.
He drags her to shore, choking
and spitting like a caught fish.

I would have swallowed the ocean
to forget the fear on his face.

First Night

If affairs have to happen,
they should not start

like ours: beneath the electric
buzz of the Little Chef
sign, you pull my hand
down your pants
after two whiskeys
too many, murmur
How does this feel?

Not like the movies.
This is the sloppy first
kiss you slide in
the corner of my
mouth as we stumble
back to your door,
tip-toe through
your living room to
the study. This is
my back pressed
into the frayed gray
carpet, stapler biting
my elbow, your
quiet fumbling
trying not to wake
your wife and son
in the next room.
He cries anyway
and you scramble
out, knocking
books on my chest.

I curl my knees
up and run through
the questions
on tomorrow's
French test.
You collapse in
your bedroom, face
down in a pillow
until you forget you
even started this:

In the morning
your wife
gets ready for work,
unaware of me
half-naked, a
wall away. I
listen for the
pour of water,
breathe in with
the steamy hiss
of the coffee maker
and wonder how
she takes it.

After Hours

I grab him by the belt loops,
pull him in between the deep
fryer and convection oven after
hours and drop to my knees, a tight
fit. I haven't finished the dishes and
the air is still bleached with sanitizer;
lazy soap bubbles pop and cling
to our second shift sweat-stained polos.

He yawns in the middle of it –
I try not to take it personally, mask
disappointment by pushing my
hands further into the sagging back
pockets of his jeans, fingering the loose
change left over from his last table –
drunk, giggly messy-bunned blondes
who doodled their names and numbers
onto the bill instead of a tip.

When we finish, he steals
the chapstick from my pocket,
doesn't offer me any. I run my
tongue across the sore roof
of my mouth, go plunge my arms
up to the elbows in dishwater now
flat and shiny with grease. Behind
me, he brushes a halfhearted kiss
into my hair and walks away, the
crumpled dinner receipt in his palm.

Things I Lie About

Having had sex.

Having had great sex.

My ability to give blowjobs

without teeth. That I floss

daily. That my cousin

the dental hygienist looks good

with bleach-blond hair. That

my cousin and her new baby

will share the same hair color, that his

wide goofy smile will be anything

like hers when she was little. That

I need to hold a smaller version of myself,

consider the crinkles in her face and

see that she has my ears. Not that

I want children, but that I

can have them. That my children

should be born blond with

brown eyes. That I know

the color of my eyes. Green.

80 Proof

When he says *baby*
what he means is *bourbon*
on the rocks in the tumbler
without a chipped rim, four
cubes of ice and no questions.
The television, the sunken
red recliner swallow him nightly.
You write letters to your sister
that never get sent and cut
your teeth on empty bourbon
bottles. He eats fat ears of
roasted corn in steaming pools
of butter that dribble down
his chin as you refill glass
after glass with four
ice cubes, pour whiskey
from your mouth into his.
Slowly, your heart curls
into a fist like the one you take
night after night until even
your sister isn't able to find
your face on the street.
Even so, your skin yellows
and heals after each refreshed
drink, each drop of amber
slugged back when he screams
for proof and you have
nothing but an empty gun,
a charred oak chest, matches
that couldn't catch fire.

Kin

They're silver mollies,

Mother says as she sprinkles
the fish food carefully flake by
flake into the glass bowl on the
counter, watching as they break
the surface and send the fish
scattering momentarily –

A pair; one male and one female.

They return warily, investigating
each multicolored piece invading
their tiny world, finding them
acceptable. *I hope they have babies.*

She gives me that look usually
reserved for the nights I claim
to be working late but stumble
home whiskey-drunk from the
Granville, one arm around
a guy in a black band tee and
Celtic tattoos whose name
she never learns because
he's always gone by breakfast.

*You know, mollies eat their
young,* I say watching the pair,
lazy and full, float around in
counterclockwise circles while
reaching for my coffee mug –

I'm sure we would too, Mother says,
if we had that many to deal with.

I'm working late tonight,

I say, skipping the creamer and
taking the coffee straight.

Consent

The moment you pull
my knees apart like oysters
across the cobalt bay
of the love seat, I still
tell myself you must not
have heard me – didn't
sense my sticking, the
change from measured beat
to rapid pulse, how my muscles
clenched at the wrong time.
You must have heard that
gasp sucked sideways
through my teeth, knew
it wasn't for the way
your fingers gripped the back
of my neck. Didn't you
feel me tugging the scarlet
hem of my skirt back
down over and over
again, how long it took
to grasp the rounded
edge of a word, pushing
from the stuck hinge
of my throat *Please, I'm tired* –
words, briny and raw,
you pried from my
tongue and swallowed.

