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TWINING

by

Kaitlyn Sage Patterson

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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Twining is a collection of poetry that focuses on a theme of isolation and the dangers presented by interactions with the natural world as well as the people and animals inhabiting it. The work explores a childhood split between an ashram in India and a middle school in East Tennessee, the universality of seeking comfort in religion, sex, and companionship in a variety of forms. The work primarily employs free-verse structures.

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And My Mother Called it Kundalini

Gurumayi, radiant in crimson silks,
sits cross legged on her chair
in a small, wood-paneled room.

She waves me forward
I, just yesterday nine, shake
with nerves in blue velvet and lace.

*You asked for a spiritual name,
little one. What did they call you?*
I tell her the name I snatched

from the crystal bowl at her feet,
Pavani, purify. Laughs shake
up from her belly, down her limbs,

into my small hands, fingernails bitten to nubs,
clutched in her long fingers, the color of chai.
No, no. You are Deepali, my radiant light.

She smooths damp hair away from my brow,
whispers for me to close my eyes.
Her sandalwood scent swirls around us.

I wake in a forest, slumped in a circle drawn
in the dirt, limbs twined with jewel-toned snakes.
Emerald, copper, silvering bodies smooth

their way along my slender, childish limbs.
The soft swish swish of their tongues
as they reach into the damp air freezes me.

There are no snakes outside this circle.
Just the screams of the monkeys, the hum
of giant insects, the lowing of the cows.

And I am bitten.
And I writhe.

Protection Mantra

In moments of stress,
 when the seatbelt screeches,
 like the Indian burns I gave the boys,
 still hairless, androgynous on the fifth grade playground
 to punctuate my tough-guy act,
 into my belly, chest, neck
and I do not crash through the cracking windshield,
onto the sidewalk, but rock back into the leather of my seat

I find myself repeating the mantra

Om Namah Shivaya
at once prayer and blessing and thanks.

I chastise myself for this knee-jerk repetition,
evocation of the soundtrack to my childhood. Wish for a different
god, a different history. One where the deities are long dead,
and I don't sit, just forty years distant from the day that my childhood
guru's guru, my sister's declared favorite, Baba, raped a girl, called it
enlightenment and whispered,

This is the mantra, this is *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Package for a Soldier Abroad

The postal worker, Keisha, split her cotton candy
colored lips into a toothy grin when I slid
the cardboard box, address for the Abu Dhabi Air
Force base Sharpied over the amazon.com logo across the counter.

What a sweet young woman, supporting your troops.
It hadn't occurred to me; Tupperwares full
of chocolate chip cookies, lurid Tom Robbins novels,
and suggestive mix tapes qualify me

to join the ranks of young women, supporting our troops.
I wanted David to cut open my box in his sand-swept
airplane hangar, find himself charmed by notes
written on Guest Check pages tucked between cookies.

I wanted to pull him into *Jitterbug Perfume*, where characters
waft like scents through the pages, where sex is necessary,
where he might remember the surreptitious grasping,
our tongues twining together, the reckless need we felt.

Will you fill out a customs form, sweet pea? I wonder how
to quantify the value of cookies baked to fill an empty bed,
songs to wrap themselves around his synapses,
and books to anchor his brain squarely to mine.

A Postal Worker has Tea in the Garden of the One Armed Man

You look as though you need a cup
of tea. It's awful hot today and you've walked,
you walked such a very long way.
I have some tea, cold, that tastes,
well, it tastes blue, the way, I imagine,
that the insides of your elbows might taste.
Is that too forward? I'm sorry.
It's just that you know so much about me, I imagine,
from all the letters and catalogues and packages of seeds.
Would you like to hear a story,
a story to go with your tea? The story of how I lost,
lost my arm you say? It isn't lost though.
I can tell you where I put it. Would you like to hear
that story? The story of where I put my arm?
After the war? Well.
After the desert I wanted an oasis.
In this old yard of the old house that once
was my old mother's old house and old yard
I started to build a garden.
I fed it and watered it and talked to it and loved it.
When the first little pea shoots and lettuce leaves
peeked their way out of the overturned soil,
they began to chat with me. Baby voices at first you see,
they were so young. Wisteria, who was here before me,
when she heard the voices of the youth, my new little seedlings,
she spoke to me too. Told me the sacrifice of my time,
of my energy wasn't enough, and the trees,
they agreed, thunderously, especially my darling Maple.
I gave them wheelbarrow loads of rich fertilizer
which sated them for a summer, but when they sprouted
again, the new generation, they called for blood.
I cut the palm of my hand once a week that summer,
see the scar? I scattered my blood on their roots and they drank,
hungrily, and were sated. Until two summers ago, when my
blood and toes and the little finger of my right hand, see,
weren't enough and they decided, in the night when I slept,
that my arm would satisfy them. The left, that I might continue
to tend them, to give them sustenance, to plant the next
generation of bloodlusters. I argued with my with the pliant carrots,
asked pity from the raspberries, cried over the peonies,
but they left decision making to the wisteria.
She demanded my arm.

