

WORTHY: A COLLECTION OF POETRY

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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April 2023

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ABSTRACT

WORTHY: A COLLECTION OF POETRY

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Western Carolina University (April 2023)

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Worthy is a collection of poetry aimed at uncovering and rediscovering a spirituality that rejects my Mormon and patriarchal upbringing, instead finding a newly defined faith rooted in femininity, wildness, and intuition. The collection walks readers through my deconstruction of not just the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but all Christianity. It explores the complex and rippling effects of my decision to leave the church I was raised in and married in, including the effects on my relationships with my husband, children, extended family, and friendships—as well as the ever-expanding relationship with my past, present, and future self. Though autobiographical and specific to Mormonism, these poems transcend my singular life and connect with women in our sisterhood, examining and celebrating how motherhood, marriage, religion, and the inevitability of aging change the way and things women write about and experience life. Themes such as the power of names/naming, grief, anger, wilderness and Earth, sexuality, and bodies are explored through lyrical and accessible language. There are a few poems that quote materials published by the LDS church in order to contextualize some of the vocabulary and situations that are unique to Mormonism, so readers of all (or no) faith background can understand and relate to the circumstances that surround each poem. My poetry collection will contribute to a small but growing community of “ex-Mormon”

women writers, as well as women the world over who have become disenchanted with patriarchal-based, organized religion in general.

WORKS CONSULTED

After losing Mormonism (and Christianity in general) as a grounding foundation to my life, I sought out books that illustrated new ways of worshipping and establishing new moral codes. As an extension of my comprehensive exam reading list, and in an attempt to redefine my beliefs and restabilize my home and personal life, I have studied extensively from other female writers who explore topics such as Christianity, female deities, patriarchal systems, women's roles, feminism, motherhood, connecting to a collective sisterhood, healthy coping mechanisms, breaking generational trauma and cycles, trusting my intuition, and finding peace in the unknowable. I also sought out other women who had lived through and written about religious or lifestyle upheavals. Additionally, I also studied craft books on writing poetry, which allowed me to not only gain a better grasp on conciseness, word choice, rhythm, meter, poetry forms, and titling my works, but also provided hundreds of creative writing exercises.

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POEMS

Elegy for a Mormon Girl

If I hadn't been told
that my merit depends
on my motherhood, that no other success can compensate for failure
in the home, that a man's job
is to provide and a woman's is to nurture, that women
are a helpmeet, that we brought sin
into the world, that the boys' budget is bigger
because it's cheaper to teach a girl to cook
and sew than it is to teach a boy how to
pitch a tent and light a fire, that I must *hearken*
unto the counsel of my husband as he hearkens
unto the counsel of the Father, that I can't hearken to myself
or my Mother, that all good things come from God
and bad things come from Satan, that sadness, anger, & doubt
are only felt when the Spirit has left you, that masturbation
is equivalent to murder, that I'm not worthy
to take the sacrament but the boy who grabbed my breast
is still worthy to bless it, that my value comes
from my virginity, that I'll have to share my husband
in the next life because there won't be enough
righteous men to go around, that we don't practice
polygamy anymore, but apparently we will
in heaven, that my clothes distract
the priesthood holders, that I need special handshakes
and codewords to get into heaven, that I'm so lucky
my husband will babysit for me, that *Adam fell that men*
might be, and men are that they might have joy, that when it says "men"
in the scriptures, *of course* it also means women, that *of course*
there is a Heavenly Mother, but no, sorry— you can't talk
to Her, that I'm a daughter of a king—a king who hides his Queen
in the back shed, that a 14-year-old boy, poor as dirt, found gold
in a mountain, that he used his Seer Stone to translate precious
plates that no one else ever saw, that my dad won't be in heaven
with me because he didn't accept baptism, that I can't have my caffeine hot
but it's okay to drink it cold, that my strength comes from the Son,
that there isn't a Daughter, that I need to repent, that I'm unworthy
that I need saving

I wouldn't have had to lay to rest
all the selves I could have been.

The Last Prayer

I.

Barefoot. Bare body.
Chest torn open to a bare, beating heart
Running through the forest.
Feet, bare as they are, pound
anxious and quick -
the sharp stings of needles
the tumbles of gravel
the wet and heavy earth
- to make it there
and back before someone comes
looking. Before anyone else
but my self can find me.

Barefoot
in the woods on an early autumn morning.
I kneel at the altar
- I yield at the rock
as I've been taught:
elbows down hands clasped
head bowed in submission
- head bowed in desperation.
I shut my eyes to the world, grope
through my blindness.

II.

He asked if I had prayed
about it. The way the word *pray*
sank like an anchor, dragged across
the ragged cave of my stomach.
To whom would I be speaking?
I didn't want Him anymore.
I was ready to find her.

III.

My words come out in tumbles.
The creek, just a few feet away from my kneeling
body, rushes past, my sobs splash
its depths, catch and carry in its current.
Earth rises to meet my knees;

sticks and pebbles mark me
as theirs. The boulder beneath steadies me.

The most desperate plea: *What is true?*
Face as wet as the water rushing past,
feet as black and broken as the dirt beneath,
chest as heavy as the rock.

When my eyes open, light
and life explode back. I blink through the blue diamonds
of tears and sky, the kaleidoscope of where I end
and the world begins.

