

ROGERS, STEPHANIE M., M.F.A. *Beautiful Ways to Die*. (2007)
Directed by Prof. Stuart Dischell. 34 pp.

The following is a collection of poems which explores conflict in relationships, including the speaker's past and present relationships with men, family, friends, and her evolving selves. These poems were composed over a two year course of study in the Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

BEAUTIFUL WAYS TO DIE

by
Stephanie M. Rogers

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2007

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Symphony for Red.....	1
Half Perfume, Half Something Rotten.....	2
Dear Sophia.....	3
Sestina for my Year in the Bootleg Porn Industry.....	4
The Incident When I Screw Your Best Friend then Dump You: The Eighties Version....	6
The Night You Left.....	8
Meditation on Naming Goodbye	9
The Deliberate Drunk	11
Operations on my Other, Lesser Self.....	12
Beating the Shit out of my Despair.....	14
On the Occasion of Her Annual Disappointment	15
Lament for the Almost Forgotten	16
Serving Ice Cream to Joaquin Phoenix.....	17
What Flutters in the Cardiac Notch	19
The Incident When My Dog Dies and/or You Leave Me.....	20
Another Way the Body Dies.....	21
Since Your Disappearance.....	22
False-Positive.....	23
Bad Date	24
Aubade	25

Untitled	26
Queen of Sorts	27
How the Night Comes.....	28
The Incident When I Encode a Poem for the Ex Who Thinks He’s a Genius.....	29
Testimony	31
Past Life	32
A Musician Instructs a Poet on How to Play the Oboe	33
Syringa	34

Symphony for Red

All the red has been used up and buttoned
across the backs of butterflies and crowned
upon the new-hatched cardinal's head, the red
unfurling feathers streaked with heat as bright
as August sun and dark as cherry stems.
I've touched the broken checkmarks, zigged and zagged
inside a tired eyeball—ant farms—red
and mean as fire, pulsing up like armies
digging from a poison-threatened pupil,
the iris, optic nerve, and redder still
the broken vessels near the nose's bridge.
They curl like forgotten threads dropped to the floor,
a sewing kit gone mad with bleeding spools.
Even the scattered sky flags down the day
with a red-tinged hat removed and flicked, a signal,
a shake of crimson here and there and *there*,
beside the wide-mouthed cat greeting the dawn.
But gone, an hour later. Instead—a blind-
slat scar of yellow sunlight peeking through.
And gone—the vacuumed threads, the cardinal
who unpacked the earth, its morning search for life—
a slithering meal. Like that. Just gone, a dash
of rose across a cheek, a faded smack,
the starry flint of a cigarette alive
on a lawn and left to scorch inside a hiss
of rain. Then back again—so soon—as rain
begins the deeper stain of petals, bricks,
illuminates the stoplights, stop signs, red
against the paint-chipped red that still, that *still*
exists even in dark. And then, a spark
of light, the clouds gathered like a thumping heart,
a spilling bowl of strawberries, then gone—
Like that—erotic sky turned gray and calm,
a vanished anger, quick to blur, dismissed
and absent still: your skin, your hands, your lips,
all gone—and weren't *they* red?

Half Perfume, Half Something Rotten

I should've stolen what you cultivated
before frailty sprouted from the seedling.
The crops you planted in my teeth,
I should've eaten them. Instead,
my gums bled weeds like a burial ground.
My lips turned to buds. You hosed them.
I partway left, and the cat missed me,
the rug curled up at the edges. Now here
in the home I've grown inside your chin,
I sleep. Where else was I to live, corn-
toothed, a pistil for a tongue? I rather like
having taken root in a face—the congregations
of cells slough off. I cling. Most of all,
I want you to feel what it's like to be pricked
as my new thorn skates your skin, hoeing
the follicles. Would you believe what I found
there—all your past loves, shied-up, crouching
down when I dig? And some music
pulsing slyly in the background. They shimmied
their petals like dresses when I came, thinking
I was you. Inmates, they call us. But I enter
pores now. I breathe. Yes, before, there
were days when I traveled from bed unhinged
to the ground, walked the sidewalk alone,
observed the gardens. So what does it mean
to have chosen captivity? Now for us,
there is no last touch. Sometimes I kiss
tree branches, and the flowers bow.