[No Stanza Break]

I made tourniquet from belt, gathered my chainsaw,
brought it to life, and laid my arm at the wisteria's roots.
When I woke, no longer screaming, I buried my arm,
and there it rests, feeding her, until she wants more.
Would you like some more tea? It's wisteria.

An Island Nation Which Only Produces Kudzu

I drift into that world where villanelles
grow, wrapped vine-like around iron fence-posts
and the sharp-toothed grins
of fiercely small beings swing with the torches
they carry overhead, hoping for the acid odor
of singeing hair or an ear close enough
to be gnawed upon.

Your titanic typewriter
has gone silent; webbed
with lack of your stomping out our stories,
dark with foot-blood, long dried.

Our black and white daughter
still lurks there, bathing in the ultramarine blood
of once imagined kings, feeding on fingertips
in that booth made of bones,
and drinking kudzu nectar from chipped teacups.
She shimmers, all grays and negative space,
standing out against this place's dangerous colors.

Her eyes blaze at me from under
her spiderweb veil and my ankles
are suddenly wrapped in climbing vines.
They snake around my calves, moving
lazily up my thighs while their brothers
tangle around my arms, tighten
around my belly, grasp my breasts,
and loop my shoulders.

I am held, frozen in her gaze
as these vines enter me, circling
and swelling inside me like so many violent
lovers. My head is yanked back by the vines
knotting themselves into my hair and all I see now is twinkling
pointed grins and kudzu hungrily waiting
to twine round my neck,
until I am choking,
until I come,
until I am blinded and gone from that place.

Playing Flute for My Guru

Zipped into a white collared, blue dress
 (like my eyes, like the blue pearl, like shakti)
 I stand before Gurumayi, during darshan—
 seekers flowing down the middle aisle of the meditation hall
 looking for spiritual names, inner peace, a mantra, a path to God;
and hold a flute,
not my tarnished silver, but showy new gold,
to my chapped lips, blow the mantra—
o-o-o-om
 na-mah
 shi-vay-ay-ay-ay-ay-aya.
My notes twine their way through the hall,
into the ears of penitent seekers gathered in the cold,
marble and glass hall. They did not come
to hear me, seven years old, missing two front teeth tremble
my way through two excruciating minutes of their beloved mantra.

They seek her.

Rapture

We, ensconced in glass, sit rapt
as the sun falls and Gurumayi begins
to chant. *Kali Durga.*

Our voices marry, the women's high
notes with hers. The men's
deep basses rumble in response.

Orange light from the setting sun
bathes her. Her robes for a moment
woven from the light
surrounding her. The drummers
lead us, faster and faster by degrees.
Her arms lift just as the final
traces of sunlight disappear
and we call, blindly, in one voice
Kali, Kali, Kali, Kali.

I see her standing now,
her eyes black, enormous, her skin
glowing like blue flames.

She drifts towards me, smooths
my hair with her blazing hands,
and whispers the mantra in my ear.

*Om Namah Shivaya, now you are mine.
Now you are free.*

Tentacles 1

I fantasize about the similarities between arachnids and octopi.

Both deadly, eight limbed,
with gloom filled eyes,
spiders tick tick their way across the bathroom tile,
burrow
into soft cream colored sheets, to sink their many
poisoned teeth into my lover's hairy thigh.

I imagine that I slide, naked, into bed with a violet octopus, slick
tentacles wrap themselves around my legs
and waist, suction at my breasts,
slip around my neck, grind beak into my groin -
that eight limbed fiend, I would welcome
for its slow poison would bring, along with anguish,
great pleasure.

Blind Leading

At Ray's, a blind man trusts
us to hand him crumpled fives
for coffee and turkey on wheat;
mustard for me, cheese for Clint,
before we sit in a corner booth.

Clint tells me,
your heart is fist-sized.
Strange that something so small
can thump blood to my toes,
to my *brain, two fists together*, he adds.

What other pieces
of me are measured in fists?
How many fists of blood pump
to my fingers each hour?

The bruise on my arm, under
my sweater, mirrors his
fist, bigger than mine.
I suppose his heart
is bigger, his gin-pumped brain.

Evolution of Fear

I hold a grey snake,
allow his triangle head
to caress my neck, his rattle
warning to ring around
my fingers. I place him
in a box of burnished jade.
Led by faceless, chanting voices
I stumble up punched metal
stairs, spiraling endlessly.
Concrete walls crumble to dust
as thin air begins to crush
my measured breathing.
Ravens circle Gurumayi's
jagged throne. I lay the snake
at her feet, an offering, open
the box to fierce rattling—
she commands me—

Leap.