To the right, the roaring of the water:
This is truth.
The boulder beneath my hands, unapologetically
massive and immovable:
This is truth.
Tree roots thrusting down through the soil,
a maze of muscle and memory and motive
rise to branches trying to touch the sun.
This is truth.
I turn my hands over, turn them over to see palm lines and
fingerprints, blue veins not quite concealed
under a shiny white skin.
Put my hands over my heart,
its rhythm
writing anew each day. Breathe in
the same air the trees gulp and the river jostles and the Earth carries.
This is truth.

I walk barefoot back home, and the door reveals the open face
of my daughter.

I smile, knowing
she is already saved

Definition of *Veil* From the Church's Website

Veil / A word used in the scriptures to mean / a divider separating areas of the tabernacle or temple / a symbol for a separation between God and man / a thin cloth worn by people to cover their face or head, or / a God-given forgetfulness that blocks people's memories of the premortal existence / The veil divides the holy of holies from the holy place / The veil of the temple was rent in twain at the crucifixion of Christ / Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face / The dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind / The veil shall be rent and you shall see me / The veil of the covering of my temple shall be taken off / The veil was taken from our minds / A veil of darkness shall cover the earth

New Name

I.

Nineteen years old just trying to get married to the first boy who asked me to,
as I'd been taught for the past ten years in seminary, Sunday school, sacrament meetings.
The temple an enigma, a necessary step to take to be with him.
Dressed all in white, I am given a new name—my old name not pure
enough, not worthy to be held in the halls of the Lord's house.
A name I do not know, do not trust. A name I must
*always remember and which you must keep sacred and never reveal, except at a certain place
that will be shown you hereafter.*

Later, I learn that every woman going through the temple that day was given
the same new name. All of us Phoebes, faceless in white.
Somewhere, in another room, my fiancé is told my new name.
I will never know him in the same way that he knows me.

II. *Sisters, you have been washed and anointed to become hereafter Queens and
Priestesses to your husbands. If you proceed and receive your full endowment, you
will be required to take upon yourselves sacred obligations, the violation of which
will bring upon you the judgment of God; for God will not be mocked. If any of you
desire to withdraw rather than accept these obligations of your own free will and
choice, you may now make it known by raising your hand.*

Where is the free and where is the choice?
If I were to raise my pale, shaking hand,
I would not be allowed to marry my husband in three days' time.
The returned missionary who is watching me from across the room.
The one who gave me the skinny diamond that rests on my finger.
It sparkles in the light of the chandeliers above.
I am blinded into submission.

III. *Will the sisters in the room please veil their faces?*

I bow my head and say yes.

August 29th, 2009

Each day of the month corresponds with a name.
Today, we are all Phoebes
To veil me is not enough, I must be renamed.
I thought the new names came from scripture -
Silly me! To think there were that many options!

Maybe I am Phoebe.
If I am, I am
also Sarah, Rebekah, Emma.
I am Esther, Lydia, Abish.
I am Hagar, Vashti, Martha.

I am Eve.
I am Mary.
I am queen, savior, mother.

A Name and a Blessing

Look at their suit jackets, crisp
and pressed. The jackets that shrug
on a hanger on a Monday
waiting for Sunday
to roll along so they can feel
powerful again.

Look at the plastic buttons riding up
their clean white shirts - the buttons
that will stay clasped and dignified
all day long, no need for access
to a chapped and bloody nipple.

Look how they watch us from the podium—
us sinners in our seats,
our bored and fussy children.
Feel the hush that settles over the room as they encircle the baby,
invoke the Father.

Where is the Mother?
There, in the pews.
See the woman, see the mother. See how she bows
her head.
Listen.

Inside she is screaming:
I already gave him a blessing. I blessed him
with my pulsing placenta, my parted perineum,
the white ink of my breastmilk, *the ballooning and deflating
of my body.*

Do not hold him to the congregation like Simba on Pride
Rock. He is not yours to name.

I. Etymology

Preside / be set over others / have place of authority / direct and control / from French presider / preside over / govern / from Latin praesidere / stand guard / superintend / literally sit in front of / from prae before and sedere to sit / from PIE root sed / to sit / usually denoting temporary superintendence or direction

II. Marriage Vows

Thy desire shall be to thy husband / he shall rule over thee / Brother do you take this Sister by the right hand / receive her unto yourself? / Sister do you take this Brother by the right hand / give yourself to him?

III. The Family: A Proclamation to the World

By divine design / fathers are to preside / in love and righteousness / responsible to provide / protection for their families / For the husband is the head of the wife / even as Christ / love your wives / even as Christ / gave himself for it

A Man From Church Shoots His Wife and Kids

I found out when a friend texted me a link.
Did you hear the thing about the Milligans? she'd asked.

The *thing*? I'd wanted to scream, after clicking
and feeling my heart dry, then cake into clay. A *thing* means

Oh, they painted
their front door orange. Or, the *thing*

is someone egged their house. Or maybe,
god forbid, the *thing* is they're getting a divorce.

A *thing* is not, he shot them one by one,
starting with the wife so she couldn't

protect the babies. A *thing* about the Milligans
is not, he rang the cops and told them to come,

then put a hole in his own head, surrounded by the
blood of his family. I couldn't speak to my friend

for weeks after she sent me that text. The casualness,
the hot painful spill of the tea.

At night, I'd drain my dark tears onto an already
damp pillow and wonder what role the church plays

in an act like this. What blame can be placed and taken away?
Was it because of what he'd been taught?

Was it because he'd been told
they wouldn't be in the same heaven together if he only killed himself?

