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The poems in this manuscript explore the thin veil between our identities as humans and our identities as animals. Through a tension between lush language, neatly contained, and concise language broken into rugged lines, this collection offers a study in the ways that we attempt to control and understand our desires. A variety of landscapes, from the Blue Ridge Mountains, to the New Mexico desert, to deep sea trenches provide a backdrop for what the speaker asserts to be a universal feature of humanity: our desire to decipher and contain our inner wildness.

CLEVER BEASTS

by

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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.

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I

*...after nature had drawn just a few more breaths the star froze and the clever
beasts had to die.*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Love as a Horse's Anatomy

Consider the first wide round of spine,
the atlas,
evolved to embrace
the soft stirrings of nerves
against the shocks of galloping, jumping, moving.

Below it,
more delicate ridges,
curving up and over
the scapula,
meant for elongation and contraction.

The forelimbs, in contrast
to the sturdy cavity
of a human clavicle,
fused to the rest of the skeleton
by a fragile webbing
of muscle and tendons.

The legs whittled
down three metacarpals
to the minute piecing of the phalanx,
and contained within it, the coffin

bone. And that name makes sense
because they are the ones that splinter
under the burden
of a body that encases
lungs large enough
for me to crawl inside.

But still I want that—to feel
the labor of a twenty pound heart.

To be cradled in a ribcage heavy with
breathing and beating—all it must contain.

Engram Landscape

*a hypothetical means by which memory traces are stored
as physical changes in the brain*

Whisper into this dark. Fill it with the salt
and damp of the air in your hometown.
With any luck we'll wake to new blades

of grass (rough-edged ones from
the un-mown yards of your childhood),
rooting into the floorboards. Kiss me

and I'll draw you into the back of my throat,
through the soft palate into softer memory.
There you'll find a field of corn silk and copper

hair. Walk through it—filling your arms with
my mother's, my sister's, the red that tangles,
recessive, in each chromosome. Tug a few filaments

loose and find, not roots, but every burst capillary
and skinned knee. There'll be blood from that time
I sliced my finger down to the bone, and a peculiar

warmth. The kind that can be felt at the site
of a fracture or shimmering above asphalt,
the dry heat of the flatness I remember.

But here the wind's heavy with magnolia,
charged with a storm gathering along the horizon.
Walk as far as you can— dig deep into the earth.

I need you to fill your mouth with soil.
Melt burnt clay on your tongue. Taste
everything buried, sharp and metallic.

Gulping: A Pastoral

Split woody stems along their length
and lilacs will drink and drink, until
the vase is dry. There is a bird building
a nest outside my window—to cradle

speckled eggs, then open mouths,
circling with wanting. I've pulled
apart a pile of honeysuckle, sucked
a whole limb bare. Driving home I can

see through the blurring—miles
of clear-cut pines. Larger roots will
strangle saplings. Magpies swallow
the contents of nests that are not

their own. There are parts of Nebraska
brimming with mud, and muddy feed-lot
cattle, everything crowded in too tight.
Drop pennies in water if you want

tulips to open faster. Remember there
might only be enough phosphorus for
fifty more years. That we need it to breathe,
to grow bones, that it can't be synthesized.

Stars normally orbit in pairs, white dwarves
pull the matter from their companions—
an uncoiling of carbon and iron. One night you
handed me a glass of water and said, *drink*.

And when I did, *you gulp so loudly*. I should
have told you that I am like lilacs, like the field
of sunflowers my mother pointed to and said,
watch them turn to soak up every ray of light.

Elegy for the Giant Pacific Octopus

Some grow as wide as twenty feet, each arm drifting far beyond the ballooning body. Their undersides coated in suckers that explore dark water by touch, each tasting and towing what nourishes towards its beak-like mouth, the only rigid part of itself that cannot be compressed down to nothing. The largest ever found weighed just over one-fifty— washed up dead during high tide, the flesh left to the air and water's mercy. I admire this creature. Search for myself not in its changing pigments, but rather in the way it bores through shells with a toothed papilla, softens and loosens the muscle inside with its saliva, then scrapes out what is tender with a barbed tongue. I want to love like its seven months of slow starvation deep in a cave surrounded by clusters of thousands of eggs, stirring fresh water up and through them. The final upwellings fueled only by the pearls gently splitting. Love like its final sinking into a many armed, many tongued embrace.