Dear Sophia

Today, I woke thinking my cat had died, balled up near the heating vent, but it was a plastic bag of random trash, a crumpled reminder, bathing in the sun. I thought I'd feel relief. I miss last year, my stagger from a Cincinnati bar, you laughing at me then yelling *Steph, get up*. Sorry for buying the ornaments while drunk, crying, the bar lit with a Christmas tree and names of all those AIDS victims written across the paper decorations. Remember I misspelled my uncle's name. Did I tell you the dream I had about our subway rats? They found a way out of the underground alone. None of this makes sense. Dear Sophia, I wake needing to tear my skin, to take it all apart, to get it right. This time I won't become surreal although the moon's still evidence of some god's fingerprint. The tree outside keeps dancing with a face intact. It's yours or mine that dangles from the highest branch like winter apples, pale, no longer poisonous, not cold, not wanting what's never close enough to have. Tonight it's Christmas. In Carolina, frozen ground, no snow. I hear it's white all over Ohio, gathering a reflection. Of what? Listen. I'm not drinking alone. There isn't a bell slicing through your quiet dreams. I'm not reliving, no longer naming everything a regret, a eulogy. What I can't help I'm trying to rebel against. I'm trying to undo the botched up circumcision of the senses. Remember New York City, how we fell, hitting our heads against a pole in the subway car, those rats answering by hiding, like us, in dark? We'd gotten good at blaming, at kissing one man to wipe away another. Are you okay? I'd like a word, a lie. Say *home*. Tell me the weather's fine.

Sestina for my Year in the Bootleg Porn Industry

All that's known of me is I'm some trouble,
a coughing housecat, and once recycled rain
pecking the bureau. So, watch out someone,
there's my new porno in the vcr, not wrong,
not right, but there. Some say you're a creep
for watching, Daniel, that ridiculous scene

where all the roads lead to that obscene
farmer, hacking on his death bed, trouble
with his greasy heart. Who wouldn't creep
away, clattering, while I pulled the reins
attached to a white trash neck? Wrongly,
I pushed a sex ring, though it was someone

else and his idea. See, he wanted some. One
time for fun I burned Joe's belt and he'd seen
it all and made me brand the hard, wrong
side of the buckle someplace nasty. Trouble
with that boy. He rained like me, rained
like a waterfall with a clown face, a creepy

sudsing eye. Big world to love in, a crepe,
fruit-filled, impossible not to miss someone
with this least suffering. Once I let one reign
long. His name was Leaf, a mostly unseen
pot-smoking someplace, and all that rubble
piling up, up. Sister, everything was wrong

then, three-legged and missing teeth, wrong
like me posing on the nude piano in crape,
too, and how I wore a railroad track, troubled
the photographer for mascara and someone
unshaven in a cop disguise. In that scene
Frank pulled me from my drowning, drained

the bathtub before the hair clog won. Rain
now, and I still haven't made up the wrong
face for the moon, my best blush, ashen
eyes. Matthew, if this is love, I'm a creeper,
a candy bar on summer pavement, some un-
discovered beauty, dead. That's the trouble

with the underground porn scene, all that rain
transplanted, and the trouble with the wrong
men, a sum: one wide smile creeping a spoon.

The Incident When I Screw Your Best Friend then Dump You: The Eighties Version

My sister says, Don't be mean to people who don't understand you yet. That's logical advice and good and no, I'm not paying for the new bedspread, even if it means losing. Principles. Wasn't we good once?

