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Predator's Tongue

by

Tara Mae Mulroy

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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Abstract

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Predator's Tongue, a collection of poetry centering on the theme of predators and prey, explores the effects of trauma and violence—physical, psychic, sexual, emotional, and mental— through free verse narratives. The sharpness in the writing forces the reader to see the fluidity of these predator/prey relationships—wounded people wound people. The section breaks of this work serve to highlight growth and development: from “animal,” giving in to base impulses and horror, to “child,” beginning to learn, respond, and adapt, and to “woman,” learning how to be an adult in adult relationships.

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The Medulla Review: “Pygmalion Makes a Woman”

Noctua Review: “The Salt Miner’s Wife”

PANK Magazine: “Daphne as a Housewife,” “Persephone Writes to Her Mother,”
and “Size”

Spillway Magazine: “Ms. Fox”

Touchstone Literary Journal: “the fringe on this arch or ridge”

I.
ANIMAL

“Whoever was tortured, stays tortured.”
-Jean Amery

Philomela

The hawk lusts after the swallow,
dreams of the soft rufous feathers
of her breast, short bill, forked tail.
With his beak, he stitched pieces of string
to the tips of his tail feathers.
He stalks her as she seeks a nest,
the sun sets as red and raw as a picked scab.
The strings bob in the wind behind the hawk,
the air smells faintly of rain, of carbon.
The swallow sails, her plumage a glossy dark blue,
the wink of her streaked underparts when she angles.
When she takes off for an old mud nest
above the maw of a drainage pipe,
the hawk presents her with his fan of feathers and threads,
the dirty white of the threads from old potato sacks
against the wreath of ocher and cream. She flies
in terror: a hawk! a hawk!
He tails her, traps her against a trunk,
clenches her with his talons.
When she calls out, he tears out her tongue with his beak.
The steel factory in the distance spits at the sky.
The stump of the swallow's tongue flounders,
strikes no note.

Ms. Fox

He finds her trembling in a bush, behind a spangle
of moonlit branches, panting, fox eyes glowing.
Her round face, sagging with spinsterhood,
suddenly turned savagely youthful.
He comes upon her, and her head dips and cocks,
her ears picking up the rippling of the stream,
a woman whistling as she hangs the laundry,
the lazy flight of a June bug. *Do you hear it?*
she barks, her eyes and the tip of her nose black.
In the morning, before a lengthening light,
he watches her brush the sleep from her hair,
looking longingly into the pane of her own eyes.
He looks at his exposed belly, scalloped thighs.
The night before, his body made of sleeves
of bone, her teeth at his neck,
the cold making the hair of her stomach, erect
like fur, how she twisted against him, clawed at him,
then tore off, as if chasing some prey.

Gathering an Appetite

I bring a fork, a knife, and a spoon to bed with me.
I might awake to labor pains,
to my body's desire to turn itself inside out.
Pregnant again, belly curved like a cow's ass,
John promises he'll leave if this one is another *dud*.

After Montgomery came out with dwarfed arms,
John never forgave me.
It's your fucking womb; It's just as cursed as you are.
His eldest son would never handle a tractor,
never work outside a horse stall.

I once saw a mother corn snake, threatened,
swallow its young. They were weak.
If the fetus that stirs inside me like an unsettling brew
comes out with any deformity,
I'll eat it to protect it from itself.

The Tanner's Wife

The woman hides behind a stump to watch. Her husband suspends a fox skin over a fleshing beam. Last year, he watched from the window their daughter, her hair the color of turned leaves, run in front of a car. He lifted her from the curb, cradled her head like the pears he palmed for their ripeness: her eyes blinking rapidly, her lips opening and closing, opening and closing. She died in a quick splutter, there against his chest, there in front of their home. He took up haunting the highway shoulders, stalking the deaths of does and coons. The woman took up laundering linens, stalking her husband. The dawn hit the sepia of a fox's fur; its tail twitched idly before it ran head-long into traffic. A clean, unremarkable death: not a mark on it, only its left eye, gold ringed with black, filled with blood. She could see its last rattle as he carried it to his truck bed. In the morning, the woman opens the fridge for the orange juice and finds the fox's head. In a day's time, it will be gone: the brain used to oil the skins. She waits until he sleeps to remove his button-tufted quilt, messed with blood and fur, smelling of his body, those skins. She starts the water. She picks hair from the button's mouths. She remembers when they laid together under this quilt with their baby, her lips the size of a thimble; how their baby between them felt like a warm bag of sugar, impossibly sweet.