Chicken

Nudge the needle over ninety. When Jimmy tells you to, give the dead coyote a good kick. Don't flinch when the fur splits and spills out a mass of flies. Years later when David sinks the end of his Marlboro into the pale of your hip, watch the spray of embers. Think of lava— of Earth turned inside out. Later still, feel the knotting scar and think, *you were quiet once, you were brave*. Someone's shout echoes in the quarry, *jump!* And someone says, *current's strong this spring*. Cross solid lines, cross back. Take another step out on the rotting limb. Fingers slide halfway up your thigh, *are you nervous?* Lie on the flat of your belly, squirm into the crawl-space. Yes, the banks have flooded and trees reach out asking you to pull them from the mud. Kiss a married man with your open mouth. Cough up mouthfuls of the Rappahannock, think of Civil War soldiers, long dead in the water. Feel highway air pulling, close your eyes to metal's almost graze.

Fishhook

My father sitting in a plastic lawn chair—
the garage light's been calling to moths
for hours. I watch them spiral away.
My feet cross the concrete floor—air full
of wings. Dad's stripping the bark from
a thick branch, peeling shavings long.
When it becomes more bone than wood
he'll form it into something. *Let him play*

God for a few more minutes, my mother
says on Sunday evenings, even though
the pot roast is steaming, *He's just out*
there with his lost friends. She means

the moths, though sometimes me. But
it's not so different for any of us. Every
so often the world takes you to a stocked
pond, no catch and release. Who knows

what you're going to reel in? An old friend
who's been dead for months. A man who
will never love you enough. The first time
it happened I checked to see if the world

was looking, then tried to throw back my
mother's cancer. But the world caught me,
looked down at my line, shrugged and said,
Gut it. By now I know to split things down

their white bellies. To sink my hands in wrist deep,
and wait with the moths who lose the moon's
fainter burn, plunk against the bulb when
they realize they are lost. Tonight my father

and I watch the curls of oak blend with tabloids
and stubbed cigarettes, and a fish seems to writhe
into his hands. He taught me how to push
the hook deeper into softness so it will let go.

Seed

She peels an orange as he speaks.
 Thinks of shelves filled with boxed
fruit; the rows and rows of rind
 picked by hands far south and bought
when days are dark and the need
 to taste bright in pulp is sharp.
Freed, the pith wet with juice, pale sweet
 in her hands, she tugs a half moon
from its globe. He says *do you hear me?*
 And she thinks *No* but looks to his
face. His hair sticks out the way strands
 do when fists try to pull the right
words from roots. His mouth rounds, more
 sound spills *I just love you both.*
She works a pip from the meat. Slides
 it to the thin, half-clear skin where
it bursts loose. She stuffs her mouth full.

Portrait of the Body as Jane Doe

I'll become pliable again, the rigor
 having come and gone. You will touch

me then, noting the mole on my left ankle,
 the two dotting my breasts, the fading

birthmark scattered across my lower back.
 You will turn me and find a drop of blue

ink suspended against the purple blooming
 of blood at the nape of my neck.

You will think of my face as *soft, fragile, calm*.
 You will open me from pubic bone to sternum—

saw through the fat, the muscle, the ribs.
 You will weigh what you can and think of

all you can't— the words my tongue
 has formed, the half-lives my ovaries contain,

the kisses that found their way to the backs
 of my knees because, I like to be

touched along my creases. At one point
 my chest will be parted and pinned into

a yawning cavity, return me to me in a confusion
 of pale yellow, plum, and blue. There is no need

to be tidy. You will suture the skin shut,
 careful though, it will be delicate as rice paper.

 You will wash my hair. Draw the strands
out straight, rake your fingers through what

 has long been dead. You will cup handfuls
of water, rinse the ropey mass of filaments,

 your hands brimming with that last kindness.

Retrospective

I was twelve when my grandmother's dog
went into labor. I watched each body spill
from the larger. Watched the mother twist back
to each writhing sack and slowly begin to eat
strips of grey-blue placenta, ending with
the umbilical cord. Only then did she begin
to lick the mewling, red puppy inside. Three
days later my grandmother took me back
to the cellar, oddly warm with heat lamps
and milk. I watched as my she held
each one, stroked the softness behind their ears
until they went limp, then pulled surgical
scissors out from her pocket. The ground
around her feet became peppered with dark
droplets and five severed tails. When
the last puppy was lolling in her lap, she handed
me the steel, reeking of Isopropyl, whispered,
Do it quickly. Maybe they don't feel it.

