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These poems are motivated by grief that began in infancy, when my biological mother gave me up for adoption, and continues in adulthood. The collection is a record of my attempt to process this grief. With no memory of the biological family, the adoptee accesses these experiences through imagination instead. The term *ghost kingdom* refers to the place where the many imagined versions of the family and self, both biological and adopted, exist within the adoptee. Both the term and these poems are a way to give parameters to a loss that has often felt infinite in its unknowns.

ECHO AND INSTRUMENT

by

Cory Mac Pherson

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Committee Chair

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For JBE

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by CORY MAC PHERSON 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

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*I believe I am choosing something now
not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel
Does the infant memorize the body of the mother
and create her in absence?*

—Adrienne Rich

I

Which Is Loss

the silver stolen by the crook
of your arm or the ruby ring
of blood that comes as it's
drawn from your vein

pain brightened pain
the wound you mine
for the color of a strangled
throat

which looks like an unstrangled throat
from the inside

the bruised neck
of sky turned pale
from the afternoon
or the forest bone-
strength of prisoner
abandoned

which trumpets the louder sorrow? You pull me

from your body.
I think about you.
This is how I learn
I have a body.

Which is heavier to lift
the metal coffin buried
in the dusk of me
or the nothing it holds

which is you?

Birth Mother Looking at a Map

I pull the crewneck continent
over my head, become a blank
island, clean coast. If she wants,
she can name the island
Peninsula, can hold her
loneliness like an ax, take it
out on the only forest, build
a house with skylights.

If the moon falls onto her
floor of sand, she can
draw squares. This,
her new moon; the floor,
her new sky. She can love it
through the night, though it cries.

She can change her mind
silent, if she wants the sound
of propellers, she can name
the island *Island*. She wants to
hold her decision like a match,
take it out on everything that breathes
in her, encircled by flame. If she can
be lost. If she can.

Birth Mother Cleans

when there is nothing left
to destroy or save, her mind turns
to the hospital floor. Tiles diamond
the room of her. No longer
dimensionless, her pain
has a ceiling. Her memory
of the ghost-part is roped off with neon
caution. She does not want her creation.

I mother the twin pain bright
in the veins, liquid light, unspilled
garnet. Clean with spells of bleach.

If joy was never our birth-
right then what is
ours was the opposite of

mid-wife please can I hold her
mop or be held in her fist forgetful
of my wanting to be
dragged across the floor soaked
in the dull mess pulling shattered
mirror splintered in

the smooth bone
memory of windows,
the custodians of dream?

Ghost Kingdom

In this version, death
is so clinical, like parting
legs, and I have the feeling
of lying down in a field,
sinking into night-
dark earth, un-thinking blades
of grass, scarred sky. You, me.
That gentle. Like a word
you didn't say. That close
to forgetting.

Notes for My Biological Father

If the light is on, my parents are still alive,
in their bedroom down the hall,
watching sit-coms – the laugh track a lullaby
as I drift into the dream house, where I keep
their dead bodies.

*

You must be the half-moon
night-light that shines on my doll,
but leaves the dollhouse
dark, the doll's eyes open;
makes everything strange and not
mine; sends me running to my
father's side of the bed. No.
You are the vanishing space
between the tee-shirt warmth
of his back and the edge
I fall from in sleep.

Only She Remembers

I think of my birth mother
before anesthesia. Then I am alone
with her pain. Swollen, she asks
to be hollowed out empty
with epidural, or I am feeling something
only she remembers. We are together
in this forgetting, this nothing
but colors unnamed. Do not un-mother me
yet, Mother. I know the medicine wants,
but I wonder: if we let it take over
will there be rooms are they white
with wait will I wake recover

Birth Mother Giving a Massage

She unknots me from her knowing
how to speak the orphan
tongue of touch how her body is
a memory holding my trace raised without
blade without blood wound around wound
she knotted in me unknowing.

Birth Mother as Sign Language Translator

She held the song
of my body in her
body, a chorus
about the sea, how
it filled the dust-
dry socket of earth
to teach us its silent
language. When she sings
now there is no sound.
She grows pale
wings from her
wrists. They cannot fly
though they can mean flight.
Our story begins
with the desire to drown
in an ocean unnamed.
Curved palms make
waves when she tells it.
This means fly,
the way a bird can
also mean freedom.
She needs another way
to say this for the part
when I leave her.
She curls two fingers.
This means I love
you, turns into an air-
plane when she moves
her hand across her
chest to mean the bird-
less fly. Our story does not
end, but her hand will
reach the limit of her
body. And she
will stop telling it.

Ghost Kingdom

You wake in the wilderness
of my body. It should scare
you. And it does.
Will I always be left
alone, arrow of wonder,
searching for the fixed
point of what it was
I meant to you?

