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Live Anyway
by
Daphne Maysonet

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2019

Abstract

My thesis manuscript is a collection of narrative, confessional poems entitled *Live Anyway*. The story my work seeks to tell is one of childhood trauma and the complicated attempts at creating family by one who has tried to love her initial caretakers, lost, struggled with the emotional damage in the wake of that loss and then gone on to love again and again. My poetry explores parental mental illness alongside an adult version of the self who has chosen romantic love as a way to keep faith in family and in humanity. The story is one told with the magical-thinking embedded in an occult-leaning Caribbean culture and a sensitivity to the natural world, through the lens of a preoccupation with pop culture consumed in visual art, music, television and classic Hollywood film, and in spite of spirals through anxiety and obsession. Concrete, juxtaposed images and clear dramatic situations provide the entryways into themes of desire, disappointment, memory, survival and the relentless will to repeat and recapitulate romantic love and domestic bliss.

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Recover

My mother, my sisters and I are piled high and new
into my uncle's soft-top pink Amigo, a car no longer
known by name. We are leaving New York and spin
past relentless stalks of Pennsylvania ash trees

along I-70, where hours ago, high-rises struck
the skyline in their familiar vanity, belonging to us,
like tall glass children. We have left behind most
of our possessions. We are human cargo and otherwise

largely nothing. In my wake, there is a brown tabby
I'd abducted from her family of strays. She is now
twice-orphaned in the city, and I imagine her, sooty
and begging for milk or combing the alleys for bread.

I am four, so I don't yet know that this is a story
I shouldn't be proud of. I don't understand shame. Except
I want to say I ask my mother why we are moving,
and she tells me nothing. Instead, I am briefed before

the trip or maybe just after. I don't remember.
You can erase whole histories by not remembering.
But my mother asks me if a man has ever touched me,
asks if *pa* has used the dark or the quiet as an invitation

to my body the way that he has with my sister. I say no
with my four-year-old brain and my four-year-old mouth,
and my four-year-old heart is a red asteroid that crumbles
when I find out my stepdad's a monster. But what I mean is

I don't remember. Later, *pa* will return to our building
in the quiet April dark to find that his wife left him, took
the kids. He will invite the neighbors into our house to take
our dresses, our toys. The neighbors dissect my mother's

collection of vinyl. We never get anything back.

Night Crawling

He tells me he used to collect bugs,
when he was a kid in Corinth, Mississippi,
that he's caught each kind
of shimmering devil by its half-moon
wings, listened to humming
clouds of them rage under lamp posts
—his hand breaking a swarm's shivering
edge to stop a beetle in its orbit.
We haven't been dating long, so I don't
get sick thinking about it: the way
it must have fluttered against the roof
of his cupped hand & how right I am
for fearing something that is always so close
to the end of its life & how useful it must be
to take action in the face of everyday
danger. To shuffle into an ear instead of praying
for safety from the memories of your mother
calling you ugly, letting you know
there wasn't a place for you
in this world. And relatively speaking, it makes
more sense to drop from a doorframe
and scatter into midnight than cry
on the white bathroom tile
when you remember you will lose
everything you claim to love.
There is a kind of recklessness in survival.
The desperate beating of compound wings,
the will alone. We haven't been dating long,
but I can tell you, he won't remember
the beauty of a thing in panic.

Beg

I know I'm crazy because before you left for work yesterday,
I asked you fourteen times
to tell me why you loved me.

1. The way my eyebrows move.
6. My questions' nasal upticks.

And after fourteen answers, you turned away
from the swinging
lamps of my eyes

slid in your Jeep and drove to work as if you had to.

(I know what you're thinking.)
Tell me what you're thinking.

So I stayed home with my worries, laboring over each one
(they need me) by combing your underwear drawer
for signs that I couldn't keep you

—perhaps a Polaroid of an ex or
a fingerprint of unknown origin.

I find nothing and think about the ways
the world keeps us from ever truly keeping someone.

I call you fourteen times to make sure you're still breathing.