Bedmates

Amélie, an obstinate girl,
spurned propositions of puppies
and kittens, opting instead
for a coppery green boa
constrictor to wind around
her childish fingers.

Named Chloe, the snake
grew with the girl, never
leaving Amélié's side, twisting
up her arm, sleeping through
mathematics and science in the
pocket of her corduroy jumpers.

Chloe shared a pillow with sweet
Amélié's cheek. On cold winter
nights she curled under quilts
next to the girlish stomach. Amélié's
parents worried, and her friends
recoiled, but she clung

to Chloe's soft scales. Under
the bleachers, during football
games, boys were surprised
when rather than young flesh,
they touched Chloe's growing
bulk twined under Amélié's sweaters.

Then came a day when Chloe
grew listless, Amélié's only
bedroom companion stretched
long in their bed, hardly moving,
barely eating. In the dark of one
night, some months later,

Amélié woke, gasping for air
as her lifelong companion
tightened round her ankles,
hugged her ribs furiously,
cracked the tiny bones ringed
in her throat, and struck at her face.

Hannah/Mukti, Sister

Our seva, service, was with the animals.
Though we, ten and twelve, were too young to feed
the tiger, too small to command the attention of the elephant,
too timid to be in room-sized cages shrieking with birds,
each morning we took short, native bananas, mango slices,
and almonds to Hanuman and Shakti, Gurumayi's spider monkeys.
Hanuman, like me, grabbed mango first. He sat on my shoulder, nibbling
the fruit grasped in his tiny hands. My sister Mukti, once called Hannah,
held Shakti's leash. The monkeys, relieved to be free of their
wrought iron cages, plucked hibiscus blossoms from heavily laden
bushes as we walked, drank the nectar gathered in the bells
of the flowers and threw the bright blossoms at us, taunting.
Shakti climbed too high into the branches,
until she felt the tug of her leash, and fell upon my sister.
Tiny hands pulled Mukti's hair and tiny teeth sank
into her neck and shoulder. I was frozen but Hanuman
leapt to Shakti, acting as ever, the loving and helpful servant.
Hannah's shirt, against the dusty earth turned
from dully white to the crimson of the hibiscus flowers overhead.

The Cherry Season

I know the summer
has come when our backyard
cherry tree grows heavy
limbed with red-black globes.
It has been thirty-two years
since we shuffled our
beds and boxes
clumsily into this rectory.
Newly wed, with John's
mutts playing mysterious
dog games beneath our feet.
My belly swelled that summer
like the cherries
that weighed thick branches
deep towards our earth. I stood
most nights, body rounded,
fingers stained, mouth
dripping cherry blood.
John was allergic
to the cherries. His skin
puffed, reddened
when I caressed his face
with cherry-blooded fingers.
I carried our son Miller
that summer. Miller who
so loved cherries.
Miller who, seven years old,
climbed that tree, fell,
fed the cherries his lifeblood.
John cannot look at the tree,
threatens to chop it down
but I cling to it, need it.
Each summer I devour
the cherries, remember
Miller's sweet young skin,
stained with cherry blood.

Ignored

They stem from the sullen earth
like so many young women
rustling behind the confectionary bride,
all bright and softly vying for position.
These wildflowers reach from
their home beside the sidewalk,
push their satin-tucked petals
into the spotlight sun.

Sapling

Heavy footed and balloon headed, I tromp
again down a dusty red road.

The monsoon is just a month past.
While the plants are still verdant, wild,
the roads have turned from mud to dust.

Behind me in the marble walled,
manicured ashram, full of silk clad women,
the heady scents of thousands of cultivated
blooms, and rich buffalo milk chai all tie
together the strict routine dictated by Gurumayi.

I walk toward the village, where sad eyed
cows linger in the streets, smiling and dirty
men pour off brand cola into tin cups.
Women in thin cotton saris balance
a child on one hip and a bucket on the other.

I am sent away by Gavin, who has not asked
for another name, whose blond hair curls
damp against his forehead,
so that Mirabai, also blonde, might toss
her tinkling laughter around him, rest her
hand, not childish like mine, on his.

Thin-limbed youths pause their raucous
kickball game as I shuffle by, their white t-shirts
sweat spotted and crusted with red dust.
They bow, when I bow back, they scatter,
erupting in snickers, turning their backs.

Sapta

As the sun sets over cedar trees
in the Catskill Mountains men
light bonfires in the centers of two
sets of concentric marble circles.

I kick my pink jelly shoes off
into a pile of slip-ons and flip flops
and join the women and girls
twisting around the circles on the left.

We step in unison to the notes and beats
that come from the center of the circles,
droning harmoniums and sitars, skin drums-
front, front, step back, clap. Front, front...

Walls of sound rise from each circle,
blending. The low,
chocolate voices of our men calling
down the hill into the high cream of our response.