Birth Mother as Someone Else's Child

Baby is turning on the colors inside
Baby's head, is leaving
for a little while. No visible
hummingbird waves in baby's
chest. Is baby dead? She is
not moving, makes no sound.
Baby is not my baby.
No problem of how
to love a light bulb. I do not
draw hearts in ink, or
imagine gold rooms with calendars
for her. I do not say *Mother*,
when I point to myself,
do not wait for her to say it
back or imagine any instrument
is made from an echo.

Birth Mother as Birthday Phone Call

May I ask who is speaking
through the fireworks? She is
busy being born as the atmosphere
dulls shades of Independence
Day. May I ask who is calling
this liberation? She is unavailable
at the moment she is turning back
to the first page looking for the blur of her
arms full. May I take a message
for your torn paper lantern sky
floating away?

Pretend I'm not here.

Enough to Change Next Time

Born in the stitches of her.
Grew fields in the dandelion-
fragile of her. Breath mine
enough to change next
time. Sun wrung and
wrung for more of her.
Death dead of fright-
death.

Stitched in the birth
of me. Crying in fields
for me. Breath not his
enough. He wrung and
wrung for more of me.
Me wrung and wrung.
What fear of fright-death.
What sun.

II

His Questions Led to More Questions

Deep drowse of July
he didn't touch me

I combed my mind moonless
with stars for the mood swing
of his arms he censored

the bedroom window I
burst into champagne lit
myself on traffic

can I have more of this
humid dream unbleached
by daylight

heat broken his body
on mine asking
am I crushing you

I have more questions
about dying he didn't
answer

and then he did.

Before I Became the Size of His Thumbnail

When I think of everything
I've ever wanted, I want to lie
down on the curve of summer:
the hill by the spring, when
he was in love with her, and I
was in love with the shape
of the grass between his body
and mine. We drew outlines
of each other, filled them in
with the color of the night
it got so hot we ran
from my house to the spring
just to cool off. And when I asked
if he thought about dying,
he didn't look at the water,
which was the color of how
wrong I am when I say we were
swimming in the summer crushed
sky and he was mine, which is not
a color, but another way
I've missed, continue to mis-
understand. When I say I want
to sleep for a long time,
I mean I want to lie down
until the vision comes: he's still
you, and I'm me, but bigger;
and the whole arc of earth is enough
for the length of my spine;
and if you have something
you want to tell me,
you'll have to scream it.

It Sharpened Against You

There is a blade in my head
and I'm afraid of its sharpness:
I drag a sword the distance

of sleep to keep you or I spend the night
alone cutting stones: we have different ideas
about what we mean: in the stream

of morning you draw me out
from the darkness: say you dreamed
of an ax, so you planted a forest.

His Hands Bloomed a Field

When he had hands,
they were many
or they were enough
to light me on
light. As a feather,
my body was not touched
enough to levitate
open. Palms opened
on the bed. Unmade,
when he had hands.
His work was honest enough
for morning song or so soft
I slept through him.
When he had hands,
I had hands under me.
What did I hold
there, was something there
to pin above his head,
what was in the dark
when he had hands?
I had a master. Fat with
moonlight. My work was
skinned. Knees sin enough to need
night bleeding through slits of
light. My body poured out
light. Unmade morning.
When I did not have
wrists of night, he held
knives so soft they slept
through me, made my body. Stiff
as a board, he had fingers, light,
enough. For each eyelid to close
each open eye unblinked. Looked
asleep. When I was not.
Enough. For he did not have hands.

He Held the Lack

like a summer storm of fire-
flies and sex. Like a body can be
perfect. His is terrifying:
sharpness of a needle, soft
bleeding. Like hot-
cotton pain. He brings me
the world makes me wait
inside so he can drive the car around
the rain in my head holds
the door open. Like a mind
can be perfect. His is next to
mine is always in his
head is delicate electricity is
dragging a balloon across the floor.
He is sometimes missing
a sock all the time. Am I too
bright-sided can never hold
what was missing I wonder
if strangers think I'm pretty.
He is was. I wanted the all
of the aboveness of it. Always
hovered over the bed adding more
versions of myself over us getting higher
how far before I can call it deep
space dear astronaut you left
for so long everyone you knew is dead.