Tenor of the River

Don stumbles out of the barn, crying *Sarah, the reaper, the reaper!* His breath catches, sputters like river rapids. His shredded work gloves hang off his wrists and bob in the wind. He toddles to me, weeping, my new husband weeping, cradles his bleeding hands before me. The fingers neatly clipped, palms shaved in a diagonal cut, orphaned thumb. He murmurs through the hanging locks of his hair, *some shadowless thing, some shadowless thing.*

His hands still bleed like the first day. He sleeps constantly, lets the blood drip down the unraveling thread of his bandages into a basin on the floor. As I rub his shoulders, he murmurs, never above the whisper of a distant river, *they burn, they burn like something's breathing on them.* I dress in his overalls to muck out the stables. My hands shake as I shovel up the wet bedding. When the sheep dog noses in, I kick him until he flees.

You want me to die. You want them to eat me. He works his jaw around the toast, leaves the eggs, pushes my hands away. Last May, he beat unconscious the bear that had maimed two children. He pisses himself when I wake him from a nap. I help him change his clothes, unravel his bandages. At the sink I hear a murmur over the river of water, It's got its hold on him; it'll go for his heart. I think, if his heart is no longer mine, take it.

The Locust

God called me to be a pastor,
gave me the hands for it.
At each sermon, they, alone, mimed the savagery
of hell, punching the air with each *sin, sin, sin*.
The front row women leaned forward hungrily,
flinching whenever I drummed the pulpit.
When my hands filleted through the Song of Solomon,
I created nets that drew them in.
They lapped at my every word,
drawn to my office door most evenings.
As the sun settled itself away,
these prim women would sit, hands crossed,
divulging their desires
for rapture. They watched my head hang heavily,
my whole hand searching a page
for the scripture to guide them.

Then my hands started moving on their own.
The right one fingered Mrs. Caudle's blouse.
She smiled, presented her lips,
but I pushed her out, closed up early.
It continued: a fondled sleeve hem,
a clutch of Mrs. Flowers's long hair,
a brush of a backside,
a grab of a waist.

The women stopped coming.
Their eyes followed me,
all of them clumped together after service,
murmuring to themselves.
My hands coveted them, sometimes lunging
after the trailing scent of their perfumes.
Mrs. Brooks finally addressed me,
That was a nice service today, Pastor.
I grabbed her shoulders, blessed her.
Then my hand jumped to her breast.
She stepped back, fell,
arose later only with the help
of the mortician and his underling.

I move two towns east.

[no stanza break]

They hire me, hand me a pitchfork,
watch as I huff over the hay,
silent and ceaseless until every dusk.
Sometimes my hands stop
to run over my length.
The other men turn away from me,
move to other parts of the field,
as my hands rub and rub.
At night in my single room,
I dip my hands in wax until it hardens,
hoping their lust won't turn into need.

The Sheep Child

Mother shed me like the coat
my father shears off her every summer,
leaving me in a furrow, blinded
by the sun beating off the heat-crippled field.
I remember the wind stirring my wool,
my hand finding my hoof and clasping.

The buzzards ringed the sky,
their heads like ugly human hearts.
Father found me, carried me inside,
hid me in the storm cellar.
The dust shores up, stirred by a blind servant
that brings grass and beef.
Sometimes, I hear the laughter of children.
I imagine my father bowed with need
tearing to my mother as she lipped grain.
I imagine pastures and milkweed,
heat scorches, sun rises.
Snow falls through the slats,
tastes like wool.

To Love a Lamb

The sheep bleat outside the window
while the ram dances in the kitchen.
Rejected by its mother, it slept
on a pile of blankets in our room,
drank from a bottle in my hands.
Thomas says it has fallen in love with me;
it runs into his knees whenever he gets too close.
The children that are not mine, but his,
worry it will butt them. They lock it
inside the spare bedroom on their weekends.
I stroke the wood of the door, wanting
to hear a baby bawling. Instead I listen, lonely,
while it bleats on the other side.

Thomas tells a story of a ram
that knocked its owner over in the fields
and when he tried to stand,
knocked him down again.
His son found him come daylight,
nearly dead, bleeding from the ears.

When Thomas comes home, grimy
with sweat and dust from the lumberyard,
I peel his shirt off him like an onion's skin,
smell his musk mingle with the beef in the oven.
Is another woman running her hands
along his back to feel the strength
of his muscles, hardened by labor?
We should take the ram to Ben's.
I shudder, mutely agree.
Dressing later, I discover his dirt
has darkened my torso.
I push the ram outside that night
and cry next to Thomas in bed, listening
as it bleats and runs itself into the back gate.

In the kitchen the next morning,
I hold one of the new hen's eggs,
palming the warmth from the hen's hock.
Thomas and another farmhand
rope the ram to take it to Ben's—

[no stanza break]

Ben with his dull calf eyes,
his filthy, bloody apron.
The ram will not last feel my touch.

My hands cut celery, prune weeds, wait.
Thomas returns with the ram
wrapped in tissue in a small, cardboard box:
four pink chops, each shaped
like half of a heart, leathery and heavy.
I feel their weight, miss the feel
of the ram's snout at my breasts.