*Hari Krishina, Hari Krishna,
Krishna, Krishna. Hari, Hari.*

*Hari Rama, Hari Rama,
Rama, Rama. Hari, Hari.*

Darkness grows, and we are lit only
by the bonfires in the two circles and one
between. Our pace quickens until we are
only turning, clapping, chanting.

I edge my small body out of the circles,
breathless, unable to pace
the quick footed women. I lean
against a rock, breathing heavy

in crisp summer air. Bodies
twist in the firelight.
A unified voice calls *hari, hari, hari*,
and I wonder if my classmates are right.

Wonder if my childhood will end
with me burning in their hell.

Lacking Excess

I wish for Frida Kahlo
eyebrows.

Thick and black,
like a moustache, misplaced.

They have a degree
of willfulness,
expanding like so many Hun warriors,
on a battleground.

Mine are sparse,
arched,
typical.

Those few strands that dare to take root
outside their thin borders
spread like trees in a desert.

Imposed Upon

I write

around

my cervix. (what an awful word)

I avoid pen and paper

move the word

cancer

around my mouth

like hard candy.

Try to dissolve it.

Try to bring back the knowing (possibility)

of white picket fence two point five kids dog and

gold ring.

Which he promises I will still have.

(maybe not from him)

(maybe not my children)

(perhaps no fence)

(maybe cats)

I ask him in my sleep
if he can magic these
cells away.

Long Division

My bed drifts like a continent
 across the room,
 loosing itself from the wall's mass
 and letting the space fill
 with an ocean of pillows,
ejected like cliff-faces or icebergs.

We, atop of it, glaciers.
 Crashing across space,
 consuming and destroying ourselves
 each other, the space between,
until bedpost is interrupted by
 fan blade and centuries twin
 back into seconds.

Tentacles 4

My knobby darling,
preying mantis of deep oceanic caves,
I envy you-
 while you string your thousand embryos
 like so many strings of lights
 from cantilevered coral ceilings
 your children's father rots
in his salty grave.

Blow ocean currents over your incandescent
egg strings, oxygenate them, protect them,
you will not last much longer. You, the perfect mother
 devour your own arms rather than leave
 your progeny-
 and when they are born
you will drift away, resigned to the moments you have left.

They call you murderess, you know.
 Wise little witch, while you take
 his sperm packets,
you take, with them, his will to live.
 He will float, starving,
 until his glands send poison
 deep into his veins and he sinks.

I wish that I could clasp hands with your mate,
 hold his sperm in my hands until my eggs were ripe.
 Watch as your mate, my beloved, withers-
 Our child, simultaneously, glistens and grows.
 Once hatched, I too could let myself drift
 on ocean currents,
cede myself to the cold embrace of the Pacific- let our daughter take up my work.

Infallibility: Accusation

They tell me that I raped you.
Marisa, eyes shining across
wrought iron table, her feet
twined with its legs, states
that your girlfriend Lisa declared
that I raped you, man I once loved.
She says I took you, willing
till this night, to your own bed,
and forced myself upon you,
you who I had loved.

And you, my omnipresent you,
lurker in the corners of my poems,
evader of all blame, but that which I will
now square on your shoulders,
for you, Marisa tells me,
you kept your silence.

Infallibility: Reaction

Need I remind you of

of lying in wet grass, mosquitoes sucking alcohol-diluted blood through our thin-skinned feet, talking about Lisa, what you did wrong with her, always her.

The drooping limbs of the overgrown crepe myrtle, pink blossoms stuck in your hair: cigarette-scented breath with which we dissected the ways we betrayed one another:

Into the kitchen for just another beer before you looked past me and said,
I'm going to my room, if you want to come.

The three minutes you spent by yourself before you came for me, plucked the cigarette from between my fingers, tossed it into the dark.

We play the one album, the only one we could both fall asleep to, before you pull me onto your air mattress by my waist;

your chin catches in the collar of your sweaty grey t-shirt as you pull it over your head;

your impatience with the zipper of my blue jeans, ripping them over my hips.

Our awkward limbs, jangled together for a few rhythm-less, muddled minutes, nose against jaw, elbow against ribcage, knee against bony knee.

My quick reassembly of my clothes after you stated that I ought to go. Now down the hallway, stumbling down the stairs, into the dark.

Alchemical Ash

A fall afternoon, grayscale skies,
dreary rain caresses
a bubbleglass window.
A mottled apple drops
from its tree- God grants
Newton gravity.

Earlier that morning-
weight settled on uncushioned knees
Newton prayed he might be granted
knowledge of the philosopher's stone-
turn baser metals to silver and gold.
His words echoed through his empty house,
settled sullenly on undusted windowsills.

Newton will settle
sullenly alone
on his thin featherbed,
sink into fitful sleep,
wake to an empty house,
unsettled dreams.