Anglerfish Lessons

The water's pressure enough to fissure
long-fused fontanelles.

The fish's first three vertebra lengthened,
detached,

protruding into the esca, flesh filament
arcing beyond its eyes.

The spine movable in all directions,
its lure beckons,

luminous.

Says, *Come closer.*

Mouth wide, almost too open, nearly
the entire circumference of the head.

The teeth angled
inward to prevent escape.

The jaws shut by reflex alone.

It will distend its mandible, its ribs—
swallowing prey twice its size, whole.

Desire purified.

Here is a need, and here
a body willing—
make me frightening, make me ugly,
make me able.

II

Eurydice to Orpheus I.

The heat that August cradled me.
 Pressed thick against my thighs and neck,
like clammy hands cupping the flesh. And you,
 you had that pond with its skin of green algae
and scales of lily-pads that were rooted
 into mud that clouded up as we walked
waist deep into the unmoving center.
 The bottom water a cool upwelling
rustled up from the muck. All I could do
 was float in the stillness and wait for
the tickle of a water beetle your stirrings
 Later we peeled off our sodden layers,
spread them on the grass to dry
 in the lingering sunlight. In just
our underthings we sprawled out, drinking
 peach crescents floating in a blushing
moonshine, the syrup smoldered in our throats
 You said you wanted to leave this
swamp town, but all I heard were the chords
 your voice formed as each syllable
hung in the humid air —fell—and broke
 open on my bare skin. You didn't need to touch me.
Your words rippling over my body were enough.

Love Song for Scorpio's Tail

After Charles Olson

Optical double
in the cold sky small after
 so much distance

seconds, calculations, years
we learn

the slow degradation of light, the illusion
of alignment (what

we told ourselves was in the soul, true, and safe

under the red wash of a harvest moon)
 gravity does not bind

these bright bodies in orbit or the other bodies
just beyond pale neon-lit sand
 scuttling dark

and close

Salt Pans

What wakes me at 3 a.m. is the sensation of being gutted. I run my hand down my body, waiting to

feel ragged flesh, but it's just skin, whole and taut over my bones. I've been sleeping on one side of

the bed again. My mother tells me *it's not healthy, learn to take up space*. I move over, stretch my arms

and legs out like I'm at the Four Corners, reaching into Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah.

Spread out, I dream myself into expanses of water, a rocky shore, rutted with clusters of mollusks. I drink

whole tide pools dry, hack the shells free, break them open and suck the salty muscle. I wait until I feel strong.

Run over low, blue mountains— across plateaus, hell bent on an island in the north Pacific. I fall in love with the way

its name puckers and rolls across my tongue, with the foggy sea cliffs. But the ghosted wisps burn off by noon. Reveal

a pulp mill with its own kind of billowing. This is not what I wanted. I feel my way down to the desert's barren heat,

no reminders of past or present, or of a bed where two once wove around each other in sleep. Here, the sun will not

give me the chance to become a wide lake. The moisture burns off too fast. I'm only a dusting of salt, shining white for miles.

Knots

I know your spine is strong, each
vertebrae along your lumbar curve
thickening until they are large enough
to fill my hands, but there is a knot

inside you that won't loosen—
what happens when there's weight,
so much that the body begins
to harden so that it might not crumple.

Years ago my grandfather gave me
a pearl necklace, explained that he
chose this present because I could
learn from the string, knotted between

each orb— so that if one might fall
the others would remain intact.
I think of that necklace often now,
of the pearls of grief I carry with me.

I do not undo my own knots, too afraid
I will release the wrong pearl, that all
the sadness of loving a man will be gone,
and the love too. And yet, what you fear

is pain, so you ask me to draw fresh
blood to the tissue with cinnamon balm
until the skin begins to redden, give
off heat. You ask for pressure, and my

fingers still tingle with the knowledge
of what lies beneath the twisted muscle.
A woman gone from your life, absence
calcifying you from the inside out. You say,

I feel so empty. You reach aimlessly into
the fridge at night, you fill yourself with
water, with warm grass, with my hands.
And I think, it does not matter. You are

overflowing. Absence is not emptiness.