Weeks later, I had a dream in which he didn't kill them.
There were all alive and happy, their children playing with my children again.

And I thought, They were wrong. The news reports must have gotten it wrong.
The thing is, there is no forgetting.

Righteous Desires

I kept wanting to go back to the temple, wanting to test it.
I wanted to see if the answers were where they promised they'd be.
I wanted—I did, I really did—to wear the white robes,
feel the drop of water wet my forehead,
wanted to warble through the secret codes and handshakes,
wanted to chant the charms, raise my arms and salute god, broken or not

I wanted that *power in the priesthood, be upon me.*
I wanted to be pulled through the veil and I wanted
to see if I could find Her, at once and finally.
But instead I was met by the one I'd always seen on the other side:
a man, white as privilege and older than change.

Timeline

I'm a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

I'm a *progressive Mormon*

I'm a *nuanced believer*

I'm confused.

I'm unworthy.

I'm lost.

I'm no longer practicing.

I'm no longer believing.

I'm scared.

I'm searching.

I'm crying.

I'm raging.

I'm gone.

They say time heals all wounds, but what do you do in the meantime?

Before the time when time is enough?

In Which I Tell My Bishop I'm Leaving

I.

I sat in my bishop's office and told him I would not be returning to church.
He asked if he could talk to my husband about me.
He asked how I could know my sources are trustworthy.
He said *I'm going to have to think about this.*
He warned me to *be vigilant, Satan is trying to take over you.*

He didn't understand
that I wasn't asking for help—
I was telling him I no longer needed help.

II.

When he asked me why,
I said *I struggle with being denied access to a Heavenly Mother,*
despite being assured that she exists.
He looked me in the eyes and said *I can relate.*
He looked me in the face and said *Heavenly Father is just protecting her.*
And we will have an eternity to get to know her

in the next life.

I wish I had said I call bullshit.
I wish I had jumped on his desk, grabbed him
by his goddamn floral tie, and let loose the animal
of my body. Let the grovel of the weasel within
come skittering out, sharp teeth bared and spittle foaming.

You fucking pussy.
Show her to me, goddamnit.
Show me her face. Is she even there?
Where are you hiding her? Bring her out.
Give her life.

Stop lying to us all. Stop promising
something that isn't even real.
What are you? Afraid? Afraid of what might happen
if all the women of the church start praying to her,
what revelations we might receive,

what ruckus we might cause,
what rebellions she might whisper to us,
what flame she might light within us,
what leaping bounding fire to burn it all down,
veil by cloudy veil?

Erasure

Temple Recommend Questions

1. Do you have faith in and a testimony of God, the Eternal Father; his Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost?
2. Do you have a testimony of the atonement of Jesus Christ and of his role as Savior and Redeemer?
3. Do you have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel in these the latter days?
4. Do you sustain the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the prophet, seer and revelator and as the only person on the earth who possesses and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys? Do you sustain members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators? Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local authorities of the church?
5. Do you live the law of chastity?
6. Is there anything in your conduct relating to members of your family that is not in harmony with the teachings of the church?
7. Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?
8. Do you strive to keep the covenants you have made, to attend your sacrament and other meetings, and to keep your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?
9. Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?
10. Are you a full-tithe payer?
11. Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?
12. Do you have any financial or other obligations to a former spouse or to children? If yes, are you current in meeting those obligations?
13. Do you keep the covenants that you made in the temple? Do you wear the garment both night and day as instructed in the endowment and in accordance with the covenant you made in the temple?
14. Have there been any sins or misdeeds in your life that should have been resolved with priesthood authorities but have not been?
15. Do you consider yourself worthy to enter the Lord's house and participate in temple ordinances?

you have

restoration

you sustain

you

you live

in harmony with

you

you

Are

Wisdom

you

are

night and day

you made

your life

worthy

Learning a New Language

~~Bishop Cornelius. A judge in Israel. Asked to sit in Judgement over Transgressors.~~
Kevin. His name is Kevin.

~~Sister Rantanen, President of the Children's Primary group.~~
Marion. I will call her Marion.

~~We believe~~
Mormons. The Mormons believe

~~I'd like to ask to be released from my calling.~~
I release myself.

Perhaps

Perhaps the poplar doesn't open
and the dogwood doesn't bloom

Perhaps the frost hits too soon
and the rose wilts in on itself

Even so, the snow will land
on my fingertips, beg me to

drink its crystals.
I will welcome the cold.

Agency

It is the freest form of pain I've ever felt. It is the freshest air I've ever inhaled, so deep it burns my lungs. It is a time so ripe with growth that my skin and soul can hardly keep up: stretch marks rake across my heart—ragged reminders.

Friends that used to be friends stop texting when they find out I've left the church, unsure how to navigate a relationship no longer centered around believing in the same god. Family members send me conference talks from prophets and apostles—

as if I hadn't already read them all myself.
As if I simply hadn't tried hard enough, believed enough, searched enough.
As if I could just be fixed.

But no matter how many different staggering emotions I juggle and drop and bury myself in, there is one thing I no longer feel:
guilt.

Instead, for the first time, I am filled with a sense of agency.
I am not gentle with it—
I bite into it, tearing it and tasting it,
raw, beating, and real.

Initiatory

This is me groping in the dark, hands outstretched to catch a wall, a counter, a corner. This is me discovering a creak in the floor, and there – another. This is me missing the bottom step. This is me watching the moon rising through our window. I think, I will wait to put up the new curtains.