Gramma

I knew my grandmother,
before she died. Her hands pulled into themselves,
scrunched by arthritis. Mama says I have
her bright blue eyes, her laugh, her touch
in the kitchen. She kept my childish secrets,
didn't tell my vegetarian parents when I plucked
the pineapples off the Christmas ham
and popped them between my crooked teeth.

Mama wouldn't let me go to her funeral,
didn't want me to see her hairless and withered
from chemotherapy, radiation. Later,
over tea, my mother told me about bathing
my grandmother's body. Mama and Tammy
spent hours washing her
tissue skin in rosewater, painting her nails,
a lady has pink fingernails and red toenails,
rubbing jasmine scented lotion into the calluses
that built themselves on her heels, like they do on mine,
then wrapped her limbs in one of the satin
nightgowns that she so preferred before her body
was taken and turned to ash.

Gramma stood over the stove
stirring fudge with her crumpled hand wrapped
around a wooden spoon before she died.
She asked me to get a cup of cold water
to test the fudge; trickly,
soft ball, hard ball, and when I brought her
my cup, the one inscribed *Sugar* for my name,
she stroked my cheek with the back of her hand,
*No Sugar, get Matt or Travis's cup. You'll need
to have that for milk when all this is done.*

Sweetling

The man I love smells like pie.
Lemons and limes sing
from his earlobes. Sugar clings
between his toes. Butter dances
luridly behind his knees,
and vanilla beans are his musk.

Garlands

I perch on the edge of a stool
in a gray-walled, concrete room
flocked with matrons in bright saris
and children, grubby fingerprints smeared
on the thighs of their cotton pants,
around buckets of blooms
pinched from their stems, chatoyant
when bathed in harsh fluorescent lights.

Our fingers pluck single blooms,
needling them onto strong thread.
We, the children, weave playful garlands
to adorn the necks of the bronze statues
that litter the gardens and paths
that twine their way through this ashram.
The older women pattern their work,
creating adornments for the statues
of the gurus who came before.
Bade Baba, and Baba. Before.

In a corner, with baskets of white rosebuds,
snowy chrysanthemums, creamy gardenias,
and orange marigolds, Mirabai, once called Ellen,
sits in her swami's robes, orange like the marigolds.
She makes the garlands for our Guru, Gurumayi.
I watch her, wishing at once to be allowed the honor
of creating something beautiful to hang
about Guru's neck, to be noticed by the Guru
and to be freed from this room for the afternoon.

I want to run into the sunlight of the gardens
and immodestly climb into a tree,
read a novel that takes me far away.
To Narnia or Middle Earth, on adventures
more normal, more American,
than those in the novels in the ashram library.
I want hobbits and dwarves and talking lions,
not tales of gods whose fathers chop off their heads
to be replaced by that of an elephant,
or blue gods who are entirely too fond of butter.
Instead I sit, threading together chrysanthemums
until the giant brass bell rings and we are called
[No Stanza Break]

to chant the evening chant before Bade Baba's statue,
wreathed in the garlands we wove the day before.

He Sleeps Next to Me, Two Months After He Left

I want to pick the scabs that litter his elbows and knees
like the war wounds collected by five-year-olds
playing out their feverish games of cat and mouse.

The single zit that mars his broad shoulders
begs that I reach over in the slat-filtered morning light
and pop it while he sleeps beside me.

I could do without the aftermath of the sex,
the juttied hip bruises between my thighs. His little round bites
decorate my collarbone like a long line of beetles.

I want to stick my index finger in his mouth
and feel the ridges on the roof, the warm soft embrace
of his tongue. I want to take a sample of his plaque.

His Achilles tendon begs to be sucked upon,
my fingers twined with his toes like I would hold them
if he didn't have hands. Those long, skeletal, beautifully fingered hands.

The dirt collected behind his ears needs tasting, gathered
in the months we were apart, time I could have spent behind those ears,
making the tiny hairs tingle with my unfolding clarity.

I miss the late-night, cross-legged conversations that spill
secrets like wine from a drunken girl's glass and remember that he left,
will leave again. I need to suck my secrets from the loose skin of his elbows.

Reckless

Rosalie climbed high in trees
twisting between the limbs,
balanced on a single toe.
She shot arrows into stumps,
while hanging upside down.
Her mother called her feckless.
Her father only grunted.
One summer day when the hot air
swirling through fan blades
became too much, Rosalie
pedaled her bicycle to the ocean.
She stuck her toes in tidal pools,
caught crabs in the dunes,
tumbled castles left by babes
seeking shelter from the sun.
With mother's warnings ringing
in her young ears, Rosalie bounded
into the cool, frothy waves.
She dove under, floated atop,
and rolled between the waves,
careless of the setting sun.
The waves chilled, sun sank,
Rosalie sought sand
to stand upon, but her toes felt
only velvet water. She tried to swim
her way to shore, but it grew only
farther, and when she swam parallel
the waves tried to drown her,
Limp-limbed, tired, she floated
on her back. She rocked upon the sea
till tentacles came up from deep
and took her gently home.

