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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

The University of Memphis

December 2012

## Abstract

Patterson, Kaitlyn Sage. MFA. The University of Memphis. May, 2012.  
Twining. Major Professor: John Bensko, Ph.D.

*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 Krishina,  
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 Tolblerones. 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.