Here, this is us making love in the kitchen, labelled boxes scattered on the floor around us.

Delivery

I.

I dream of a woman.

She sings no songs, cries no tears, speaks no words.

She is still and yet so full.

I feel her with every cell in my body.

Her light floods me, and I buzz with recognition when her name comes to me:

Mirabelle.

I call my mother in the morning:

Is there anyone named Mirabelle in our family?

I am desperate to understand why she is familiar to me,
why she came to me in a dream.

I scour the branches of my family tree.

It is not until I am handed a black and white photo
of the gummy-bear shape inside me that I understand:

She is not from my past. She is my future.

II.

The church calls it a *spiritual gift*.

They tell me God gives at least one of these gifts to every
faithful member of the Church.

We are warned that we must beware

lest ye are deceived, always remembering for what they are given.

My church tells me that my gift for dreams has been given conditionally—
it is not mine to keep.

III.

I dream of my stepsister.

She is surrounded by bright yellow sunflowers.

The velvet of the petals, the deep,

nurturing scent of the Earth, the unforgiving

sap of the stem—she is buried in them, but they do not touch

her. She is not the blossoming flowers,

but the storm that feeds them all.

When I wake, I sit on the edge of my bed and text my stepmom.

Her response is a cannonball to my stomach:

The chemo failed. The cancer is spreading.

I cry fields of yellow tears.

IV.

My church tells me that if I leave, I will
say goodbye to the gift of the holy ghost.
That I will
say goodbye to my whole concept of God.
They assure me, if I walk away from this religion
you will lose everything.

Every relationship I cherish, every chance of being with my family, every marriage vow I
promised to my husband, every sacrifice I made for my children, every hour of service I gave,
every moment of intuition, every talent earned, and every gift bestowed.
Every choice.
Every dream.
Every beat of my aching, searching heart.
They tell me none of it has, ever, been truly mine.

V.

I dream I am at the hospital giving birth to my daughter.
I am surrounded by midwives, nurses, my husband.
Their faces circle around me, floating heads of smiles and encouragement.
She enters this world easily. I am quiet, and so is she.
We name her Mirabelle.
I give Mirabelle to my husband to hold.
He walks quickly ahead of me. I cannot keep up with him.
I am alone in the hallway when the familiar squeeze of a contraction returns.
I stumble, steady myself with a hand on the wall.
I am not done giving birth.
I frantically look around—where have all the doctors gone?
I try to call out for them, for my husband
as another contraction rips through me.
I feel the pressure descend to my bowels, heavy
but not foreign.
It is too late: I must deliver her by myself.
Her head tears a new dimension through me, a fire
so pelting and plunging that I roar into the empty hallway.
The echo surrounds me, and I reach down to catch
the wet, raw body. I slip my hands under her arms, grasp her firmly.
My love for her is all-consuming and never-ending.
When I finally catch my breath and cradle her to my breast, I understand—
I gasp awake.

In Which I Contemplate Divorce

A friend of mine divorces her husband after she leaves
the church. I send her a message.
A part of me is jealous. I wonder
if divorce would give a part of me back to myself.

But then I remember the time in the car I could barely speak,
the way I asked him over the Bluetooth speaker and miles of country
if our love was strong enough,
if our love was bigger than what church I went to or what god I believe in—
whether or not his vows were conditional.
The way he patiently waited for me to stop crying,
the way he answered
It is you. There is nothing else.

But then I remember the way those few shimmering gray hairs sprinkle his scalp,
the way the crinkles around his eyes have deepened.
How his body has grown towards mine
like a tendril to the sunlight.

From the Church Magazine, *New Era*, Apr. 1993

Sacred temple clothing is a shield / protection against Satan / as you receive your endowments in the temple / you receive the privilege of wearing the sacred temple clothing / night and day / the garments of the holy priesthood / tangible reminder of your covenants with God / reminds us that virtue / sets us apart from the world / in a special way / makes us one with God

Garments, The Scars of

When I first went through the temple, I clutched the garments to my body in an act of comfort. If it weren't for the feeling of cotton in my hands, I might not believe it had been real. Stitches down to my knees and over my shoulders, the only physical manifestation of what happened to me in there. The only proof I held. I wore them like a scar, resolute and constant.

Garments *and sex*

We clutch each other's bodies, fingertips pressed into the meat of thighs, the trail of spine into tailbone, the sweat catching in the clavicle. We allow the most intimate of entrances, the most desperate of sharing and then, after we catch our breath, we roll over and put our covenants back on, lest the devil tempt us in our sleep. We will always have this between us. We will never completely melt into one another.

Garments, *Being a Woman in*

Not designed for a woman's body. Had to ask how to wear a bra with them (*the garments must touch your skin. Wear your bra on top of the garment*). Had to ask how to have my period in them (*Wear a regular pair of panties to put a pad on, so you don't get blood on them, don't stain them with your femaleness*). Had to ask how to nurse my three babies in them (*get the special kind with envelope access to your nipple. You'll have many layers to dig through, but your baby will find what it needs after much searching. You'll need to step out of the chapel to do it, though. There's a little room for you to wait in, with a speaker so you can still hear the weekly messages. Not seen, but still hearing*).

Garments *in the Wild*

When viewing other women in the wild, our knee jerk reaction will be automatic judgement. *How can she wear her garments in that outfit?* We are conditioned to scan each other's bodies for the lines, for the markings. We are set up to hate one another.