It has volume. Your dorsal disks, delicate
and small, are chipping with this weight.

And I am Delilah. I unknot you every evening.

At night, when you dream, I open the hinges
of my shoulder blades. I run my fingers over
my knots, some so tangled, it is as though
the pearl has been lost in a snarl of piano wire.

I read the Braille of my sadness. Each edge
sharp and so bright under the moon. I kiss them.

Driftwood Fire, Coastal Carolina

If our love is a fire, because in poems
love always seems to be burning, let us
be a blaze of driftwood. Follow the wrack
line, fill your arms with bleached and twisted
limbs. Bring them back to me— already
dark against the sun's submergence.
Stack them the way your father taught you,
leaving space for air to feed the flames.

The Harper Boys' Truck

Rust blooms smattering the hood by now, histories
of road trips in shades of ketchup smeared into
carpet. I untied my bikini and slid into the backseat
with the boy whose father stared at me like I was
a ghost because he remembered my mother and one night
thirty years gone. I pressed my back against the leather
as though by sticking my skin to it I could meet
my mother back when she, too, had sidelong glances
cast at her during church. Heard the whispers of, *wild*,
and knew that meant, *takes her clothes off*. I am child
of her long hair, of her finger shoved deep into her throat
after each meal, of the nude panty hose slipped off
in the bathroom before each Friday cotillion. My mother
married a quiet man, boxed her crocheted white bikini
for me. I've learned to keep her secrets—how once
she said she'd wanted to end up in that backseat for years.
I'll do the same, lean forward to avoid the steering wheel,
trace the wood grain of the pews as though it was hair on a chest.

Mono Lake, California

"lifeless, treeless, hideous desert... the loneliest place on earth."

-Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

People say this place looks like the moon.
That it is just as barren. Spires and knobs
of calcified minerals, scraggy growth
dusted white with salt. Earth used to be
like this— clear with the absence of roots,
pulsing gills, greedy drinking. But something
that became us after millions of years crawled
out, breathing. We wonder what spurred
that slimy being, which probably looked
like a Japanese mudfish, to begin gulping
air, to flop ashore and writhe in the mud
for years, until its skin no longer needed
constant moisture. Safety? Food? Love?
I wish I could say that I am that fish
and you are the Sierra Nevadas. Your image
cast into the water until I was desperate
to see you right-side up. Here though,
even after all this time, what survives
this harshness is invertebrate: bacteria
that feed on arsenic, brine shrimp, their
segmented bodies and feather-like appendages
changed little since the Triassic period.
It will take years for me to grow bony
architecture, a tail, to be more than a blind
nudging against the sludge. So I'll settle for
a gentle undulation of Alkaline flies, a swarm
skating the surface, floating shadows
capable of walking underwater, encased
in an air bubble. I'll graze the algae, lay
my eggs, populate, thrive. And eras later,
when something finally gasps ashore,
I'll say, *I've been here all along.*

Tongue and Groove

Darling, you've gone all pixilated. The screen's
dark. I shut the computer, open the window,
recall touch when it is soft like the night

air stirring the hairs on my arm. I whisper
through invisible wires, *do you feel it?*
Flip over, let eyes adjust to the white glow,

we've fallen asleep and the video creaks
with electronic crickets. I want to wake you.
Ask you if you remember that time we crawled

on the roof during a winter storm, faces pale
in the lighting, or that kiss on the sidewalk
outside my house. Remember how you dropped

your soda and it splattered, cold and tin-sweet
against our legs. When you left it rained. I took
off my shoes, ran through the rising puddles.

I watched the lines of water trace their way
down my legs. All we can do is reference
this time or that. I try to hide that I don't know

your body anymore. Where do you like to be
touched? The crook of an elbow, the palms
of your hands. I explain the mapping of tan lines.

You remind me that you've been sanding boats,
that your skin is rougher. You say that you've gotten
fatter. I say that I'll still want to fit myself against you.

I yearn for two chests practiced rise and fall—
now when it rains I stand in it until I'm soaked,
knowing this is the only way I'll be touched.

Jackalope

Relic of my childhood, its glass eyes gather cataracts
of dust. My sister and I still pull it from the shelf,

reminder of red earth and mountains.
We polish its antlers with our hands.