For dinner, we eat them seasoned with rosemary.
His children laugh with their mouths full,
remark how wonderful the ram tastes,
tell their father that he won "the battle."
Upstairs, I put a robe over my nightgown,
walk out to the pasture where the sheep
rip the grass out by the roots
and sleep in small groups. Some
patrol the paddock for predators.
I smell their wool,
see a ewe lick the ear of a lamb.

Thomas finds me later crying.
What's wrong? he asks.
I follow him into the kitchen,
drag out the cardboard box
from the trash, and stare
at the blood smeared on its insides.

II.
CHILD

“Only a daughter could have done that.”
-Sharon Olds

Marsha Bradley Hates Her Mother

Hummingbirds have the excuse
that once the feeder runs out
of that sugary liquid, they can beat
each other to death.
But what food can I fight you for?
You with your loose fists, wrist cracks,
the finger bruises you knew
my blouse would hide.
Would anyone mourn you?
Maybe sister. She would cry
over your stinking waxy corpse,
narrate the time you held a wet rag
to her face while her body burned.
What sort of apparatus
would pierce that old bird skin of yours
without fudging those myriad bones?
I'd love to slice you open,
let the steam of your body
exhale into the night air,
pull back that meager skin
and find something beautiful,
something that could temper
the anguish
through which you made me live.

Knights Templar

I wish my father had not been my father,
had given instead his solemn orders,
been a part of a brotherhood,
built coffins and went on walks
with the brothers he lived with,
laid with, and buried;
some men become soldiers,
or doctors or lawyers.
My father became none of these,
but he should have been a monk:
a slight awkward man,
passive and regimented,
with plain tunics
and a haircut to match his bald spot.
He should have forgone his carnal desires;
he should not have been working at that office
when he met my mother,
should not have arrived at her doorstep,
with fat eyes and bad teeth
asking to be loved.

Product

My mother meets my father on an online dating website.

They arrange to meet.

I imagine they enjoy themselves.

He, I imagine, is a thin, red-headed man with fierce eyes
(eyes my mother says I have whenever I refuse to take no for an answer).

She, I know, is a thin, blond woman with trembling hands.

On their second date, he sets her on his bed.

She (I know from our "sex" talks)

remembers the brown carpet of his room,

the door he locked behind them,

her beige underwear that her friends had told her definitely not to wear,

the flavorless gum hardening in her mouth,

the curious pale thing, covered with the same tufts

of red hair, that he pulled up from behind his zipper.

Kennedy and Me

It's 1984.

Kennedy has been dead twenty-one years.

My mother holds me in swaddling clothes, pink,
because I'm a girl, and it's the day

I was born.

She's watching TV.

The Macy's Day Thanksgiving Parade is over.

Time to air Kennedy's fateful hour.

He moves through the crowd,

nodding his fat face,

those dull squinty eyes,

how he and Jackie loaded into that car,

waving here, waving here,

everyone's smiling!

They are driving,

fatefully driving.

Suits running.

The heat exhaling off the pavement.

Kennedy wipes a hand across his forehead,

waves.

His body ricochets and then slumps.

His wife's pretty face,

the sudden horror that fills it.

The baby that is me

in my mother's arms.

The Pearl Kingdom

My mother, high again, suspends a mermaid
above my middle school principal's conference table.
She arranged the meeting,
told him she had something important to show him,
arrived with a mermaid doll and us.
Her face glistens, her eyes slack;
she mumbles incoherently about the mermaid
returning to her pearl kingdom,
pleased at becoming who she was meant to be.
My mother looks at the principal expectantly.
Sister and I tremble. Will he see? Will he take us away?
I clutch her little hand beneath the table,
her hair trimmed like a bonnet, her skin the color of milk.
The principal stares at my mother, his mouth hangs open,
his eyes whip over us:
My sister's hair trimmed like a bonnet, her skin the color of milk;
My neat clothes, my braided hair.
The mermaid lies on her stomach. She is sunbathing.
The principal rises, shifts his belt,
takes my mother's trembling arm, thanks her for her
wonderful presentation of her dedication to the arts.
My mother's eyes moisten.
The mermaid is sunbathing.
The principal tells her,
You have such sweet girls.

Childhood

Mother beat me senseless.
The dingy coat closet
smells of moth balls,
snow sweat, dust stink.
I hold my knees to my chest,
muddying my blouse with tears,
feeling the beating in my bones.
Anthony, the class bully,
will make fun of me.
You're always falling down the stairs!
No wonder you're so bad at sports!
He guffaws!
His big fat nose trembles,
all those pores in his nose tremble.
Mother will say I shouldn't
let him bother me.
Sticks and stones may break your bones,
but words may never hurt you!
I hear the TV turn on downstairs.
She will say she's sorry,
she will say we should go to the store.
so she can buy me something nice.
I will pretend that Anthony will not,
no, he won't, make fun of me tomorrow.
I will wash my tear-streaked face
and let her dress me in a new pink dress.