Garments, *The Proper Disposal of*

It did not happen all at once. I said, *I'll wear them when it makes sense. I won't when it doesn't*. The first time I slept without them—the feeling of my own skin touching itself, the delicate white of my inner thighs warming between themselves—I was surprised at the familiarity. Surprised to feel the ache of missing someone I hadn't seen in so long.

Eventually I folded them neatly into stacks, hid them under my bed. There they waited for a proper burial, for the symbols and shapes to be cut into unrecognizable form. For months I told myself I would burn them. Until I realized they didn't deserve the consumption, the ritual, the evolution into ash. They deserved to rot slowly, to wait, heaped and piled. To simply be tossed into the trash. Let the Earth do with it what it will.

The Wilderness

If you stop talking to me,
you won't be the first.

If you think it's temporary or I'm a project or you'll pray for me,
you won't be the last.

Think say act do believe breathe become

I left the church I was raised in,
held positions in, married in,
baptized my children into.

I was one of the valiant ones.

I left so that if my son ever came to me
and told me he was gay, or if my daughter ever asked
if she was valued the same as a man, I could say
I love you and *yes, always* and actually mean it.

Why have so many of us
been okay with this for so long?

In Which I Contemplate an Affair

The night of my birthday, dancing as if I had something urgent to say.
The cute, too-young-for-me guy who asked what my favorite song was
and I said Backstreet Boys

When I said I was cold
When he handed me his jacket
When I moved my wedding ring to the other hand
When he asked where I was staying that night

I realized I'd always be looking for his familiar form
in another body, in someone else's face.

Night and Day

The first time we both slept without our garments on,
our thighs sweating between each other,
we burned together, finally touching skin to skin,
Body against body.

Thighs sweating between each other,
we were wet spoons of heat,
body against body.
I had to pull an arm out from under the covers

(wet spoons of heat)
just to keep cool enough to stay under with you.
I had to pull an arm out from under the covers
—white covenant cotton no longer coming between us—

just to keep cool enough to stay under with you.
Your black boxer briefs against my black bikini,
white covenant cotton no longer between us.
Sinners, but at least we're sinners together.

With your black boxer briefs against my black bikini,
they tell us that our promises are broken,
we're sinners (but at least sinners together);
we're walking away from an eternal marriage.

They tell us our promises are broken,
that we'll be separated after this life.
If we're walking away from an eternal marriage,
then let's hold on tight while we still can.

We'll be separated after this life—
sleeping without our garments on—
so let's hold on tight while we still can.
Touching skin to skin, we'll burn together.

The First Time I Drank Alcohol

11,000 feet up in the air, the red wine hit
my lips with a tang of freedom.
I toasted my glass against my father's, and the question
of *why now* rang in the shine. Though I knew he already knew
the answer. That first sip
began with the relief that comes with feeling like a goddman adult
for the first time in my life, and it ended
in matching moonrise tattoos. I savored each scratching etch in my skin,
drank deeply each drop of ink. Later, stinging tears as we crossed the Sun Gate.

How I wish I'd taken a picture of his hand in mine.

Cradle

I.

Day one.

The thirst is unquenchable, the throbbing untouchable
I hear nothing but axe
dropping on skull, heavy with each footstep.
The tour guide flips through photographs in his handbook,
and I feel nauseated.

II.

Day one.

You must hold a newborn child with a distinct delicacy.
You must cradle their neck so their chin doesn't rest
on their chest, doesn't choke them
in their own sleep. Though these 9 pounds of flesh and blood and bones
just tore through the very center of your being, you must pretend
you are unchanged; you must assure everyone you are still
hinged. You do not mention the blood that covered the baby, covered
the bed, covered
your hands. Instead, a midwife gently scrubs your fluids
off him while you take a shower so hot your flesh sears pink.

III.

Day two. The headache lessens. I can walk
without feeling the beating of my heart in the veins
of my skull. I almost feel normal.
Today we begin hiking.
We smile for a photo.
The sign reads, *Bienvenidos Santuarios Historico de Machupicchu*.
The trail is dusty, the sun burns my shoulders,
and my backpack weighs heavy. We are rewarded
with plates full of fresh Peruvian avocados, thinly
sliced cucumbers, and salty potato wedges.
Our tent is set and our beds are made for us.
It is the *Luxury Tour* after all. We watch
the sun pull red, and we sleep soundly.

IV.

You bring the baby home, and you are newer
than he is. You are blind and deaf to anything
but his squalling. You don't know what you're doing
but something like intuition or inherited
feminine knowledge pulls him to your breast, your nipples
cracked and scabbed over. The weight that once hung
from your front, now aches in your back, as you sway
and sway

and sway

and sway.

Holding your sandwich in one hand, you eat standing up. You hear
his cry in your sleep, and jolt awake in the dark.

V.

On the third day, we climb until we reach the 14,000 foot peak.
It is not a direct route. The trail curves
around the stream of the jungle, cascades down
into the valley, and hikes up hundreds of crumbling, ancient stairs.
The weather turns cold, blistery wind whips my hair into my eyes.
But oh the views at the top.

I see the entire world

nestled between the peaks.

I watch a moon rise,

a blurry orb in the fog.

That night, as we drag our tired bodies to our tent,
our tour guide hands us each a jiggling hot-
water bottle. I melt at the touch of its searing pink heat.
It soothes me.
I cradle it like a baby.