The myth varies. The jackrabbit feet lopped off—
replaced with a hen's. So like a fiddle, its call

mimics the sound of the human voice, shouts,
That-a-way! I would follow that sound

through the dark. And yes, in my dreams I live
out on the plains. I fill a bowl with whisky

every night. Leave it on the front steps. The only
way, I'm told, to slow one down enough to catch its
impossible silhouette against the bright thread of horizon.

Song for Who Waits

The peepers bury into soft wood, lift
Every loose edge. They slide into dark.

Their brown throats

bubble the echo of bells. Or is it heartbeats?
I sleep alone with this song I know

too well. Reverberation

fading into November's cold, or just the silence
of late at night. Perhaps I should be

more direct. I still

have not heard from him. He is back in the city.
He is breaking up his old home. He will return—

car full of grief boxed

with books. Now it is just me and the frogs' trilling.
Like the springs when I was young, walking through

woods with my mother,

ground still frozen. The shallows clogged with muddy
crystals. Even then, I knew to follow the singing

as easily as I now know

that he will not come back to me whole. I'm becoming
like I was fifteen years ago: too eager

to fill my hands

with clutches of eggs, trying to save everything.
The strands broke over and over as I scooped

them into jars.

I learned futility when every jar spoiled. When the one
tadpole that hatched crawled out of the water

too soon. Fried

to a husk, its still-slick underbelly caught on a rock.

Tell me we are not like that, I tap out

on railings and counters.

Something to ask of unfamiliar stillness, but it will
become faint as the days grow colder.

My mother tells

me to unlearn the past in the quiet of winter. Says there is
forgiveness in the chorus, the waiting for warm rain.

III

Dog Days

My father, shadowed and lit by a hanging
work lamp, scores into paisley wallpaper,
soaks it with solution to loosen the glue.
The night, still heavy with sun, swats
lazily at curtains downstairs where
Mother has fallen asleep. I have finally
stopped stirring inside her belly. I rest
upside down, still and ready. Outside
the 17 year cicadas call to other chorus
groups from the magnolia tree's deeper
dark. A few late-comers, like me, are
furrowing up from the dry earth, knowing
to aim for height the same way my fetus,
5 days beyond full term, knows to ease into
gravity's pulling. Now, I wish she had woken
with my settling. Waddled up to my father
leaving the paper's edges to whisper as they
wedged into the dormer window, slid
the sash up, and watched August's deep sky,
limpid with orbiting light. Sound brushing
against them like the wings of the milky bodies
shedding their exoskeletons in the leaves.
I'd want them to hold that night in their lungs, sense
my coming in the slow darkening never noticed
until September. But my mother stayed sleeping,
woke to air louder with new tymbals. I would not
come for another day. My father stayed

until the light was morning soft and the heat
climbed over the sill, until the wall was stripped
clean, and forgotten swaths littered the hardwood.

And maybe I am wrong to wish anything different,
maybe this is what beginning should look like.

Portraits of Red Mouths

1.
My teenage father breaks into the local pool,
just to swim in the dark.
Can't find his shorts,
concrete deck maps his search.
What's omitted in the retelling—
other white body treading the dive well
her cold skin
taste of chlorine.

2.
Sophomore summer,
matinee showing.
Chapstick slick
down my collarbone.

He says, *skin like petals*. Says, *milk*.

Elephant hair bracelet
scratches my wrist raw

3.
My sister clutches a paper cup.
Asks why cherries don't taste, *like this*.

sugared red sunk into the chap of our lips
curb heat blisters through denim

I tell her,
this is what red tastes like.

Three Clouds

1. Anselm Kiefer, *Ash Flower*

Five days of rain like oil mixed with acrylic—
days and days to dry out.

The lead something to
pour over the world,
bright and red and real.

When even blisters
might be better than gray. How one forgets
that the glow will harden.

2. Jasper Johns, *Flag 1957*

Pop Art class, the room dimmed, heat blasting.
There is always the same lament: that we
could not all don gloves and run our hands
across a Warhol. I was thinking of
taking my cold, gloved hands and skating them
across my boyfriend's chest. We were all tired,
so when the next slide clicked into place
it took us a second to realize it
was a Polaroid taken in The Factory—
our professor, pants around his ankles.
No one knew what to say, so we just stared.
Then the Johns piece clicked into our view
and we didn't see the layers of paint
just what we wanted, white and whiter white.

3. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Sky Above Clouds*

Perhaps they will
rise, a slow

welling of air
from the Southwest.

Stilled in
the blue embrace

they wait for us,
but this lightness

cannot last. You must
leap toward

the washed horizon,
warmed like

a sheet hung
in afternoon light

billowing and snapping
at the graze

of air currents.
Beyond all this lies

what you dreamed
the first time

you rode in an
airplane, the weight

peeling from your
bones like

clothes dropped
by a swimming hole.

Meeting the world's body— kind and soft.

Neighborhood

Just add water,
that's what they say about these
places mortar and siding

finished basement with theater
 complete with tubs of plastic
popcorn some cartoon movie

on repeat optional
 kitchen bump-out what could
be a reading nook here is
 where the plasma goes oh yes
another family

 lives just down the road girl age 13
the boy a few years younger

what is never sold the cracks
 uniform same corner
same model home how the two

girls (age 13) will watch bees
 fill cracks from their
identical bedrooms how
 Kenny will watch them
 from the widow's walk

how they'll turn from
 each other to change clothes

nipples bright against white rooms

lit by the same crisp light
 the hum of bees in walls

Dust Bowl Lullaby, 1935

After Kai Carlson-Wee

There has to be a silo, filled only with
the quiet. A house with a tin roof nestled
in an empty field. Nothing but sky
overhead. There has to be a rough
hewn fence and a sister scanning the floating
dust for the shadow of her father. There has
to be a mother balancing twin boys
on the wide of her hips. There has to be
a jar of coins, dipping lower and lower.
Weeks without pay. There has to be a ghost
of rippling head-high wheat spilling across
the distance, a lumber mill filling the air
with the sound of steel on bleeding wood,
the smell of burning from those saws slicing
through it all that fast. There has to be
watered down broth, bread gone stale,
a few stunted spuds. The slow embrace
of dusk as the orange sun is halved
by that blank horizon. That house washed
in shadow until it is dark enough to burn
the lone kerosene lamp on the kitchen table.
There has to be a mother's fierce promise
uttered into night. The boys whimpering
when the hunger pangs set in. There has to be
that sister's cool hand, soothing the boys back
into sleep. A soft hum caught in her throat.
A father, a mother, hearing it all through thin walls.
There has to be a moment when the light
catches the boys right, their bones too visible
in the morning. A night awake by that lamp, a touch,
two bodies pretending they are one, a hollow
comfort. There has to be a hawk riding a dust storm
miles away, a single cottonwood marring
the flatness, and that father's whisper
This is how it has to be, this is how it has to be.

Ishtar Terra

for my sister

The name for the smaller
continent on Venus, where everything is named
for women: Lakshmi, Eve, Ariadne.

It took until the year
you were born to glimpse the surface
through clouds of sulfuric acid.

This is the sort of place
that we are so like. To the north, you,
Ishtar, with your mountain

range in the east, peaks
taller than Everest by miles. With your
volcanoes, and lone impact

crater filled with lava.
Perhaps you will say that we are nothing like
a desert littered with slabs

of rock, like heat
and wind shear so strong if a human were not
vaporized by the pressure

they would not be able
to move one step. Always so literal, my sister.
This universe was made in pairs. Earth

and Venus, so similar
in size and gravity, and much closer than one
might believe — given all that talk

about Mars—

But we are these two. Ishtar, and to the south,
Aphrodite. Larger and breaking

her hot, red, ground.

Buckling with compression, the mountains
sinking. The cracks welling up

with coronas

of something like magma. There are secrets here,
whispered only in the ashen light.

The claps of thunder

no one but us can hear, and the lightning. What
we remember— the oceans that once

submerged us.

Accretion: A Study

Offshore, Thresher sharks gather around
the carcass of a young whale. The Coast
Guard tells us that when the wind blows
right, we'll be able to smell the rot for miles.