Wasn't we committed? Were. Were not. Listen, about last night, I curled up with a new man, distant. Reasons, love: the body, the body and his mean, sexy keytar solo. A keytar strapped across the chest

lost you my love. My love? I fall for such insignificant wholes. Back to the beginning: Yes, the stars got fancy, and I'm a little untrusting of such flashy skin, meaning yours, meaning mine, his, meaning let's take

a moment to review step ten: I have continued to take personal inventory and when I am/was/were wrong, promptly admitted it. Damn skippy baby. I said I'm sorry but I meant tie me up, I've been a bad girl. Even

the band-mates know, with their snare drum and their amphetamines. Mullets? Let's dance. You make me feel like the tenor saxophone, all copper-colored, chipped, some regretful wail. Big deal I seduced

a new man. I was drunk, panic-stricken, the stars winking, the stars throwing up all over town, you in the role of you-as-accomplice. Wasn't you a whisper? Wasn't you vanished, little wallflower, up the drummer's

skirt? Were too. You so were too. A mystery we woke in bed together, the smell of sulfur, black holes burnt into the bedspread, the bedspread still warm, the bedspread spread all over our bankrupt bodies. Still,

I could try to be good from now on, a playground in my mouth, a train wreck in my hair. Weren't that something I spoke to you in a dream? Was. Was not. Starting over: Dear Vulnerable,

I'm sorry I fucked your best friend on top of his keytar, with you as supporting actor, you as boom mic operator, you as Mr. Miyagi, foreign and monosyllabic, asexual, pruning a bonsai tree for seven hours

straight. Then karate, then the severe ass-kicking. It is/was/were also, all so ridiculous. Do you wish to squish me just like grape? Please yes, tie me up and squish me, love, I've been a bad girl. Even so. You don't

understand me, and yet I'm mean. I'm sorry. For instance. Last night
your best friend taught me a diminished chord progression in the keys of B
and C. And other things. Oh shush. All along I'd meant to show you

something that began with losing: my body off-limits, my body passed
around, my body burnt to asphalt under the wretched trees. What a beauty
I once was in their light, before I learned to slink through alleys,

truck stops, the backwoods of your hometown. Wasn't we committed?
Wasn't we in love—the drummer's skirt at the foot of the bed, your best
friend's strap-on belly-synth glaring expensively on the clothes line?

Love, love. You don't think we're sorry. Let's sleep awhile longer
under our last brief sky, the sun floating like a charm against a white
neck, all the fighting, sex-starved clouds, such territorial bodies.

The Night You Left

I found a tambourine buried in the yard,
but when I banged it against my thigh
the cymbals wouldn't crash. Instead
the grass that had been sleeping
on the sidelines, switch-blade edges
glowing silver in the light, woke
and waved their pleated torsos. I waited,
imagining the sound humans make in words
until the grass squawked fat eighth notes
from their rooted stomachs, trumpets
on the lips of the wind-whistled blades.
I tell you until then I knew nothing
of nature's dedication to speech. Yet
as they played I had to pay attention—
you should've seen it—as green ground
turned to fingers, hair, something human
out there, and then my hands cracked open
like a sidewalk, the earth shook, dirt caked
the new rivers in my skin. I lost my body.
My bones stood fleshless like a room
absent of art. And when I tried to cry out
for you, the neighborhood dogs howled,
pawed the spots they last buried bones.
Do you know what they uncovered?—
rusted tambourines shaking in the ground.
They didn't sound like I thought they would:
loose change jangled, hammered glass—
no. They sounded human, like laughter,
a couple jogging through a percussive rain,
and as I listened they grew louder, thousands
of cymbals echoing one voice, words
never meant, words lost inside the brief
shatter of skin at first touch, dropped
nails from twenty stories up, my fists
once unleashed across the highest pitched
piano keys, the pounding of one
wrecked body against another.