We Borrowed Light

The photograph flattens washes us
we can't tell the difference time-
yellowed paper keeps you
a blur movement flawed
machine I remember
your name I remember
you me silent you saw
I couldn't how alone
we were you started
to tell me never finished

Because He Could Not Stay

Bees white

Because he lives in fear of touch

Before they fell mute they hovered his hands

Because the venom he could not hold

The color that contains every color is not a color

Because he could not vanish you

My body was covered

Because you think of him in terms of light

Soft and at first like snow

Say what you mean

There is so much I do not know

Bees

A drift of white because he could not stay gone a drift

In Rooms He Built

length of dinner table

Cradled in candlelight,

he placed candles on floor-boards

But he did not want to
imagine doors but she did
not want to imagine doors.
So he reminded her of the car.

filled her with empty rooms

up the stairs down
the stairs up the stairs
down the stairs up
the stairs down the stairs
up the stairs down the

lit them

I mean he reminded me
of a car I mean I remember
the car ride he told me he used
to be a house of needles
and he tried to die there
I mean you you wanted to
die and you tried and tried
and I tried I mean I am
trying not to believe in
the miracle of you in this
car or any moving body
with doors I mean I was
trying not to believe in
a universe so careful
Careful, careful. I was
carving out dark places
in my body where they could
build rooms I mean I do not

remember where they were
driving only that you didn't
tell me and I didn't ask.

lit them

When I Cannot Find Him

my brain is islands I let it
go up and down streets
again this town is better again
when I cannot find him he can stay
everywhere I unbraid what I know I was
with him when he found out
I was with him after
the funeral he wanted me to come over
on the floor he had questions so
many he didn't ask for
answers I didn't know silence
could be an erasure forgetting
is like silence I remember now
all those walks we took
I was quiet he was always okay
with it.

*

My brain is not islands I want to unbraid
what I know from what I know he cannot
stay everywhere I know other people are living
here many people each with a body each
with a name a mother made knowing
we were not meant to hold one thing only I desired
drowning I remember thinking
his body was whole enough to hold something
like light or sea knowing often we are made only
of what can make a body after all or again.

He Speaks with Thunder

I harbor still, sick with sea
and shark-filled silence: *he*.
Nothing but the lightning
harbored against my sleep-
wrecked body. *He*: sinking
teeth into the ship of our
flesh, unhinging his jaw
for more. He asks the
thunder to speak for him.
It gives its sentence in the
language of exile; says, *you*
made this dusk night-less. Or
it says nothing. Nothing
like the relief of lighthouses,
he pulls his teeth out for me
to find, dull with beach and
weather, in the sand of sleep-
later. It is the only way he
knows how to say *I'm leaving*
now without thunder.
Nothing like the still we
summered, weathered with
unsick slumber: *now*. I drown
in the sea I call the wide-wake.
Now: I do not speak of teeth
or stream relief like I still
wonder if he will wake and
when; and if, when he opens
his mouth, he will devour me or speak.

III

Birth Mother as Dentist

If I am good she will give me
a sticker that says I was
here, but she is asking questions
I cannot answer. My mouth is full
of her hands, her hands
are gloved, but she won't touch me
any other way. She is putting wings
between my teeth, but she is asking me
to bite down, she is asking me to breathe. Finally
a question I can answer: Yes I remember

my first love yes I sleep with my door
closed and still wake with fists
full of teeth yes in the bed of the first boy I loved
I ask if he will brush my teeth
when I am too tired to do it myself
yes he says *no* always that doesn't stop me
from asking I just want to spend hours with the small
of my back on the hardwood floor pressing
thinking about how to stand up
straight I just want to find
pants that hit the perfect length
above my ankle I want to wake on the surface
of something other than a table
I want the sentence of my dreams
to mirror more than the floor of a river
tell me you are a doctor
tell me you have medicine
tell me I will remember this
but not the pain of it for once
not the other way around
and then cover my mouth.

First Night

Everything lost
in silence. Her
heartbeat. Body
heat. Her.

Not my mother.
Her nursing
scrubs. Not yet
thinned from wear.

Not my mother's
daughter. Me.
Not lost. Or all
has been.

No imprint.
Now Mother.
How she holds.
Our jet-lagged dance

slow. The phonograph
toward the ceiling
blooming.

Not my body
not crying.

We fractured silence is ours ends.

Dawning

I can be everything
now that you're gone,
so why not the tired sky?
It is always night.
Or it is not. Or I was
made of emery:
scatter of starlight.
Or I was made of
emery: blackness
broken by. The sky
is nothing more
than a girl born
to hold the aching
mess of sun.
Or this is how
I grew up: bright
with glass bulb
in my paper cup
hands. Or this
is how I grow
up: with my back
to a room that
surrounds me
and never
with light.

Conception

The movement never making
a thing they could hold, my mother
let her belly become a balloon she blew into.
Full of emptiness, my father carried her
far from the black blind of their bedroom,
pointed to the other side of the world.

 a woman the lamp reaching
Are you picturing light?
 a man the bed not speaking
Are you inventing language for what happens when they touch?

She feels the future now,
their bodies, on Earth.
Their holding now a making,
its aching now a call.

Decree of Adoption] Fragments of Sappho

that the Infant mentioned in these be and is]

] you will remember

hereby legally child of] for we in our youth

further changed to a true copy of the taken from and did these things

1.