The Mississippi Delta

My sister and I collect hazelnuts, sweetgum fruit—their seeds like dust.

We want a firefly and its glow, as if it would warm us.
It flies off in its dumb way.

We skim tadpoles, dump their ink-drop bodies into a bucket,
try to make them live on grass and drowned crickets.

After her bottle of whiskey, Mother's hands get rabid.
She drives us to school, skirting the double yellow.

She points out the deer—the antlers, the does,
the carcasses of the ones that fled into the lane.

Daddy sloshes the tadpoles into a hole.
This is their funeral.

A muscle in my sister's hand jumps like a poisoned animal.

Sisters

Crowded in a corner of the art exhibit,
they stare at the mirrors.
My mother would say *their* mothers
should have dressed them,
teenage girls with bodies like tulip bulbs
clothed in matching green sweaters,
black skirts, scuffed black boots.
The blond one cocks her head
to admire the gilded frame mirror.
The brunette stares at her own face
in the small one framed by mahogany.
She pauses to dolly her lips,
squinch her eyes, poke out her tongue.
The blond reaches out tenderly,
slips her arm into the other's,
bending her neck like a reed so *her* face
and her face show in one reflection.
They lean into each other, shaping the letter A.
Similar noses, eyes, lips.
I think of my sister: eyes the color of steel,
willowy, docile. I imagine us
mirroring these girls, gripping arms,
leaning into each other more surely,
trusting that, this time,
both of us will share the weight.

Strait

The winter-blackened trees resemble
my mother's pubic hair,
of the body that stood in front of the stove
panning eggs, pouring grounds,
of the nakedness she felt was as normal as butter.
Her breasts hung like slabs of meat
from the hooks of her armpits.
I wolf toast and jam,
tell her my plans for the day.
She brings me sugar,
her belly drooping over a swath
like a balcony's shadowy awning,
her backside dimpled like a topography map.
She warns me to be still,
remember time is a current.
The light flicks off her thin blond hair,
her roots the color of cobwebs.

Remembering a Time When I Wanted to Know

I was born to a father with a full beard,
knew only his beard
against my cheek, my neck
when he hugged me goodbye—
yet again, goodbye.

When I was seven, I came home
to find a barefaced stranger,
sitting at our kitchen table,
sipping coffee from my mother's mug.
I tore through three rooms, up one floor
while he gave chase,
his white orb of a face flashing
around corners, his belly bobbing
in a way familiar.

I didn't slow until I heard this stranger
shout my full name,
didn't stop
until he railed off
the plot of a story I had written
for only my father's eyes.
Trapped in a corner of our den,
I let him guide my hand to his face,
the face,

I knew only in relation
to airports,
airplanes,
luggage,
miniature soaps,
and thought,
How naked and lonely his lips look.

Age 9, in the Bath

I have yet to have my period, but I do have breasts
or at least the beginnings of some.
My father makes me wear deodorant.
I clutch my knees closer and he enters.

He tells me I smell if I don't wear it, tells me
it's important for a *growing woman* not to smell.
My bathroom doesn't have a normal door.
I can wash my body, but not my hair, he tells me.

It's just a thin board that slides closed,
a gold turn lock, small and delicate,
that used to work, used to lock the door in place.
I clutch my knees closer and he enters.

At some point, the lock broke. I can't remember how.
The soles of my feet and the bones of my butt
dig into the bottom of the bathtub.
I can wash my body, but not my hair, he tells me.

I look at the water, foamy from the soap
I washed off my body.
I eye the eyes of the drain cover.
I clutch my knees closer and he enters.

I hear my father's feet on the stairs,
my father's feet in my bedroom.
I can wash my body, but not my hair, he tells me.
I clutch my knees closer and he enters.

Myrrh

My father always used more stick than carrot.
Lights drew me into his room,
fireflies circling his head.
Some nights, I thought of the green glow
the fireflies made when they ringed
our pear tree, bringing it to bloom.
Other nights, I held my mouth above his,
feeling his percussive breath,
imagining how his lips kiss the hole of his flute.

When he was drunk, I hid in darkness.
I told no one I had known him,
that he climbed me like a bough.
On the third night, he held up a lantern, drew his sword.

For months, I walked, living off salted meats and dew.
Bark enveloped my breast.
My hair: first silk, then leaf.
After the gods rooted me,
I dreamt I saw my father.
He pressed his lips to me
and drank.
The starlings built nests in my arms.

The Night-Roller

After I dress my father in his pjs
and settle him carefully into his twin bed,
he struggles his way up,
sits in his wheelchair,
sets his weak legs into the foot plates,
and rolls out into the evening.
He calls it *night-rolling*.