In the Clutter Room

for Ian

We linger between book-
shelves tired and worn
with word, your back
on the hardwood floor,
eyes on my breasts
beneath a t-shirt.
You don't notice
the inkstain on
my thigh, bled
through jean pockets
like proof of poetry.
I hold my breath
in smaller spaces as
your fingers tighten
around my hips –
from up here I feel
too large to handle.
The cracks in ceiling
paint match the cracks
in my fingers, even
the bones of your feet
that pop
when you leave the room.
I hear you moving distinctly.
I think I'm getting farther
from the ideals that
abbreviate me.

Being the fat girl

in junior high means you play
football in the corner lot with the
cul-de-sac boys after school,
a sport where padding is encouraged.
You are a cement block
of a linebacker, nothing gets
past you until the day the boys
realize what you have *up top*
isn't just padding. Daniel goes
out of his way to tackle you,
and you don't mind. You
invite Missy (who now spells
her name with an *i-e*) over
to watch the game, catch
her making out with Daniel
in your backyard during half time.
The next morning you wait
at his locker before school,
hand him the note you wrote
in silver-green gel pen, stare
at his tennis shoes while
he snickers and walks away.

Funeral Parlor as Prom Night

for Aunt Kathy

She was already still
by the time I arrived,
her thin frame grey against
the headboard's warm oak.
I stood at the end
of the bed and slipped
my hands beneath
the maroon comforter
to rub her feet the way
she used to rub mine.
Who knew there would be
so little difference between
that bed and a box, or my
long black skirt and the short
violet one of a girl in crystal-
drop earrings and blonde up-do
who turned out to hold her
son's hand in the front row,
the soft chords of Amazing Grace
as good as any for that first dance.

Nelda Says She Met Frankie at a Murder Trial

I can't remember his first name, but his last name was Brotherton. That was probably the only murder in Boyer County that year – you wanted to go to that. That, was *entertainment*. And that's where I saw Frankie for the first time. His cousin introduced us, and even at 14 I thought he was *so handsome*.

Anyway, I had a whole long day of looking at him, but he was watching the trial. Who was this guy who was more interested in a trial than in me? Later that day he did ask me on a date, but I already one and I thought, *how was I gonna get out of this?* I wasn't the kind of girl to have two guys on a string. So I broke the date with Forrest and went with Frankie.

He wasn't Frankie when I met him, though. His whole life he was Franklin, but I thought that was so stuffy, *no way I was gonna date a Franklin*, so I called him Frankie. When we first started going together, nobody knew who I was talking about when I said Frankie.

Anyway, can you imagine, your Grandpa's name could have been Forrest instead of Frankie? Me neither.

Being the fat girl

at summer camp means always sleeping
on the bottom bunk. You spend a week deep
in the Appalachians hiking, spelunking, scraping
mud instead of bathing suit off your body. It's easy
to drink Jones Sodas on the swings
with Ashley, her face so much worse
than yours that she swallows pills
the size of bumblebees. She teaches you
Jacob's Ladder from across the bonfire,
whispers all the worst words she knows
and lets them go up in smoke. How easy it becomes
to roll them off your tongue towards the ceiling
after lights out, even easier to follow her sneaking in
to the next-door cabin, pull the blue sleeping
bag out of its bunk to drag across the floor
through the open door, leave the quiet girl
on the porch with her glasses in the gravel.

Firstborn

I.

I stab the cedar cane
into packed earth still
stiff after the thaw, listen
as mother leans against
the acacia and pulls the garden
from her memory – juniper,
viridian, verde, something
she named jade. *Some days,
the light was amber, or
was it citrine?* My hands
soil-deep, she tilts her
head back and clicks
her tongue – *round rubies
we ate in afternoons
by the bushful, all sticky
and tart. Your father
called them currants.*
The hole widens into rows.
With dirtied nails I place
the last of the roots
from the failed almond
trees – *Cain, can you imagine
the groves upon groves
of olives, figs, water
so wet, cerulean then
clear cupped in your palm?*

Seed after seed spills
from her mouth. I want
to gather each of her words
and plant a new garden

scarlet with pomegranates,
even the seeds sweet enough to eat.

II.

I stand above you,
blood dripping
from stone. Sharpness
sours the wet morning
air, swollen as an overripe
date. I hear cracked breath
in the slow rise and fall
of your chest as I have
every night since
we were born.

A muddy red jupiter
blooms from the back
of your head, black
hair matted like a calf
after slaughter. My pulse
unwinds into my chest,
wedging hard knots
of heat between my ribs,
each beat a question:

Abel? Abel?