Meditation on Naming Goodbye

The first step: Picture
heaps of grass.
on the sky's face.
waving with the birds.
the field: scarecrow
across the grass waves.
the distance, dancing
key clouds. The birds:
and sharps shouldering
in the field: a figure.
out the skyline. Stop.
setting: a purple
a crow's nest, hidden
in the eyes. The pulsing
The battered body
belly. The figure, now
mouth. Try again.
skidded across
The yellowing sky.
the figure—oh, you. Yes,
a field. Panting
Clouds: Thumb prints
A figure in the field,
No, not the figure,
skin. Straw stretched
Birds bleeding into
with the white piano
the black flats
the clouds. Coughed-up
Hand half-in, half-
Picture the sun
sweater. The clouds:
house, the white
pupil birds.
sky. Its unraveling
with a finger in the moon's
Field: a grass stain
a child's elbow.
Everything yawning. And
you were there

with my earlier life,
reaching up

one cold hand
the sun's shirt.

The Deliberate Drunk

We don't know what we're doing. Broken beer bottles lie in the parking lot, like this, like night, a swapping of pavement and sky, or, an ocean let's say. No, let's not say anything more, I say to this boy, so gone now, drunk or scared. I'm not sure those aren't cracked-off pieces

of body glinting back, not stars, ocean, not sky, barely pavement, a little more like skin. Be careful, I say to myself, not out loud because he's not listening now, his hands deep in my blue jean pockets, his tongue breaking a current of words inside my mouth. Stop, I say,

to my fingers as they glide somewhere underneath. I will be wholly, I say to no one, undone by this, yes this, I say, this beginning of the bruise, fine art of the kiss. And yet I want to be touched like this, lips shattering language against lips, though not this gone, his thoughts maybe

about the last girl, my face not her face, my hair not her sandy blonde, not her shoulders, hands, hips, and yet he isn't quite lost, is he? Didn't he pause there, caught in that brief sigh, and look? See, the stars still shake light across his face and no and yes, he isn't all the way gone,

not yet. I can see behind the thick lens of his glasses a flicker there, maybe not a flicker but rather a drowning, the way a hand jumps at night from cold blue water and waves, poking from the moon's splintered light. He must know my mouth is my mouth, this: my skin, this:

my delicate just-kissed chin and yes! Do you see? There, that hand pushing from the clotted dark water—a quick flash—but: the body, buried inside the surf, the body, frantic, tugging against another set of hands, soft but insistent—that's how an ocean catches the unsuspecting—

it reaches up from its grand, bottomless tunnel and finds a swimmer lurking, lost, possibly forgotten, and it reaches, comes closer, stroking, at first, the mysterious flopping legs of the not yet, the still not dead, and whispers *this is what it feels like, in the beginning, to be touched.*

Operations on my Other, Lesser Self

Hello in there, ruined and inappropriate heart,
I've come bearing a toothbrush and a reason
not to return the surgical scissors, the joint, art
books, the spit-shined shoes, aim, everything.

I've come bearing a tooth, a brush and a reason
for cradling your bird-egg cheek, for shredding
books, the spit, shined shoes, aim, everything
with a god, or fingertips. When the sun's red,

cradling a bird egg against her cheek, shredding
the day, I walk the hilltop with a stethoscope
and God. My fingertips listen to your sun-red
face like ten cast off bones digging a scalpel

into the day. I walk the hilltop as a stethoscope
aiming to hear everything caged, everything's
tin face, bones cast off by my digging scalpel.
Hello, I said, I never wanted this endlessness,

aiming to hear everything. Caged, everything's
lonely, baring teeth, and like you, repeating
a hello I said I never wanted. That endlessness
thuds like a dirty shovel on a coffin, remember?

I'm lonely, baring teeth, and like you, repeating
my mistakes, undercover, so only the eager hear
the shoveled dirt thudding the coffin. Remember
I brought a reason to find you, brushes to clean

you, to uncover you here in my eager mistakes.
I'm haunted by what nests in you, what hole
I brought, brushing to find you a clean reason
to love. In the beginning, I saw, aimed to steal

what nests, what hole I'm haunted by. In you,
the stitches rip too often, fall out, don't take
to love in the beginning. I saw, aimed to steal
another. Who are we? Cut up inside again,

the stitches rip too often, fall out, or don't take
to surgery, the scissors I return for our joint art.
Who are we to cut up, our own insides again
ruined and inappropriate? Heart, hello in there?