I hear one morning about delimbed trees—
Owners walking into the crisp morning
to discover their gorgeous oaks and dogwoods
missing *all* of their branches,
the trunks left bare and scarred.
The cops don't file a report,
but rule it some sort of prank.
That evening, as I undo his shirt collar,
wood dust sticks to my fingers.

His left hand, curled inward
like a newborn
from his arthritis, bleeds.
As I pick wood splinters from his cuts,
I ask, What do you do all night?
I'm trying to eat my way to Heaven.

He sleeps for days.
Then wakes. The furrows in his olive skin
seem softer, his dark eyes clearer.
He tells me an aged body needs bark.

The night after he dies,
a tree unzips its limbs
with a great shudder,
and one by one,
he shows me,
like he once mimed eating corn on the cob,
how to eat the branches
and become young again.

Hurricane Andrew

My father complained of chest pains.
The sun always at 3 o'clock,
the clay the landscape workers scratched up
always blood. The trail past the river birches always
muddy, ground flecked with sheets of tree skin,
my mother always calling my name at the mouth
of the path as I pedaled and pedaled.

He died on the table, the doctor said.
The sugar maple always beat the hickory.
Dead finch after dead finch we found at the base
of our pawpaw, feet curled up to their gold breasts.
The sun always at 3 o'clock,
always half-shaded by hospital curtains.

After the funeral, our neighbors dumped the bodies,
decorated our kitchen table with the white blooms
the wind ripped off the vine.

Daughter

After the funeral, she ground the buttons
of her mother's favorite cardigan into a dust,
added shellac, and found she could melt off shells.

Her father watches her line up snails on the porch railing.
With one drop, she leaves them like tongues without their bed of palate.
She captures a turtle out of their creek with a net.

In just a moment, it looks like she's husked it.
Its back so spindly, torn open like a plucked grape stem.
Hard to know how that spine held that weight.

He should take the poison away from her, hold her,
help her comb the hair that riots in every direction.
He takes her to the tidal flats.

A clam's body looks like putty. The oyster, an uncooked breast.
The mollusk, just grey-flecked siphons and tentacles.
They shudder and die, slough out to sea.

Her father weights the back of her neck with his palm.
He shelters her from the sand the wind throws against them.
She shivers, the buttons on her thin shirt the color of oyster shells.

**III.
WOMAN**

*“What matters is what’s left of us.”
-Traci Brimhall*

Family Portraits

We cull the flesh off the bones,
picking chunks to place in our mouths.
We don't know how to deal with anger.

My mother broke something—
a dish, one of my father's paperweights,
once an innocent glass frog.

My father sucked air in and out, in and out, in and out,
walking around the house, his breath rasping like paper bags.
When his parents fought,

his father used his hands as mallets,
then receded to the living room,
called every player that got fouled

“a stupid nigger.”
His mother banged her finger in a drawer
to calm herself down.

My mother fixes her hair in the powder room,
then sets out the plates for dinner.
We focus on the act of devouring.

We don't mention the swath of skin on my arm
that looks like water-ruined paper.
We don't mention the broken dishes

someone has yet to clean up.

The Salt Miner's Wife

I knock the salt shaker over
reaching to hold your hand.

The salt licks up my arms,
clings to the hairs above my lips.

For a measure, I throw
some over my left shoulder.

Mother always told me,
the salt spirits need sating.

My husband at home waters the dried beans,
cooks sausage to stuff the hog maw.

The baby drives acid up my throat.
The salt follows me, it always does.

Other people's salt picked up by wind, water.
Mine clings to my windpipe, my nape.

Forces of nature have little reckoning
when salt latches onto somebody's sin.

You kiss my palms and we part.
The waitress watches.

I will go home to my husband.
He will hear tell of this time with you,

rubbing more salt into his wounds.
He shuffles through our house,

coughing into his fists,
raining salt on us all.

Persephone Writes to Her Mother

Mother, he is a gentleman.
He is a builder with bricks of moonlight.
He knows the secret places of the earth.
He washes the sleep from the eyes of the souls.
He lets them look on beauty.
He lets them tell him they hate him.
In the mornings, I gather berries and apples.
I scrub his back with rind.
I weave spider-spit, eyelash.
He talks in his sleep *pudding, fire, discus,*
the things he misses.
He breathes, *Your body is my orchard.*
I am undulating grass.
I am a field of wheat he parts with his fingers.
Poppies bloom in my veins.
When he kisses me, he tastes pomegranate.
The night crawls nearer.
The moans of the dead roll and swell.
Mother, we are well.

Size

My mother kept old love letters,
pulled them out to show me
how they smelled of men's cologne.
She told me of size and circumcision.
She told me my own father was small.
Timbering around our house,
her body the size of a hollowed-out log,
a sprig when they married.
Sex was something women did, she told me,
like it was starching collars, sewing buttons.