Slick and heavy, the weight
of the stone thuds
to the grass. His chest falls
again and doesn't rise,
eyes fixed clear on the blue
sky. The herd stirs,
looking for their shepherd.

Accident Report

My mother says, *Write about this*: The day I call you frantic from putting a scratch on the new car. And what will I tell your father? One full week I didn't see that smeared up the side of the bumper, and with my luck it'll be the first thing he sees when he opens the garage. How do I even try to fix this? But then (if this were a sitcom, you'd play the laugh track), the big reveal – all that fuss and it wasn't even me who scratched the car, It was him! That's the relief, the roll credits, the preview for next week: When I call again, losing it over that ding in the driver's side door handle, put together the pieces for me because I can't remember. And that's what terrifies me.

Being the fat girl

in high school means you are
a bitch with a violin bow.
You and Missie dress in darker
colors, but she's more goth
than you. She holds a séance with
the theater kids, you run through
your scales in a practice room.
You graduate concertmaster, lead
a fifty-string section to state victory,
yet when the award comes, Tori,
the bass player with slim fingers
is asked to accept, as if all
the black fabric in the world
would never cut you
down to acceptable size.
You smile but don't
show your teeth.

Atlas

Your bed is too small for us both.
I could move and we'd crack
like whalers breaking against
the surge of the Bering Sea
in the storm

 where we first met,
clouds plum and sea green,
furious that we found each
other. We might have met
anywhere –

 I saw you
in Montevideo selling leather
vests with your father from
the feria, but couldn't speak
over the snarl of the city.
You say now, I am
not

 so quiet, not the speechless
thing you startled me into
on the steps of Charing Cross,
when you reached for my hand
and I was already

 gone. You could
have chased me but you made
your way to Morocco, sat down
at a café and ordered two cups
of peppermint tea, as if
I might appear.

 We could have
met anywhere. When I was twelve,
was it you who sat two rows behind
me in a cinema in Baltimore
as clandestine strangers
fell in love on-screen?

Or, was it
your blue shirt I spotted across
the aisle on the bus to Jakarta,
shoulders so similar to the ones
I trace now – though I will
never be sure

when you are
real, and when what I know
changes with each breath
that escapes my lungs,
I am sure that we have met,
if only for one moment in a dark
apartment bedroom in Seoul.

In the Walls

The squirrels have been
at it again furried
hoarders dropping
acorns walnuts
hickories on their
scramblings from roof
to crawlspace to
roof again scritch
scratching up the ridge
of my spine to nestle
in the insulation of
my brain pulling together
myelinated axons
like dry branches
against a winter storm
burrowing through
my ear to the drum
peeking out from behind
my optic nerve from
that hole in the floor –

At night I can feel
the walls breathing

Being the fat girl

means, inevitably, you will date
a skinny boy who wears skinny
jeans and leather cuffs.

He is easy to buy
for but not to share with,
you will never ask him
for his jacket on a cold night.

He helps you make excuses
for late night drive-thru
runs, doesn't understand how
you can only eat one Oreo.

He never says anything
about the way you flinch
when his arm drapes across
your waist at night. Eventually,
you learn how to lean
in, where you fit together.

How to stretch and
fill the empty place
once he's gone.

Reliance

I wait for blood
every night, proof
of mechanical failure:

Dull, at first, the
gears just warming
up against each other,

learning how to turn
again, how best to fit
together in the grooves
of my body. In rhythm

they send out sparks
that can't catch,
the ache a building
brushfire needing
to be cleared. Still,

this could be home
to someone, soft
nest a hare could
burrow deep within.

But not for you –
the attachment fails,
our edges all off.

Again I read the letter
you've left countless times,
roll your vowels
across my tongue
as if they could ever
be easier to swallow:

The *you* that will not be
in my body. The *I*
I will not be in yours.

Thirty thousand cells an hour –

This is how many times you've left
my body, died and peeled
away since your last finger-
prints traced lines between
my shoulder blades. That last
night I lay flat on the cotton sheets
while you built constellations
from freckles, made each birth-
mark a whirling galaxy.
The splotches have stayed,
sun-marks my shoulders earned
the summer we spent canoeing
Elkhorn Creek, scanning the water's
surface for the long V of a turtle
coming up for air, a striped bass
holding its breath. Past the float,
you'd rest your paddle in the shadow
of the abandoned railroad bridge,
pull a cold can of gingerale
from the cooler, hold it
to the back of my neck
to watch me jump. Later, at
the bend of limestone cliffs
you traced the lifelines in our
palms, stretched out my fingers
so that light glimmered between
them like ripples of water on
your skin, this skin, skin I
should have shed by now.