Tentacles 2

Laboratory doors locked, building empty,
I settle my naked limbs
against the scratched stainless steel floor-
hook fingers through the hips of my black
cotton panties, tug them down past
buttocks, over knees, under ankles and toss
them, squeeze my eyes closed anxious

minutes tick by like knitting needles
marking time
until he slides,
tasting,
down the glass aquarium side,
slipping onto my shins, flashing gold,
aubergine, and finally
my particular grey.

He slips his way up my tender
thighs, suckers biting, tasting,
pulling gooseflesh and my need- my shameful want for this touch-
from the skin at the small of my back.
He slaps his arms up my belly,
drags his bulbous head behind
heavy between my wet thighs.

Briefly, he settles between my breasts
with many arms wrapped around me;
my neck, waist, shoulders, legs marked
by his suckered travel. He moves,
off my neck,
caressing my face,

back into the next tank,
where his silver-scaled meal swims.
I shudder against the cold floor, smile. For in these moments,

I have escaped.

Logic

Twelve, I told my mother that I had asked
Radha, whose given name was Suzanne,
to be my guardian. I was going to stay
at the ashram in Ganeshpuri for another month.

She took a sip of chai, made with buffalo milk,
rich and sweet and over-caffeinated, from the chipped
teacup that had been resting in her hands, swallowed.
You'll have to get back to the Airport in Mumbai by yourself.

I declared that would be no problem. The tumble
swerve race of a taxi in a country without traffic laws,
slipping through trucks and sports cars from the 70's
and carts pulled by buffalo did not intimidate me.

You'll probably have a seven-hour layover in Switzerland again.
I told her that I'd re-read Les Miserables and eat
giant Toblerones. Prop my feet up on my backpack,
ignore the friendly conversation of Swiss strangers, find my gate.

It would not be a problem. But when my mother said,
in a last effort to reason with me, bespectacled, serious,
You'll have to go through customs in Atlanta by yourself,
I had not considered that after travel, I would have to be home.

Irene Louise

At sixteen, I fly from Atlanta to Boston on my way back to boarding school. I become Irene. Irene is twenty-one, a student of political science at Wellesley, and giggling flirtatiously with Anders, a lawyer who lives in a loft. The air on the plane is dim and stale, the cold circles, tightening my skin, bluing my lips. Anders tucks his suit jacket around me, holds my hand, rubs my thigh, and weaves the plots of Russian novels into screens around us, making our two seats private, turning the story I tell him into a truth.

In his private car, he twines his legs around mine, ignores the driver, suckles my neck, bites my earlobes, pins my wrists against the black leather seat with one long fingered hand, and pulls my sweater up to bury his face in the film of sweat gathered between my breasts. I lie, tell Anders that I live in a dorm at Dana Hall to earn extra money. His driver pulls my bags from the trunk, nestling them in sidewalk snow while Anders kisses me out of the car, stuffing his card into my jeans, begging me to call.

Vanishing Act

If he had asked
to kiss you in the dim
amber streetlight
 cocaine still powdering
 his nose, clinging
 to the jazz orchestra
 CD case he used
 to hold the two sharp lines
 he snorted through
 a dirty one dollar bill, you
would have said no.

 Instead he grabbed neck and pulled
 in towards his repaired cleft palate-
 kissed hard, tongue thrust into mouth,
 with searching hands to cover and pull my hair
 tug closer- over the stick shift and onto his lap-
without you or your soft no's,
we shouldn't's...

Fidelity

They sit next to me, sip vodka
to my whiskey. I ask
if they've ever cheated on a girlfriend,
lover. One of the prescribed questions
in those tenuous first weeks-
feel each other, out while feeling each other up.

They look at me from under the lip
of the black baseball cap,
brown eyes suddenly sharply green-
blond hair darkening to black
peppered with silver to match
the skin lightened from olive to pale.
*Once I slept with two girls, two nights in a row,
wound up dating the first for a few months.
Call that cheating?*
I say that I've done the same thing.

The dark eyebrows run to light,
lumberjack hands exactly like
stroking pixyish hands in my bed.
All sound the same, our comfortable lies.

India, Again

Eight mouths sip the green tea I poured
for them, their bodies reeking
of post-yoga health -
the stench of sobriety and clean
sweated soul-centeredness rip me
back to India and the steep walled Ashram.

My first week there is fogged with day sleep
and moonlit novels gulped in the dormitory tub.
In our family's private room, I claimed
the bed where the hospitality staff
(local villagers, never yogis staying onsite)
left a beribboned basket, rounded with mangoes.