My husband told me he was small.
I wondered: was he really? Would we
be able to have sons? I made love
to him in earnest, thinking, *small?*
growling in his ear, *your cock's so fucking big.*
I imagined him as a little boy, pulling
off his pants with his back to the wall.
I fantasized about ex-boyfriends
who never told me they were small,
who fucked me with a violent confidence.
That little boy of my husband's past
shivering in every corner.

After 25 years and 70 extra pounds,
my father moved into a separate bedroom.
My mother cried into her pillow for a week,
but told me with red eyes and cracked lips,
I'm so relieved.

Marriage

My father started sleeping on the upstairs couch,
complaining of back pain,
only eased on the springs of that couch.
After my mother suggested they go mattress shopping,
he slept on my trundle bed
under my old candy pink-striped comforter.
My mother filled his absence with shopping bags,
bags upon bags filled with new, still-tagged clothing.
Her life became a set of hallways: from the door
to her side of the bed, from her side of the bed to the dresser,
from her side of the bed to the bathroom door.
When I followed her through the corridors,
looking with her under and behind piles of bags
for the swatch of fabric the same as my new wedding gown,
something in me twisted and twisted. *Dear God Mom.*
She smiled sheepishly, holding one bag in the air,
her other hand finally alighting on the swatch, and said,
It's nothing.

Speeding Ticket

The thick chest bounces in my side mirror;
the lips look like someone razored them
thin. I am not hot or seductive or foreign.
I weakly hand him my creased insurance card.

His backside wobbles back to his cruiser.
I slouch in the driver's seat,
floundering for something to clutch
against my blind terror.

Authority: I'm four, facing the wall,
watching the other children
count on flashcards out of the corner of my eye.
I broke a rule
no one taught me.

The officer returns, his clipboard humping
against his wrist. His breath smells
of coffee and vinaigrette.
I sign at the blank.

His blues sink into the blackness.
I cry at my own vulnerability, the sad
fragile shell that slid open,
the well-sculpted nest of paper he left me.

the fringe of hair growing on this arch or ridge

I am dating one, who, I know now,
must shave his unibrow with a black
double a-battered trimmer
like women use to shave their pubes.

I wear gray.
It doesn't matter what he wears.
His eyebrows shadow my cup of tea.
I can imagine our children having those:
adolescent and pre-teen years
with two duplicitous caterpillars
facing off on their foreheads.
Wish upon my future children,
on the 400k unmatured ova
waiting in my ovaries?
Is he the one? Should he be?

He'll kiss me. Brows first,
or will he lead with his chin?

Should I wait for a second or third
with him (if he asks),
or should I seek?

Delicately suggesting
after the exchange of I love you's,
while the blood is still making its slow stroll
back to his skull,
*You could look even better
with just one small \$10 + tip wax job.*
Maybe after I let him see
the scar on my right thigh and my cellulite in
florescent lighting.

He walks me to my car.
Men do not walk me to my car.

The eyes beneath those brows,
blue and green, are searching and soft.
They are bedroommy,
for the missionary or doggie.

[no stanza break]

the reverse cowgirl (oh, definitely)
for firsts and seconds that have nothing to do with
caterpillars.

Home Run

The woman's tightening like a nut around a bolt.
The man's thinking about the baseball cards
in a plastic box in the kitchen, 1969 Topps.
How #23, Lew Krausse, is on the top,
face like a pink dinner platter,
eyes like blue beads,
that gap in the spread of his lips.
He lifts them both up and thrusts.
The woman is thinking about the fingers
of Rollie Fingers, the way they curved
around the ball. How her mother had
his poster pinned up in the office,
that smile beneath that handlebar mustache.
The man thinks about card #50, Stan Musial,
the one his father bought him.
In his pocket when his drunk uncles picked him up.
He screamed and screamed.
They threw him into the pool anyway.
The color bled, Stan's teeth cardinal red.
The man says, *So wet*.
The woman thinks about her mother,
bent over the sink, saying, *I wet myself*.
She tells herself to call her mother.
The man leans up,
kisses her where Musial's teeth bled.
She feels him twist inside of her,
nosing close to her bladder.
A car's high beams cut through the blinds,
brightening their room like a stadium.

The Family of Twins

We wanted sons, but had girls.
Two of them, cake of white-blond curls.
They blow bubbles, play with toy whales,
call me "Maw," but never "Mom."
Their father grows to love them,
to show them proudly to his twin.
He grows to forget how we laid in bed naked,
my ass on a pillow, legs in the air,
holding our hands in prayer for the coming
of two strong sons, two strong men
to carry on the family name,
not girls that would become
dreamless mouths.