Period on the Inca Trail

A cup at a time, the smell of a body,
the smell from the center of the body,

the blood of the daughter,
the molten core of the woman

shed to save herself.
I pulled the moon out of hiding

that night, rose her over the cracked edges
of Mount Veronica.

It was the sacrificial cup
filled with the blood of my breaking.

It was the dark mineral of the body,
smelling of the earth, returning the shed parts of me

to the soil. It was the bread bruised
and blessed, a sacrifice on the altar

of the trail. It dripped, it trickled down
my thighs. Left behind red caked footprints

braiding the inherited god with the new mother.
Here is the bold burial.

Here is the voice inside,
the old bones hungrily pushed

from my own womb, no longer
room. The moon, she pulls them out of me, lays them to

rest. A cleansing, bones singing,
waking in the morning.

We rise, hand in hand.
At once and finally

I am welcomed at the Sun Gate,
the molten core of a woman.

How

How my dad and I prayed—
not in a church or a temple,
but with wet knees soaking up the morning mist.
Not with a bishop or shaman
but with our team of sweat-ridden hikers.
The way we pressed the coca leaves to our lips
and begged for my stepsister's cancer to be cured.
The way I knew we both knew it wouldn't be.
The message I sent her when I got home.
I'm so honored we got to share our dad.

The way she died six months later.
How we both got high at her funeral,
Unable to fully suffer together without it.

Pachamama

An ekphrastic poem based off a tapestry depiction of Pachamama, the Peruvian Mother Earth

this is not like paint, once wet and heavy and alive and later caked on and dried this instead is dyed then resurrected,
a maze of colors shadows and bright sun light exploding behind Her head this is a deep inhale of moonshine
and stars Her relaxed eyebrows and soft lips a flare in the nostril Her breath spilling over the clouds
and extending into the dark of night the curves and waves of Her hair signal the corkscrew
turn of never-ending seasons the ocean tide and the wisdom of the hands hands that slip
from our grip crossing bridges to planets and worlds that reside in the steadiness
of the stitch We Her children settle into Her folds We fight every imaginable
shade of mountains and valleys of life the cycles of grief and pain We are
the fish swimming through rivers of a bloodred heritage like fish scales
We reflect and shine We also slit and recoil from the throat that
gives voice to reason We suck and We suck from Her own
breast nourishing ourselves and unraveling Her tapestry
one knot at a time the black soil We believe to be
indefatigable the florescent green We assure
ourselves will never fade the feather in
Her hair blinds us to Her broken
wildness the taming We never
meant to claim as She is
woven & tied so too
are We one to
another

The First Time I Tried Pot

32 years old and still feeling like I have to ask the permission of someone else.
Not knowing there is no one else.

She laughed, and handed me the vape pen,
had to teach me how to hold it, how to breathe in the burn.

When I came home and confessed to my husband, so used to admission to a man,
he threw his hands in the air, sighed, said *What's next Meghan?*

As if I knew.

As if I had a plan for my salvation.

The Miracle of Forgiveness

Your sin is the most serious thing / you could have done in your youth this side of murder / the grievousness of the sin enhances / difficulty of repenting / sometimes offenders reach the point of no return / cannot repent / the Spirit of the Lord will not always strive with man / your virtue is worth more than your life / preserve your virtue even if you lose your life

Second Coming

I was not a killer, but I was
the animal almost drowned.

That is to say,
I recognize her in me—

the girl in the car at night, bra straps tugged
and windows fogged.

The girl sunk in the duvet,
arching at her own touch.

Confessing and repenting, again
and again and again.

Then the girl married, and a part of her became owned
and offensive and responsible

for all that is feral in him.
It took a decade but I've finally remembered:

I can find my own way around these waters.

Fantasy

Want to get a beer after class? I do
miss you. Trade poems and stories for sex. You
make it hard to still love and adore you sometimes.
Texts I delete, try to feel guilty about.

It's not that I'm bored, what with the babies
and the schedules and the anxiety. I'm not even
unhappy. It's just that when I'm with you that little walnut-sized hole
at the base of my skull fills with helium and I go

dizzy and float away, and suddenly we exist
in a dimension where I was never
Mormon, never married young, knew how to fuck
more than one man. I forget

I can't possibly unstitch
every good thing we both hold onto.
In this other life, I would not be patient,
prudent or even prideful. There'd be

that one drunken night in Nashville—you'd get me
to smoke a cigarette and I'd get you
to finally admit you wanted me too.
When the elevator doors shut,

when our bodies hit, my legs wrapped around your waist
and your hands on my ass, we'd ride
til the 13th floor, cheap plastic buttons lighting under our backs.
Your mouth would taste like beer and ash,

and I'd crave it. In this parallel world
we would have written together—
poems and hands tangled up in lines and lust,
sheets and wet ink, words and sweat.

You'd have taught me to fish, slippery scales and lines
flung from a dock. I'd have taught you to ride a bike
in the dark of the night so no one would see us crash.
I think we would have - I think we would have fallen in love, us two

free and lowly artists. I think we would have
driven each other fucking nuts, what with
my needy ways and soggy eyes, my to-do lists and Katy Perry
and your inability to say what's actually on your mind.

I want to say our arguments would be messy, throwing shit
around like vases and vices
but I'm afraid we'd be cold and silent,
both of us stubborn and stupid. Even that, though.

I think our burn would have been just as blinding
as the build up. The flames, the ash.
I think we would have -
I think we would have made one hell of a story.