Beating the Shit out of my Despair

Look, it's not necessarily my fault you stopped taking your meds, bitch. And then I punched her in the womb. Whiskey. To think I used to call her the Kamikaze

Kisser. On the night in question I swallowed her tongue stud. The x-ray showed, days later, the piercing had left the building. Until then, her body had not yet

occurred to me, though she rolled down a hill once on a suicide mission. Bees. Over the course of the night in question: gestures. What they meant was

if we don't particularly like each other, let's not particularly pretend. That shouldn't have been so hard to say. If there was a moon, it dripped its conjured face

onto the landscape. And lo! it did cast a heavy glow upon the bubs! I mean bulbs. In the shadow her hands looked like an octopus. I was freezing my ass off.

The night in question had me saddled, throwing all that stupid silence on the fire, but screaming *don't cross the line, seismic longing, wearing that face.* She told me

I should be more careful who I align myself with, and she said it right into the proverbial microphone. Her voice sounded like that one time, testing the reverb.

She made so much sense I wore my hair down, like a real girl. I told her *there are differences between us, Perky. You're admittedly quite the kill-joy sprung*

from some unrequited heat. She answered how the liars answer, hocking her grandmother's diamond with one hand, writing everything down with the other.

On the Occasion of Her Annual Disappointment

I woke in the night and begonias flew from my mouth.
Happy Birthday: this could be a long one. You can imagine

the lump, fist-sized, throbbing in the throat from those
unraveling bulbs. Then, the girl who looks like me, talks

like me, lives straight and thoroughly out of laundry baskets
like me, she almost wept. Well, actually. I woke weird,

hand fat with sleep. The girl in my mirror shook, curled up
at the bottom, scratched the glass so hard a fingernail flew.

When I opened my mouth to calm her, *there there*,
the flowers gathered like ulcers, shot up from my stomach,

the long stem of the esophagus, then bloomed angrily
at the voice box. Begonias. And the girl who appears

in my mirror every birthday to carve her little celebration—
another year down and we're still here—screamed, delighted.

Okay, truthfully. I woke bleeding at the mouth, grinding
teeth. My tongue: stabbed by an incisor. Droplets bloomed

on the lower lip like the residue of wine. Sometimes,
I pour a bottle for the girl in me, when it's her birthday,

and no one has given her flowers.

Lament for the Almost Forgotten

I climb out my window and perch on the roof's edge,
inhale the dancing ghosts borne from the dead
grill-fires. It's not raining yet. My hands steady
the weight of my body on sun-baked shingles, cooler

since the clouds have grown together. I'd like to know
what that bird sees peering down from the branch,
and where I fit in her portrait: leaning back, slanted
roof tilting me forward, can she see what I see—

the smaller world of insects as they flit, dig, carry,
clutch, leave behind what they know they must
come back for in order to survive? Darkness hovers.
There is someone I miss terribly tonight.

Serving Ice Cream to Joaquin Phoenix

I expected to make a cone
with something flavored cherry.
Instead, he ordered chocolate in a cup.
I said, "Joaquin, I think
you'd really like the Cherry Cordial," and his lips
formed a tender smirk, baiting me.