Days mirror each other there, everyone moving
in an endless circled choreography, a sapta:
morning meditation, a silent hour in the dark
meditation cave, watching red numbers tick
by on the digital clock and the closed eyes of other
seekers; the morning chant; breakfast in the great hall,
always-sweet bread and small sweet bananas.

I took dinner with other yogis in the Amrit Cafe,
paying for giant crepe-like dosas filled with spicy
masala potatoes or Jarlsburg cheese and sliced
avocados. Drank slimy milk
from green coconuts stuck with straws before retreating
to yoga classes on marble verandas
or the evening chant where rows of cross-legged
seekers twined themselves in wool scarves
and praised the guru in a language they didn't understand.

Lucky

It is good luck to find
that I've stopped reading at exactly
midnight. It is the same luck
that finds me waking with my lover's
fingers – not as long as I imagined,
but sweetly slim – tangled
in my sex-snarled hair.

I've never plucked a four-leafed
clover stem from red, Tennessee earth,
but if I did, I think it would bring
the kind of luck that delivers me
sleep-eyed from dreams,
my face buried in his armpit,
breathing night-air laced with pheromones
and sweat that smells oddly, deliciously,
of urine and beer and cigarette smoke.
I want to hate his smell, his too-short fingers,
to find fault in his small snores and
midnight mutterings in languages
I don't understand
but for their guttered pronouncements
of his once-pain. I seek reasons that this marathon
of a relationship's beginning will not end
with anger, with wine smeared sobs.

I secretly believe that meeting a man
with the help of one of those
Internet dating sites brings horrible luck
and that's how I found myself here,
tracing his sharp jaw.

Nesting Season

When I am left
without any desire
to focus on his eager tongue's movements,
I look down to see his long
fingers scratch his knee—
turned blue in the glow
of his television. The seascape
pictured there evoked the lavender
anemone flowers he thrust at me
earlier, their petals ensconced
in tiny nets.

I pushed his head away,
pulled my skirt down,
stood. He draped himself
on his red couch in my place,
grinned like the severed deer
head hanging on the wall.
Was it good for you?

Not that he cares, not that it matters,
what I seek cannot live in this room.
This man cannot fill the space beyond
my bed, his couch. His distracted fingers
do not know how to soothe me.

Tentacles 5

Mother's cold hands did not shake
as she created me, her little octopus
girl. Her arms, she, held me
me in the brightness of her lab,
her gloved hands stroking my arms,
my round cheeks,
cherished, though repulsive.

I grew in her gloom-
the ghosts of my siblings who failed
to live, these other halfings-
half cephalopod, half human
my imaginary friends. They whisper
to me of a deep ocean world.
I will never drift on the currents
that pull between continents, chase
clouds of baby seahorses as they burst
from their father's pouch, use my tentacles
to snatch fish from passing schools and rip
into them with nails and teeth.
I live to spite her, human as I can be.

Mother keeps me, her sterile
experiment- locked in this laboratory,
studied by men with thick
dark hair, mouths like clams, their tongues
hidden treats. They speak with me grudgingly
as though my tainted limbs, my tentacles,
scream monster though I ache as they do,
these young men in white coats,
to be held, stroked, loved.

I need to wrap myself
around some man's hips, feed.

Dangerously Close

Late on that January afternoon the sunset flicked
off the new snow and filtered through my windows.
It was a grey kind of light. Illuminated
dust motes floating down into the space above
our piled legs, in between our toes.

I tested the way my head fit
into his arm socket, my small fingers between
his long, knobby ones. Fingers

that had so recently been pressed around my neck,
tentatively resting, then recklessly –
using collarbone as fulcrum to pull
himself further into to me, closer to me.

But his cerulean eyes look past
mine, seeing someone, someplace else.
Dust covered violence; the third man to light a fag
from the same match, mucked face illumined first
by cigarette, then by sniper fire.

After he left, while stripping the dampened
cotton sheets, I find the drying rind of the tangerines
we peeled and ate in a pile of down comforters,
knee to knee, naked and shivering.

Ossuary

He's all bird-bone toes,
stilt walker legs,
and curving row of stacked spine rings
top matted with bookshelf shoulders
and necromanced skull.

This cobbled together
by delectable hunks of sweet
corpuscles tied just here
and right
over there,
tumbled together into this man,
tangled in pillows,
dangling me over the precarious edge
of the bed where I created us.

East Tennessee

tends not to get cold, rather, crisp
like heirloom apples picked from
scraggle-limbed trees by flannel shirted
youths itching to get back to the warmth
of underquilt space they share
on slowly darkening afternoons.

Under stars, we collapse,
beer softened, onto a blanket
on my roof. It felt almost warm,
but that could have been his hands,
could have been the years of wondering
if I maybe didn't know him better
than his wild-haired young wife.