No Fantasy

It's been awhile since I cried in the shower. The last time was when my dog died and I knew he wouldn't be there waiting when I stepped out, water pooling on the bathroom tiles.

It's just that I'm not used to not getting what I want. So I cried in the shower, realizing there's no one in the world left to wonder what it's like to be my lover.

Well, let me tell you—I'm no fantasy
but I am a good time, laughing at the noises bodies make,
slicked with sweat and panting like wolves.

I've got the kind of beauty that grows on you.
I may not know the right moves, but I'm also not afraid to ask.
I'll not be your bitch, but honey I am your mother.

Word Association with Orgasms

There are the ones we share
—rain on a Hawaiian tin roof, the heavy rush
of a waterfall, the soured tang of a yellow lemon-
drop, the dip and corkscrew
of a county fair rollercoaster, the crack
of an icicle, the pink
of a sweet strawberry cupcake, the blue
of a delicate China plate.

There are the secret ones
—when the mirage of someone else's face
wavers in front of my eyes.

The one I gave myself on my 30th birthday
—dancing like I was running away, or towards something.

The ones that mirror the completeness of soy sauce, the comfort
of Monet's *Nymphs at Giverny*,
jumping off a dock on a warm summer night,
the moon awakening above.

33rd Birthday

At the Indian restaurant, we talk about how you've never tried a vibrator.
You ask me where I hide it, *the freezer?* so the kids don't find it.

Later, drunk in a hot tub with you, we say things we mean
and then we say them again, just to make sure we still agree with ourselves.

For a moment there, before the buzz wears off, I wonder what it's like to crawl
into your lap, kiss your mouth, feel the soft skin of your stomach under my thighs.

That night I touch myself til I break
open, quake by quiet quake.

Wild Women Who Hold Me While I Grieve

To the one who still believes but holds
my truth so delicately in her hands, kisses
the cheek of my pain.

To the one who has never believed but loved
me even then. Still she knows
this is as dark as burying the dead.

To the one who's been through it too. Who told
me I deserve an honest life. Who told
me to uncover the secret because my children were waiting.

To the one who met me
in the middle of it. Who didn't witness
the loss but is watching the transformation.

To those who have said,
if you don't have god, you'll still have me—
And I found that that was enough.

No Stone Left Unturned

Shall I show you how even the house – even the house! –
could not withstand the fall?

Shall we tiptoe through the stutters, the nakedness,
the confusion of the halls?

The table, empty of elbows, misses the bow
of our heads, our prayers in awe of its wooden legs,
its removable planks, its sturdy rest for food.

The bookshelves, gap-tooth grinning, happy
to be free from the weight of those golden plates.
The held wonder of what new pages will take their place.
I do not throw them out, those relics of our heritage, but return them
to a dark and buried place, tuck them into the corners of a closet.

The bare squares on the wall where paintings of a man
and his sheep were nailed. The virgin bride and groom,
temples in the background, wedding pictures turned
photoside down. The paint unblemished behind the frames.

Garments—milk-stained, blood-stained, sweat-stained
no longer private in the drawers of my dresser but tied up
in Walmart grocery bags under my bed.

But here.

Now you will hear the heavy sigh of relief, the breath unhitched
from its held belly, when, in the spring, the irises of Georgia,
the lilies of Claude, the first vines of a Hoya plant are hung.
Scrub the windows and put out a birdfeeder, welcome and watch
the shine of her crest, the tufted tit mouse with seed in beak.

The First Time My Husband Drank Alcohol

Swimming in bubbles, he bathed.
I watched him take delicate sips, his face wincing at the taste.
I wanted him to guzzle and gulp, uninhibited.
I wanted to see him lose control
so I no longer felt less than him—
so we no longer had this between us,
a trophy held up in front of my eyes.
I wanted to see him so drunk he would say things,
unlock that tongue held still for so long.
I wanted to hear him say it all, what I'd known all along:

That I did this to him. To us.
That he blamed me.

Instead, he did what he's always done:
Held out his hand, slippery circles of soap tiptoeing
their way up his arm, invited me in next to him,
the water closing in around us.

In Which I Contemplate Death
or, Going to the Dentist the Day After My Stepsister Died From Cancer

But what is the point
of flossing between each tooth, that mint flavored string slicing
into my gums, blood mixing
with the metallic instruments

if science still can't save
a 34 year old woman from leaving
her two children motherless?
What is the point of my presentation on Algorithms

of Oppression, my Starbucks order of decaf
pistachio cream—actually make it a real one this time,
I want to feel the angry flow of caffeine. I want to feel alive
while my dad, miles away in Minnesota, transports her body

to a crematory, the fire raging and finally, finally
her body rid of its cancer.

Beautiful Red Raindrops

It's true, the children have aged me.
I've given them my youthfulness.

But she's never looked more beautiful to me than she did coming in from the snow that day,
cheeks burning bright and wet ringlets of hair sticking to her lips,
telling me:

Take a break from reading,
and look at the icicles,
at the beautiful red raindrops.

Wild Honey

We like to imagine bears eating honey. They hunt
salmon. They forage and gather

from the Earth's fruit and tear at the flesh
of deer. They slumber through frozen winters. They dance

in rushing rivers. They ache to save
their babies, claws reaching and teeth

bared, the weight crushing just as heavy
and sweet and sticky on their thick wild hearts

as on our own.