"Here's a cup of Cherry Cordial, on me,"
I said. His eyes turned cone-
colored and smoky. I stared at the lip-
stick mark on his shirt collar, a cherry
print puckering, a blood stain. "I think
I asked for chocolate," he said, "in a cup

if you don't mind." I reached out to cup
his stubble chin, but he stopped me,
held my hand. I couldn't think.
An ice cream crystal shivered down a cone.
A cherry fell. Why'd I offer Cherry
Cordial anyway—his mouth curling, lips

chewed up and tired? It must've been his lips,
pink and ice cream tinted, and the couple
just behind us, kissing, sharing cherries.
I said, "Sorry Joaquin. Leave it to me
to screw up a simple ice cream cone."
"A cup," he said, "No cone." I thought, "I think

he thinks me weird." I tried, "I think
I liked you best in *Quills*," then licked the lip
scar just below his nostril. A cone
crumbled down my hand. He handed me a cup.
Nothing moved. "Look at me,"
I said, as I moved from Cherry

Cordial to the chocolate bin. "I'm cherry
flavored and lovely, don't you think?"
He said, "Believe me. Believe me,"
although I don't know what it meant. Lips
tell lies and tongues curl up to cup
another's tongue. I scooped a chocolate cone.

"On me," I said, then topped it with a cherry.
Down the cone it fell; I think he smiled when he left—
his lips curled over the cup he stole—I couldn't tell.

What Flutters in the Cardiac Notch

Something buzz-worthy caught my body and gurgled heavy, the heart like a drum, tripped over, broken, crazed, trembling. Swift through the eyes, it circled then tore the dark, where, who was listening: you, lucky and undiscovered. Wasn't it you who forced the damaged sinew to break when I ripped my blue slow-bitten tongue? (I grew bored with speaking, fast regretted what I'd said.) *Listen*, you say, *these walls: too red, these rooms: so shaggy I cough on the dust, my wings in the boned cage: porous, sky-rocketing on every rumor—enough.* What matters: what burns, the new secret, a murmur, or the louder sound we're missing droning, hear?

The Incident When My Dog Dies and/or You Leave Me

I'm not unaware my dog's tail has stopped wagging,
that soon I will never see you again. Since I can't
hear what you most want to say, then tell me
with my talent what I can get away with.
You're admittedly an instant belly-dancer
for anyone with a pretty brain. So save me.
At least meet me at the Slaughtered Lamb Pub,
so we can talk about the ceiling's splotched face
or the infinite monkey theorem, or how it only
makes sense your favorite color is olive-drab.
At some point in the night you'll turn on me,
but now I've got a voice and a winning dart team
named, "Tell Me I'm Lovely." Your fat black cat
loves me too, which means I'm generally packing
in a way most others aren't packing—cats know.
When I sleep I dream I'm at the Kettle of Fish
drinking and smoking so many menthols my tongue
tears into a doily, and for three whole minutes
I become a girl you think could save you. Even
your fat black cat came over to meow.

Let me show you something I once wrote for you:
*I've slept alone I mean I've swept a lone cello
with a handkerchief to hear the timbre closest to
your voice. Now, you should notice the unoccupied
state of my hands, how my eyes scrape the floor
the minute you flaunt me a shoestring.* I'm bored
with that talk too, which is why I won't write
about the moon's whole gothic thing or how
the sun thinks she's too hot to touch. I want
that cello's moan, my dog back or you,
and a neighbor's house. Let's live there, planting
daffodils. I've never touched a flower in my life,
give or take a body part or two. If I weren't this
confusing to others, you wouldn't sound so easy-
going next to me. If we weren't this close to the eve
of a burial, I might not worry that I can't hear
what you most want to say, though that whisper
in your throat just demolished a firefly.

Another Way the Body Dies

Part of me thinks I shot someone a few weeks ago, but who knows if I know the difference between a gun fired and a plucked weed. Eventually everything I touch sprouts a gray vine and dies. My eyes always find what's rotting around the room, but I don't say a word. Now I listen while rain drums fuck you fuck you and you.

All month it's been like this, the same lull and me in bed outlining the tears on the wall where paint dripped dry. I used to have a face made of glass and all my friends looked away, afraid to ask for what they wanted. The days dissolved like a wet pill back then. Back then I slept with a bullet under my tongue.

Since Your Disappearance

The old dog hiccups all day at the foot of the bed.

Outside the sky airs its skeletons.

No one can see a thing.

The sidewalks refuse to take their daily beatings without complaint.