My matrilineal line carries the illness,
the one that mutes the throat,
dumbs the hands and mind.
My twin lives in our back house,
burying broken eggshells,
mindlessly patting soil.
Her mouth chews air.
My own hangs open in sleep now,
my husband tells me.
In her sleep, I watched her open mouth,
her soul singing its death.
We were so sure they would be boys.

Playing the Trombone

Your lips in a mild pucker
grab air vigorously,
funneling the vocal breath
into a sustained-fffff.
Lips only, no teeth.

If you don't believe foresight is a curse,
suck a man's dick
knowing he won't spare you.
He only shows tenderness
to the strings of his bass.
You'll wince when he strokes your ears.
When he unfastens his pants,
you'll swear it sounds like a guillotine.

The vocal breath and the lips must go in sync.
When you set your lips to the mouthpiece,
they vibrate.
If your vocal breath stays on one note,
the lips can only pinch or go flabby,
can't change the speed.

He tries to crush the pianist's hands
with a keyboard cover.
You know it's coming.
His fist kisses your jawline.
You knew this would come.
You spit out a crown, a string of blood.
Get up and go. Never come back.
In his hollow in your bed,
tongue the break in your teeth's line.

When you play, the trombone
sucks the air right out of you.

Family Name

My husband returns from the hospital, strips to his boxers,
tells me the nurse shaved his father's mustache.
What if he dies tomorrow and they bury him without his mustache?
he tells me while I hold him, rocking him like a child:

The nurse lathered the swath of skin above his father's swollen lips,
shaved away hair that had hidden his philtrum, that cleft
suddenly bare after being covered for 30 years, covered
since the birth of his first child, when his hair turned white.

My husband saw a part of his father he never wanted to see:
his hands that had knocked his wife to the ground again and again,
bloated and useless, filled with tubes,
hands that had taken my husband to little league games,

played ball with him every day after school,
taught him *blitz, coffin corner, keyhole, loose ball,*
the same hands that had once pointed a gun at my husband,
while a voice he had never heard told him to make good on his threats.

My husband has the same name as his father,
a name he is never sure he wants to be a part of him.
a name that means "God is Gracious,"
a name both tender and frightening: John.

There is something in love that knows an end

I watch my husband sleep,
his eyelashes flutter,
his body soften,
become vulnerable.

I wonder if I'll receive
a call one morning,
while I'm making myself eggs,
if the man on the phone will say,
Your husband was killed,
and I'll see a dull
hook in my periphery
and collapse on the floor.
His body (so vulnerable in sleep)
crushed by a drunk driver.

I cry because I love him.
I wonder if I will cry
this deeply,
after I go to identify
his body at the morgue.
If I'll become riddled with grief,
a grief-ridden woman,
stumbling through life with glassy eyes
because I had lost the one
as known to me as my own hands.
If I'll become just a shadow
in the shadow of my husband.

Fisherman's Son, Here's a Shell

Mara loved a boy named Electrus, a sailor's son, who left for the sea. No ship silhouette on the horizon, Mara fishes crabs and beats them against rocks. She rips open their shells, tears out their insides, to see the lining the color of sky, the only thing close to the shade of his eyes. Piles of muscular legs, torn armaments, blind periscopes grow beside her. The gulls give up flying to laze and feast. When she sinks into sleep, they stretch their wings over her bare limbs, and when her hair falls out in chunks, they collect it for their nests.

When Electrus returns, he can still hear the water slop against the boat when he closes his eyes, feel the waves buckle earth. He finds Mara, his love, just bleached bone and sand. Delicate bones the size of shells litter her limbs, strands of her hair shine in the surf. Her name claws itself out of his throat, into the birdless quiet.

A Vietnam Widow

Do the Martin women house
their hearts in their vaginas?

After I learned Billy had died in the war,
in friendly fire even, blue on blue,
I screwed the messenger of death,
ended up with crabs, and a baby.

As soon as Staff Sergeant Clay
entered my home,
his hat held over his heart,
mumbling his regrets,
it was like Billy courting me
over and over again.
That same Southern twang,
that smile with only one side of his lips,
eyes sparkling like blue fire.

The next morning,
after we conceived
and he was about to get the fuck outta dodge,
I placed my hands on his chest
like palms on a tabletop at a séance.
I told him to say, *Louisa, I love you,*
over and over again.
In the dim light,
it was Billy there,
Billy's long-known body,
Billy's baby in my belly,
Billy's smile in my eye.

Widow's Attic

She stores his skull and the odd bones
they returned to her there,
along with his rusted
fishing lures, a box of clothes—
riddled by moths—jars of paint,
his navy cadet uniform,
apples rotted from their orchard,
wine bottles—labels peeled off—
soil, two rocking chairs,
an American flag, letters—
opened, still in their envelopes—
a sign that reads “For Sale,”
a pocket watch—his mother gave it to him
as a young boy, that he held resolutely,
telling the time to anyone who asked,
carrying it in a small pocket in his pants
his mother sewed in special—
a rifle with ammunition,
a white dress—
hung in a zipped bag from a rafter—
his pictures—
that dimpled chin, those blue eyes—
a never used cradle,
a firebox—the label promising
“security for your most important items”—
a mirror, a wig on a head,
an unmade bed.