I Worried

I worried my mother would read my poems and see
my father in the crackled lines of the mountains,
my children in the page numbers, always moving up and up and up
my husband in the spaces between;
the pause after the comma and the rest at each line's end.

I worried she'd wonder *Where am I?*

Oh, but don't you see? I'd say.
And then, because she would not, I'd show her:

You are the breath before it all begins.
If not for you, there wouldn't be any words at all.

In Which I Contemplate Divorce, Part II

What did they tell you? What did they do to you?
What line got stuck in your head, played over and over
until something veiled you, too?

We had all the reason in the world.
No one would have questioned or been surprised.
I would have accepted the blame, the assumptions.

But then I'd have to change the batteries on the smoke detector,
schedule the car's oil change,
learn how to fold a fitted sheet.

More than that, I wouldn't wake up to the weight
of your hand on my cheek, wiping away my tears, realizing
it was all just a dream and you've saved me from the ending.

Tattoo

The snake no longer a foe,
the fruit no longer forbidden.
Enmity no more, and never again.
She is the garden,
and the entire lone and dreary world
She is free.
She is whole.
She is home.
She is
She is
She is

To Never Go Hungry

Love me through the shapeshifting of my body,
through the building of babies, the stretching of the skin, the release and loss
of the milk and ignorance. Love me through the collapse of our foundation,
walls crumbling and dust choking our lungs.

And I'll love you through the OCD that traps you
in the basement, counting the numbers over and over again
until they feel just right. I'll love you through the age that steals
your hair, gives you a heavier stand on the scale.

We'll carry each other through the famine, the forest, the future.
Love one another in between
beneath, despite
Because.

Enmeshed

I am not my mother but I am my mother's
daughter. And though the seed was pulled and planted

from her own womb, she forgets
the water rains from the clouds of my father

and that the inherited fruit—
those hard green buds of fateful dependence, the overflow

of emotions and the well of quiet—
are neither hers nor his, but mine.

For I cannot carry what is not mine, but I can love
someone I do not want to become.

So here I am, burying another seed,
covering it with the hard-earned truth of Earth.

I will teach the blossoms how to feast
on the sun, brilliant spills of yellow, weeping

to life. How to give pollen to the tragic butterfly,
the dancing sting of the honeybee.

Late Night Dinner at Panda Express or, Is This Life Not Everything They Told You You Wanted?

The long dark road draped over me.
I tried, as I always do, as I had been taught,
to ignore my hunger, the desires of the flesh.
But my hands grew shaky on the steering wheel

so I pulled over at the next neon-lit sign.
I walked in to mops squeezing the floor, the last chore on the list,
the eye roll of someone else just wanting to get home.
They said they'd have to turn the stove back on, make it fresh.

I said I'd wait.

I stood behind the counter and watched them cook for me.
Flames lit for a single serving, for the one waiting, hungry
body in the black of the night. Their hands enveloped in steam.
Me, watching, coaxing, praising.

We became a team. The floor was wet and smelled of bleach
but still I knelt, still I lifted my hands above my head,
lowered them in worship. Then, the burning communion
passed between us, the Styrofoam melting my hands.

I took it out to my car and inhaled the simple pleasure
of hot noodles passing through my teeth, hitting the bottom
of my stomach in warmth, unable to believe
this is what I give my children every single day.

Just for being alive.

What I Want to Say Is This

What I want to say is more than living—
what I want to say will save your wild life.
Hold it, own it, don't ever forget it:
You do not need to beg, you don't need cleansed.
You deserve to always be unveiled. You
know, already, the sun exists inside you.
Of course you'll be the tide; you are the Moon.
You are Phoebe. You me—we all—are Her.
Daughter of Sky and Earth, bright prophetess,
Lunar goddess. Or the Eastern Phoebe,
that plump songbird, singing constellations,
singing the whole goddamn solar system.
 Bruised and broken, healed and always holy.
 Both all and more. You are your own savior.

Writing the Body

Eighteen years old and confessing to my bishop,
I couldn't even say the words aloud.
Instead, I'd written him a letter:
I touch myself.

I remember the way he sighed as his eyes skimmed over
my words, then my body.
Sighed as he folded the paper back into the already-creased corners.
Sighed as he said,
You know, you shouldn't even be here.
Meaning, this sin should have kept me out of the Lord's school,
but my lies had fooled even him.
He handed my letter back to me, and then he told me to
burn it.

I wasn't allowed to worship with the rest of them for weeks
while I repented. I was unworthy to partake
of the body and the blood because my body
was too much body,
my words one too many.

Fifteen years later, I walk into a room
and see all fifty of my poems printed out, my words
staring back at me all over again.
Poems about masturbation, yes, but also poems
about contemplating divorce,
the ways I orgasm,
my loneliness in motherhood
—words I couldn't ever say aloud.

What I want to say is
Burn it. I shouldn't even be here.

What I say instead is
You probably think I'm a mess.

But then I watch a woman, the one
who's read them all, lift my words
high in the air. I hear her say,
This belongs here—show me where.

And I show her.

WORTHY

I will live my life in awe of the mushroom,
the sunflower turning somehow in delight.
In surrender to the salt of the ocean,
the scratchy pull of the tide.
I will find my Mother
in the turn of the seasons,
in the wind within the holler,
in the waxing of the moon.
I will worship the impossible whispering of the trees' roots
and the poetry of the peony.
The sun will birth me, bathe me, baptize me.
No secrets, no handshakes, no veils.
No questions asked.
Worthy as I am.