A daddy-long-leg left its old home for a new one in the cup of my bra.

My reflection now pretends she doesn't know me.

Yesterday I found her body buried in the dirt.

One eye wide open, the other half-winking in the mud.

False-Positive

Before then, I knew my body only
as skin touched by lovers, often strangers.

I never wanted them, though I wanted
their hands' invasion, before I felt them
as infection, a danger no one wanted near.

Everywhere the dark talked
as if I had a heart that grew a whole face
and wept, while the rest of me scattered,
afraid to possess a body.

All I wanted was a mind
to lay its unfamiliar voices down.

I wanted the blue, drowned color of my veins
turned back to sky, no fear recalled again
in my mother's voice when she asked,

What does this mean? over and over
until everything meant nothing:
my sister's confusion when I wouldn't dress

the cut on her back, the way my eyes turned cold
to her healthy blood. Until I remembered
my uncle, dead from this.

How our family burned his mattress
to kill the illness, erasing the months
he slept there refusing his medicine.

That stupid grin when I walked into the room,
hey you, his face pained, new sores exposed
where no one touched him.

Bad Date

The table's got the flowers, and you've got nothing.

Let us improvise.

Tell me the nicknames you've given the lampshades.

I call mine cirrostratus prisms.

I'm that kind of girl.

My eyes are empty soup bowls reflecting the daisies.

Yours reflect the couple making out by the bathroom.

Do not say again, You're a very nice woman.

If you watch, I'll lick the condensation off the vodka shot.

I'll change into a red skirt that ends above the scar.

Aubade

I don't move like a woman
wearing lingerie under a trench coat.

I crawl from bed, follow
the stripped clothes back to before
that moment my mouth tasted
the lone ice cube in an empty drink.

Untitled

During my nightmares when I dug up the garden, when my hands groped roots,
the tangled vines—I was looking for you—clutching my bony wrist,
all that time I never thought to check the backyard tree, the one lightning struck
when you were a boy, sending you back for three nights to your mother's bed.

And there she kept you, hand at your forehead, fingering the brown strands
of her proudest work, while you collapsed against that soft body
you writhed from once, back when you were still learning to escape, before
you got hold of the television, the books, then later the key to the liquor cabinet

where your parents hid the prescription pills you'd steal for me.
Then that tree again. Night. And rain, of course, and waiting with roots
wrapped around me for you to climb down. But I got bored with waiting,
and scaled the tree, my arms muscled in the storm-light, my legs flexing

to each syllable of your repeated name, apples thudding the ground as I climbed
higher to reach you, my toes scraping, fingers digging deep in the tree bark—
don't you see I wanted to hold on?—and I saw you there, rain-soaked
in your childhood pajamas, dirt dripping from your chin, shy boy.

Queen of Sorts

We slept in the woods perhaps.

 I remember wind, remember,
of course, light and the absence
 of light, bark stripped, baring
a raw room to hide in.

 We probably weren't insects,
though what sang in the trees
 loved me so much I went whole
days unclothed, eating leaves.

 We might've lived inside
more than out, in a house,
 with a kitchen, where you baked
bread, or tried, and burned it.

 We often left for dinner.

I've always been fond

 of a throne to rest, so for awhile
I must've been royal. If only
 you had breathed then, not
held so still I had to hack a way
 around you. Even now, I haven't
yet wiped the blood from
 the sword. I use it, cultivating
our peach tree. I wish it had
 nothing to do with you, your nights
spent digging the hole that finally
 led you elsewhere.

How the Night Comes

I walk past bars uncrowding to calm streets,
talk with a man who's given up alcohol

but begs for a cigarette. For a moment
I know him enough to dig deep for the pack,

press the butt to his crusted lips and light it.
When he winks, I take the crosswalk,

and in the distance, a drunk boy screams,
I loved you, you fucking bitch. I loved you.