Pygmalion Makes a Woman

He sticks his father's laugh in her belly.

His aunt's simpleton tenderness in her fingertips.

His brother's love of finches behind her ear.

He gives her a fart he would know anywhere.

 Girlish—

 sudden, dry, and dirty

 like what a bold girl

 would let off in fun in a dormitory at night.

He houses the slight

 tremble in his hand,

 his morning hiccups,

in a nook behind her knee.

 It puckers like a vaccination scar.

The vapors of his ghosts appear

 like a spider web

 in the color

 of her hair:

his baby girl twirling in his ex-wife's womb

 before she flat-lined,

his brother reading a poem for a school recital

 the night his aneurysm burst.

More Pygmalion places lovingly into the manhole

 in her chest

 and corks with elephant tusk.

She breathes.

 Her breath is the damp stink of lilies.

She swallows.

He feels what a parent must,

 for her throat to spill a word

 or a scream.

Echo's Mouth

My vagina ungraphs, trollops away.
I imagine she dons red dancing shoes,
dances in whip winds on far-off mountains,
rides horses madcap away from the sun's ascension.
Sometimes my neighbors find her, early morning,
belly-up, bloated, hoarse.
They tell me, *We saw her. She must have had quite a ball.*
You ever know where she goes?
I smile, thinly.
At least she returns.

Re-graphing herself,
she puts on a game face for a day in the life of a married woman:
I rise, pat myself with body cream
feed the children eat their eggs and toast.
I watch the dust rise in a field next to the carpool lane
and think about deserts, droughts, the dust bowl.
I dust the bookshelf, finger my mother's old thesaurus.
In the evening, Earl kisses my nape.
I lie back and count the turns of the ceiling fan,
listen to the calendar pages rustle with each revolution.
When I drift off to sleep,
I wonder idly who knows what things she seen
and why I've never followed her.

Daphne as a Housewife

She leaves potato skins in the sink
like opened envelopes,
imagines the quiche growing into a tree.
The spinach pocks to leaves, the yolks, sap.
Clefts of the baking dish lengthen to limbs.

The tree is the man she'd let undo her hair
like the wind unfastens the birch's skin.
He decodes the dreams of dough,
gives her the reason she cried over blackened bread.

When he kisses her, his tongue is like sandpaper.
Morning turns all the lights on again,
faucet cries, *make me one with you.*

Whore's Dialogue

She looks crumpled like kleenex, her solid torso deflated in a wood-laminated booth, the shadows under her eyes prominent in a wash of red neon. I swish the latkes across my plate; she watches me. The waiter sways over, refills our water glasses. *I'm not a virgin anymore*, I whisper. I had waited two years for this moment, finally chosen New York, this late-night diner, two am: I wanted to catch her when she was vulnerable. She blinks, asks, *15?* I reply, *No, 2 years later*. My latkes shimmy in a bath of sea salt and kosher oil. Outside, a woman in heels clicks by, the wind whistling loudly, tearing her knee-length coat, untied hair. My mother picks at her salad, laughs, says, *I didn't wear white either*.

Predator and Prey

When I bent my torso like a switchblade and let Mike enter me outside the neighborhood barbeque, I thought about conception.

The beginning: Jacob wouldn't leave his wife, so I married Bob, the man who carried his bible in a pouch tied around his waist.

The process of becoming pregnant: the New Year's Eve when Jacob woke me on to watch the ball drop and we conceived Simone, the one with his dear Jewish hook nose, the nose I told Bob later she must have gotten from my grandfather.

The originating of something in the mind: of watching Bob slipping off his runner's trunks and feeling something wasn't quite right about this. What was it about those trunks? The way he was slipping them off and watching me out of the corner of his eyes? Why did it feel like suddenly there was a stranger in our bedroom? A smell, so faint, yet I could just pick it up. I watched the air dry the sweat on his body as he told me about his run that evening, the new neighbors, the sunset over the river. I knew, then, even the who and the how.

The description under which someone considers something: My conception of infidelity was... Was I retaliating against Bob by picking up this man? Did Bob fuck Susan to retaliate against *me* for the first infidelity? Why did the whats and the dids of it matter? As I stood and we both awkwardly arranged our clothes, I thought about my children. Simone was probably picking the slaw off her pulled pork sandwich and ignoring the other children. Kathy was probably playing in the neighbor's sandbox, creating sand castles and sand animals to go into that castle. They always watched from the sidelines, their hazel eyes, my hazel eyes, gawking like a bird eying a hawk, knowing somewhere deep within that it is just prey.