I know I'm crazy because I've never been afraid to die,
but I'm terrified for ticks,
and I wonder if they die

a little between deer and dog
because being without a host
is the same thing as
being without a home.

I wonder if our collie knows this when it rubs against an arm of ivy,
lifts its leg over the azaleas—

if perhaps the leg is an understanding
that the price for an anchor
is a little bit of blood.

Does this sound crazy?

After *Yokkaichi Wind*, Year Unknown

At evening bruised sky burns the edges
of the floating world. Dusk diffuses
there better than anywhere—the vague blue
mid-fall against the water’s foreground,
the objects populating the landscape
already frozen alighting by nature’s gimmick.
Sea grass splays left below the pier.
A tree feathers its black branches against
the ghost. The universe leans graceless
under its invisible weight—dances and falls
in the phenomenon’s singular proof.
There are two types of people in this world:
One bends reckless as the thing he’s lost
wheels endlessly out of frame; the other opens
his coat to the wind and catches it.

Limerence

Maybe I've never done cocaine but passed on a baby blue dinner plate
of powder orbiting a room, watched partygoers emerge like annuals
under a brand new sun, oversaturated & urgent, leaking artificial joy,
losing heat in chatter, sick roses. I've seen them fill a vacant floor
with dance, like a Dogwood suddenly crests with white blooms,
its branches relieved from loneliness. Or sometimes they vanish
into the bathroom in pairs, breathing in poison candy together—electric shock,
first rain—surfacing alive again. But what type of temple is this
body that we have taught to worship its own sensation? Forgive me—
I'm only summoning the feeling: one wild dove landing
in my chest, spreading its snow-white feathers, and I remember
what it's like to have wings. Delirium. That feeling of anyone
beautiful calling me beautiful. The sky looking down & calling me blue.
Every time: *Finally*.

Memphis Snow

Another past-noon morning, and a snow pacifies
the city, holds each building in its station. The galleries

and doughnut shops meditate along Union Avenue.
Cars drift mute in their procession through January's

inherent blankness. You wake to find me fixed against
the windowpane of my high rise, buoyed by flurries—

great antidotes of grief. My awe takes shape in your periphery,
disrupts the little wars we carry: fathers and lovers

we've lost, debts we've never paid, and the campaigns
we've waged to buy this love and struggle

through the owning of it. Now chill falls on all our failing
plans like remedy. On my bed in the soft erasure

of winter, blue stars stir in the widening sky,
and we are the stillest we've ever been.

Pastoral Self-Portrait

My canvas wants
to look more like Kansas.
There is a medium
for everything and nothing,
and I paint a lake
of the latter on my jaw.
It's not that I hate myself,
it's just that I have to hunt
every pore to extinction.
it's just that my teeth
are a heap of busted
windows that landed on top
of each other after the last
twister. Flip a switch on and off
in the bathroom, and my skin flickers
under light bulb, then sun,
like a flower head toggling
between two truths. I choose
a shade of base that can swallow
a herd of freckles.
I want to be less all the time:
first prairie, then snow.
It's not that I hate myself,
it's just that no one's ever said
that my lips are the wide,
blush blossoms of wild begonia,
that the small valley between
my neck and collarbone
is god's country.
What I mean is, here is a picture
of my face, and it's all
that I have. I am drawing up
a blue print and marking
the edges. I am pouring gasoline
on everything the sky touches.

Positive Visualization

Today the movies are right. You fit beneath
a red umbrella that opens itself to you, a wide wing
flashing the chrome of its skeleton, the rain shattering
against it in bright, fat nickels. There is a trench coat
for this day. A petticoat for this day. There is a fountain
where your mouth should be. There is a marble Venus
at its heart. There is a seashell just large enough
to cover her sex. There is sex where you want it
and how you want it and for as long as you want it.
All of the crying happens off-screen. There is always
a Jimmy Stewart. Always a Paul Newman. There is always
a Sidney Poitier ready to fight for you but, also, ready
to fuck you. You are Ginger Rogers, and Fred Astaire
never did black face. You are Marilyn Monroe, who never
mixed the pills with champagne. Actually, you did it sooner
—definitely before 30, critics agree. Everyone is a stranger
you paint with lies. You were born in this lipstick.
A stranger you paint with lies until you seem real.