For now we're out of range, burning a fire
on the beach after my great-uncle's cremation.
Everyone's drunk, arguing about where
the ashes should be scattered, and I'm

beginning to worry that I descend from
people who hold on too tightly. Our basement
holds too many boxes of photographs. We bury
everything: two goldfish won at the state fair,

pet rabbits, the baby bird I found being eaten
alive by ants. The pitch of voices rises near
the cooler, the west coast cousins, arguing.
He belongs in his orange grove. We have

always been eager to get things in the ground.
Back home, there is a spaniel's skeleton, buried
at the end of Drummond Avenue, or perhaps not.
All my grandfather and great uncle know is

that when they stamped down the dirt they
heard it bark beneath their feet. They ran.
Now I feel in my whole body the fear
that I will never be any good at loving if I don't

learn to let things go. So I promise with abandon.
I'll give back the harmonica you lent me, delete
that hateful email you once sent. Tonight I'll lull
myself to sleep thinking of those sharks, sated,

gentle. Everyone is grabbing plastic spoons.
Someone calls for sandwich bags. They're divvying
him up. And I know they're going to keep those
dusty bags for years, until someone fishes it out

of a drawer, and not knowing, throws it away.

Please don't let that happen to me, I want
to say. Throw me in the ocean while my body's
still warm. Let me float at the surface— nourish
something hungry, sink fathoms down where light
dissolves, provide a ribbed shelter in heavy water.
I want to think that I could give myself up. That
I could say all this to my mother who laid down

next to our dying dog, who said to my father as he
held the stiff body, *You can't just leave her out in the cold.*

IV

Eurydice to Orpheus II.

Sometimes I think of how it will be if
you return to this place. It has changed. Hades
has raked his cold fingers through the marshes,
felling the trees, breaking them open, sawing
them into smooth boards. Leaving behind only
ravaged, damp earth and stumps that have begun
to rot down to molding black.

The lumberyard
crouches in the mud just outside town. You will
know it by the smell of burning. It is
the smell of a dozen steel blades buzzing
through the grain of a dozen young saplings.
For that is all that is left now, there is
nothing rooted deep into the soil, no boughs
to bend under your breath.

If you return
you will feel hunger roil in your gut
and perhaps then you will understand why
I moved to a house so new that the wood
still bleeds sticky sap. Perhaps you will see
this place as a ghost town, filled with only those
who work for Hades. The rest have— like you— left
for places that are not held by the scruff
of the neck by poverty.

I think, of course,
of how it might have been. I think of my
lips bee stung and swollen red by your kisses.
I think of our bodies, the crests and dips
of our parts, the two S shapes joining, curling
and wrapping around one another beneath
the shelter of green leaves spread wide.

Atlantis, 1963

To know your children are asleep
by the way silence changes—
begins as water trickling from
a soaked washcloth down a naked
back. How it wraps itself around
a son as he hides beneath a white
sheet and reads Flash Gordon by
the wavering light of a headlamp.
It deepens. Brushes up against
headboards as heartbeats and breath
slow. Now is the time when my
grandmother would read books about
Atlantis. I used to ask her if it really
existed, if it still exists, encased in ice
somewhere, and her answers were
long, involving references to Plato.
I'm not sure if I could say for sure
whether she believed it was myth
or not. But I've begun to learn quiet's
nuances. One night, while my boyfriend
slept, I called a friend whose mother has
cancer for the second time, and we
whispered to each other about the way
loss is something you feel at the horizon,
something you might see if you just squinted.
It doesn't have to be cancer, it can just
be the knowledge of a body, unknowing
and peaceful, snoring through the wall.
The myth matters when silence turns
to loneliness. All those unclear answers—
because she needed to dream that one night,
it might really happen. The water slowly
filling the house, buoying the couch. Her
body floating alongside the family portrait,
languid and laughing, silence at last muted.

Red Giants, 1968

I told my daughter stories about the dog star.
How its rising foretold the flooding
of the Nile and the lengthening of days.
She used to ask me about those faraway
orbs and I would take a quilt, draw it out
taut, ask her to drop croquet balls into its give
as I tried to explain the way our sun warps space
into a funnel, why Earth circles this haze of warmth.
But she wanted to know why some appear larger
than others, why Sirius dwarfs its faint companion
blaze. I told her the truth; that stars in their last
stages of life begin to feed off themselves.
That they become little more than a radiant
blooming of burning Hydrogen, their core whittled
to a hollow in space. Maybe she knew what I meant.
That one day the sun will slowly swell and consume
the Earth's orbit, or perhaps she learned it later.
She was quiet then, intent on those remote red giants.
Now she is older

and the brightest

star is beginning its descent. The oak trees sense
the growing darkness and have begun to shed their
rusty leaves. We gather crumbling handfuls,
cram them into rustling bags. We wait for dusk
and then empty them in a swath of cleared grass.
I pull a box of matches from my pocket, light one,
and drop it into the depth of the pile. Burnt
sweetness rises first, then plumes of grey swirl out.
We watch, waiting for it all to catch, and when it does
the flames are playful, swallowing the blades
and curling stipules with a few golden licks.
I turn to my daughter as she watches, her face lit
by the orange glow, she is staring up as the stars
flicker through vermilion streaks of sunset, and it is
as though she too is thinking about endings,
how they always seem to burn bright in the distance.