2.

yes many and (and further the nature of July) beautiful (before me appeared known) things

proven]

named]

made true]

To Mother

She taught me how to love
like her. Without her
everyone became
before her.

There was a world
without her. A girl.
Was not her.
I loved

her like after. Without.
Bodies in graves in.
To touch. Eyes in
petals

taught me. How to bear
the sky of how to hear
to fire of how. To hunger.

Ghost Kingdom

If you harden inside,
I become nothing but
ruby pain, broken,
cutting my way through
you. Your only memory
of me is still the cry

of my sharp leaving.
If you are always certain
there was a wrong way
to hold, you already know
what to call me. But who will
carry the crouching
life that still lives in
the cage of my name?

Birth Mother as Cook at Korean Barbecue Food Truck

Stranger talking to me strange.
In strangest language
shuffled keyboard speaks.
This is my least favorite thing she
does. Go away! I am ocean strain
stranded instead. Instead: You may only speak
in my sharpest dreams.

She is showing me her crown
of hair. Black tangle
of thought. In her voice
she is shorter than I
imagined. She is short grained static
filling bowl, filling mouth.

No seconds I would not like seconds
No I would like to go to sleep
for a long time now please let me
have the lion sleep I'll save you
the fang of dream.

Birth Story

Slice the web
of your hand
with a knife.
I'll tend to it
by feeding you
a sword. I have one

already. The streams
of blood on the cutting
board already sent me
into your dark hand.

Already a saw.
Already a throbbing.
A second heart. Small fruit.
The thought of a sword.

You want this
to be a story
about your pain,
your hunger.

It's not.

Notes for My Biological Father

My mother and I watch a movie,
watch the cartoon dinosaur sleep
on mother's back as she dies,
watch as he can't stop
mistaking his own shadow
for her. When we take a walk,
we pretend the cul-de-sac at the end
of our neighborhood is the valley
from the movie. Distortion
of length and movement, body
of absence, you are our late
summer-angled shadows.

At nightfall, we follow you home.

After the Fire

For Catherine, age 6

My arm still feels the pulse, the kick and pull
of you learning the way your legs work

in the water. I spent that summer carrying you
from one end of the pool to another.

It was there you came up for air
and saw the ivory frame of a car catch fire.

What was small burned infinite, everywhere:
the fist fight of fire, the red rush of lifeguards,

pieces of scorched fender, wheel, hair, skin
floated in the air. I thought of your lungs,

covered your mouth with my hand
to protect you from the smoke. Later,

you told me you couldn't help but see the fire
everywhere.

And I can't either. I'm still the arm,
the lung, the memory you've outgrown.

I'm still standing hip-deep in that water
warmed from the heat rash of hot days.

When you asked me to let you go
so you could see the wreck,

I wrapped you armpit to armpit in a towel,
carried you home on my hip.

But nothing could keep you forever
from learning the specifics of the disaster:

first the lifeguard used his hands
to save her, and then he used his mouth;

after the fire, she stayed underwater
until she ran out of breath.

Tolerize

I ride the carousel
of grief.
my grief is a girl
on a cliff *don't leave me*
don't I don't
remember losing you.
Anger *how could you*
how could you how
is a brass ring.
she throws
pieces of mirror
in the sea
A shining thing
with a handle.
what you took from me you took from me
you are the rain
that made the sea
she drowns herself in
the mirror
I reach to hold on to.
you are the rain that covers her screams

Let This Be the Last Time I Use Light to Explain You

I am teaching myself how
to become a long-distance
runner. The trail stretches
through a curtain of trees.
Sometimes sleeping
hands (mine) in hair (yours)
shines through. The runner
behind me doesn't
announce he wants to
pass: I see his shadow
on the pavement
and know.

Birth Land

*will I recognize anyone will I feel
small on the ground when I land
will I recognize the land if I find her
will I remember to call
home who will answer*

IV

The Sound Is Me

for my brother

Driven by the need to bite
hard on the baby fat of

your arm, I climb from my bed
to yours, where you are

sucking your thumb thin,
as you dream of milk from

a woman. If I always find the ladder,
it's because it is there for me

to find. We sleep, grow up, and sleep
separate; become orphans one

last time. Colin, this life was not meant
to be ours. If it was, if it is given, as it was

given to us once, I will be left being
nothing but a jaw full of teeth, and you

the arm bone they were trying to
get to. If our graves, stacked, form

a bunk bed, if loneliness
of bones rattling still

keeps us from the long rest, then
this: I was not your sister when

I was born, but I remember waking
in the deep-earth of my childhood

bed, and you dreaming below.
If death is nothing but light

drained, we could call it night.
When it comes, I will find you

the only way I know how: feeling
for a ladder in the dark to climb down.

And you will know the sound.