He will talk about sharing
too many beers when he gets home.
I will wonder if he remembers the crisp
January night when his wedding ring
left indentations on my fingers
while he held my hand
while we sat together in a bar, before the roof.
I will wonder if his loneliness and mine
might together be more tolerable.

Cravings

I've been craving dosas,
Indian crepes filled
with spiced potatoes
or Jarlsburg and avocado.
They taste like my childhood,
like sitting on the overly manicured
grass outside the ashram cafeteria
listening to Swami Umeshananda
tell us about our future-
when power plants power down.

We'll have to farm,
and the dosas balanced on trays
on our knees will be a taste
we imagine as we ladle our
nightly porridge. I laughed then,
but I haven't had a dosa since
our last trip to the ashram,
after my high school graduation.
By then, disillusionment hung
heavy around my shoulders.
I only left the room once, to eat
a dosa on the lawn, tray balanced on my knees.

Risk-Eaters

My marigold-colored sloth of a dog,
snores louder than he did –
the he who pulled me tongue deep into a kiss
before I'd heard him say my name,
before I'd heard him say hello,
before I'd heard him say yes to my yes.

He who drove for hours through the Appalachians
to meet me halfway, to bring my breasts to his mouth.
He who just before he pushed inside me
for the first time pronounced,
If I knock you up, I'm walking you down the aisle.
I smiled, pulled his neck to my lips,
and didn't blurt the *no's* rolling through my throat.

In the tangled sheets of the next afternoon
we toyed with the idea of driving to Gatlinburg, like Vegas,
before I pulled his shoulder to my mouth,
set upon his naked flesh like a half-starved mongrel.

I left the next day, covered in tooth marks,
fingerprint bruises, and fairy stories spun from threads
of saliva strung between our lips:
his boots in my closet, his jacket nestled
with my wool pea coat, our books sharing shelf space.

He who has moved faster than summer storms
over the wet Delta of my new home,
has shaken my father's hand, but will not meet my dog.

Imagined Retreat

The house I built
for our happier selves stands empty,
furniture wrapped in sheets.

It's nestled between verdant hills,
carpeted with birch forests. A lake is slung
around the house, open windows catch cool breeze when
we lay nose to nose sharing deoxidized breath,
my fingernails tracing your hipbones.

Our door is painted blue there. Ivy twines round
the porch columns, leaves catching chipping paint.
The rooms are sparse. Velvet window seats gather dust like snowdrifts,
and my desk holds the stories I wrote to tell our children.

I still go there from time to time,
wander through our rooms and breathe
in the stale smoke of our sex.
It is lonely on that wide front porch without you.

On Being Lost

After two days and nights spent filth covered,
sleepless, he sits. Back pressed against dirty
shelter wall in momentary ceasefire.
Pulls billfold, cigarettes, and Zippo
from his pocket, flicks flame to cigarette
before thumbing from his wallet
the photograph of me, sheet twisted
round my naked body in the early
morning light on my porch last spring.

He flashes it at his buddy Eric.
I hope I get to see her again. Catches
himself, imagines in the haze of mortars
that he will clamor into his Chevy
tomorrow, drive through Virginia
to tumble from the shower into
bed where he'll kiss my neck to wake me.

Instead, he'll rise to barked orders
another two months, sweating in desert air.
I will wait, imagine happiness where
none has lingered lately.

Tentacles 3

After a white-coated day
documenting your growth,
meal times,
pavlovian response to the electrified
red ball in the corner of your tank.
I decide, love, how your days will unfold-
I settle onto a bar stool,
greet the sushi chef,
take my first sip of sake.

He pulls from a cooler
deep magenta frosted by ice and cellophane.
Unwrapping octopus,
colored like your companion in tank six
when we deny her snacks.

He deftly pulls one tentacle out, slices,
sets it on a plate.
Each slash reveals
white flesh, ringed in coquelicot red, like the marks left
when your arms suctioned my thighs,
almost glowing.

Head is tossed into a trash bin, discarded
like a condom wrapper, an obstinate lover, me.
The chef offers me a piece of the last arm
to part ways with the body-
sliced thin, resting on a bed of rice.
When my tongue settles over it, I taste you.

Overly Modified

I'm told I like too many modifiers,
too many long-fingered hands,
too many twining limbs,
too much afternoon morning (mourning?) evening twilight light.

Maybe just too much light?

I sometimes want for end-dashes,
and at times I positively pepper them
like glitter falling from a stripper's tight ass
over my lines.

Maybe there should be more strippers?

Less sex. Fewer bodies smashed together
looking for love or redemption
or understanding or someone to help
swallow all that damned morning light.

Why can't I keep my mind about the kitchen—
stainless, loveless kitchen.
At least there I could store
my punctuation in the drawer
with the cutlery.