A Planting

After the silence settled and the air
grew heavy again I took things you'd

given me to a stump in the backyard:
Christmas ornament, the old teapot,

even that necklace of metal buds strung
together by delicate gold. I smashed them.

Left the bits and shards, turned to leave,
feeling the calm of the purge curl against

the emptiness in my chest. But then I saw
the potted marigolds you had given me,

so I kicked them over, one by one, until
there was a pile of potting soil, roots,

and fans of bright orange peeking through
fragments of brown ceramic. I left that there

too—until days later when some of the withered
bits nudged out, searching for sun. I gathered

each dry bundle of roots, a trowel, and yanked
the garden hose along until I found a bare spot

spilling moisture. Through grass and layers
of brown, leafy sediment, I dug until the dark

earth clumped on the blade. I did that five times.
Cupped the mounds of dirt. The water ran

hot at first, then cooled. Droplets clung to every
wrinkled petal. Then I washed the smears of dirt

from my hands, returned to the house and scrubbed
at every nail bed until the last flecks came loose.

Lithosphere

Don't worry; I know how you like things,
 cordial, calm. So here, where two plates converge
along a trench, you be continent and I'll
 be ocean. My water, sand, bottom crawlers

all slipping, turning molten under your drift.
 But had you not flinched at the mantle's heat,
at its formlessness, we could have spilled out
 whole mountain ranges as I drank your islands—

the familiar edges of landscape. I feel the warmth
 of sand and shallows. I'll slide beneath you at the same
rate that fingernails grow, and you'll breathe in all
 that's left of me— the air, thick with volcanic ash.

Cry Baby Ranch

A cento

The air is all softness, and the crystal streams
 where the stars are hung.
 I snap dead brown from stem.
Leg music, crickets thrum.

 Wheat in wheatfields exists, the head spinning
 that was my life and all the crumbling
fabrications inside my head.

My heart is what it was before—truer perhaps
with the same desire, dry heat and such sudden kindness.
 You needed a savage kind.

 New self, a yellow quiet light turns
from the dark and calmest thoughts come round us —
as of leaves, watching it all and ready to bloom.

Luminous Matter

A woman next door is turning out the lights.
Each window, framing warmth, darkening.
She leaves me only the glass I'm staring through
and a warped reflection. The universe keeps
unfolding. One day we might all watch
the galaxies we perceive as bright orbs nestled
against supple night become shadowed.
The quick hand of dark energy flicking a switch,
pulling a cord, *night night*. That's all we'll be able
to see, or not see: sub-atomic particles that we
have no name for yet. We watch their quiet
quivering, their distortions in telescopes,
they halo the light, send it spiraling. But the visible
is meager in comparison to the pulling mass
of black holes, the spillage of some sort of energy
that expands despite our moving bodies'
pull on each other. We'll drift light years apart.
I won't be able to point at the sky, trace Venus
and Jupiter's glow the way my grandfather
taught me. When I was younger I was always
coming home dripping. Pool water, river water,
stinking, stagnant water. Water is the only
way we can shed gravity. I sloughed it off
like a sunburn, letting the water peel ground
from my feet as I jumped in, still clothed.
I would float until my skin wrinkled, until
the softening light hid the concrete bottom
in blue. I'd pull myself onto the deck, sodden,
suddenly heavy. One night I wouldn't get out.
The lifeguards turned off the underwater lamps,
hoping to scare me out of the deep end.
On the way home my grandfather told me
that gravity is a loving force. That it allows us
to hold onto another. My grandfather has been
dead for years. I want to tell him how it's all
loosening, how I need to jump in the water again—
not to feel weightless, but to emerge from
the buoying dark, weighed down.