The Incident When I Encode a Poem for the Ex Who Thinks He's a Genius

I never wanted to be a girl who locked herself in
with no where to go but there. I look too much,
so much it doesn't matter that in a minor key

everything rains harder. That's not me poking fun
at you. I like male flautists. I like wind that screams
in octaves, so blow me a kiss one last time for good

this time. Your tongue moves like a storm cloud,
you wish, and lingers cold in the groove of my cheek-
bone. I look at you staring at a reflection that hasn't

occurred yet, so desperate to commit to anything.
Did I just say that? What I mean is I can't help
but see the unfortunate importance in assuming

your bones could feel. In general. Get your mind
out of the gutter. Repeat after me: everything
I touch in bed I fail to shake like a percussion section.

Good luck happens when the shadows don't wheeze
all night, when hands look like tombstones under-
stood in bathwater. If I could I'd be facts to no one.

A sentence fragment. A bath would be my toes
poking the ocean. I truly fucking hate you. All
this time you thought I was easy, but power lies

in getting you to think it. What I mean is, my gun
is a plastic bastard disguised as a communication
device. I have a feeling I might turn living. Stop

laughing, a girl died today you know, or a girl
you know died today. Which is it? A hint: nothing
adds up the way you hope it should. I've finally

stopped wondering about the clock, which is a larger
version of your face hanging all brutal in the dust.
To get you back on track: your arms always felt

like stop, you're a good candidate for a ten yard dash,
and sometimes I lived a small percentage
in the present, in case I loved you.

Testimony

Something slipped out of the room unheard last night.
When I woke, I stared for hours at the green cup tipped
over on the desk, and couldn't move. Your wedding ring
lay on the nightstand. The dreaming parts of me know
how to remove the dead, and they remember
how the rake sounds when it catches the gravestone:
like new ghosts fighting next to them while they sleep.

Awake, I live in the woods behind our house, revising
the end. In that version, I fall into the scattered debris
of the forest, open-mouthed, covered in bark, bruised
from branches, my face whitened like paper, ink scribbled
across my cheek in your handwriting. It says, *I no longer
want anything from you*. Should I touch you this time?

If I let you go, a few white feathers float toward me
as ducks swim off in separate directions. I watch you
disappear behind a tree, and I wonder if you'll change
your mind. The wind pushes the current outward. I call
for you, but I don't hear myself over the duck behind me.
She beats her wings against the surface of the water,
as though she wants to tell me something unspeakable.

Past Life

I stare at the flowers planted for someone else.
They touch one another often. I imagine
their touch sounds like the screech
when a car swerves to miss something
it doesn't. I watch the moon bang
against the roof like always, note the laughter
in the bed of a pick-up. Nothing wants to die
tonight. I throw my clothes into the street,
watch my naked body stretch across the road
in shadow. The light hates me.

A Musician Instructs a Poet on How to Play the Oboe

The trick is in the embouchure, so place
your mouth around the reed as though the lips
are dog-eared pages of a book. Your face
must sing. Now, picture Christ's limp body, hips
forcing dead weight onto the nails. It tears
through flesh. Your fingers rest along the keys
as though they're dying, listening for prayers
and praying, too, but breathing is a breeze.
The lungs aren't so important here, instead,
you need to feel your heart, a booming throat
within your stomach. Picture this: in bed,
a woman's taking off her clothes. One note
will never make her sing. You've got to play
with fingers, mouth, and breath to make her stay.

Syringa

My father taught me death
meant leaving every six months.
Dying happened to the living

who got bored. Death swelled
inside my throat and choked
privately. It crept into my hair

and grew from the roots.
In six months I could plant a garden,
wait for the bulbs to surface

and crack a smile. In six months,
I could be dead. Will I come back
the way my father opened his arms

to the living, the way his daughter
awakened when she saw him,
after sitting at the window

through changes in Syringa's
growth? Watch as I climb
onto his lap when he returns

to prune the over-grown garden,
to teach me the stages of grief,
the wilting, beautiful ways to die.