Getting Ready for a Mardi Gras Maritime Ball

I returned from the mall to our studio,
tears etched black into cheeks, bags of clothes
and make up at my side, and proclaimed
the news of the party being costume mandatory
had ruined New Orleans for me. And you, defeated,
sighed, reminding me of both my power and shame.
So I sunk on the couch beside you and recanted.
I'm sorry, I said, and buried my insecurity
in the vacuum created once I'd lost your attention.
And in this silence, I could hide my reasons
for feeling ugly again: the way we must always know
when a woman has trimmed the delicate curtain
of her bangs or arched on some yoga mat
like a mermaid frozen in the exquisite panic
of being caught in a fisherman's net, panting
and radiant, a pearl among so many jellyfish.
Instead, I paraphrase to save you the trouble
of listening. I say I don't feel like going
to a beauty pageant—the way any gathering
of more than one woman becomes one.
And you dismiss my logic with a grunt, so I grunt
in kind at the silliness of it all. A parade
you will never understand. There is no saint
for plain girls only a queen of beauty, wielding
her long fingers like so much fear made flesh.

Fitness Plan for the Next Big Tragedy

When it comes, you'll be whittled to fighting size,
a small, hard future you trained by burden, fat cut
from your body in inches and fingers of hope.
The kind of lean muscle only misery makes. You learn

to weigh the darkneses within you and without. Swallow
the deaths of your grandmothers who never made it
to the States, never learned English—even as their husbands
fucked their ways through the dream, dancing the sun up

with any light-brown, rose-lipped girl in the *barrio*.
Or make a small meal of the job you lost to someone
younger and less qualified—your friend who summered
in France, who understood the world's scope

as well as you know the landscape of one wound.
Measure lovers who've fallen to estrangement—
years and miles conspiring against you in equal portions.
Sustainable failure. Every time you are not the prettiest

girl in the room, and the honey of your blood crystallizes
in each artery. Pain is sweetness leaving the body.
Have you ever loved someone but not loudly enough
to sing it over what tells them they are not meant

for this world? Think of it this way: each candle
blown, each kite downed a dosing—

the pills
the pills
the pills

but you live anyway.

Trauma Survivor Not a Thrill Seeker

so when I see a man launch from behind / glow-in-the-dark cobwebs, lifting his body / into the scarlet beam of cheap bulbs, / groping toward a young woman, eyes liquid / with fear, I know that so many houses / have been haunted in this way. talk to me / of thrills: do you think a bungee cord is like the love / that will deliver you from ending it all? / a daughter who will discover your still body / and call the police, the ambulance, the men / who will pump your stomach back to hunger? / have you ever been the cord? I'm full of thrills. / have you ever worried / about being homeless? ever been homeless? I imagine / it's not as much like camping as you think. / I've been trying to get out of the wilderness / my whole life. there are water moccasins / I've repressed. they are always leaning toward / light and must be buried. this is my adventure. / I confess, I haven't boarded a roller coaster, / but have you ever ridden down a highway, / your mom laughing in shotgun as her drunk boyfriend drives / you home again? have you ever wondered what home is / and how to spot one? or woken up next to a lover / and realized he was the boogie man the whole time, but you invited / him in and started calling him shelter? and how / do you live with yourself now that you know / you ran upstairs armed only with the flashlight / of your curiosity and pointed it in his direction, like one / of those girls in the movies, like one of those dead girls?

Fat Me

Yes, I'm remembering that night again—
your second date with a married girl.
But, no, not you this time, and it never is.

Not your lips, but the words that file out
of them. Not your hands, but the shadows
they seed. This time, it's the doorman who falls

on us, drunk and stumbling, slaps
his cell phone on the table and demands,
who's this? He shows you a picture angled

out of my sight. Your laugh is the soft
thing on which a question can land.
My laugh obscures the answers no one's

asking for, like *what's that diamond*
on your finger and *what offices inside you*
keep its vows? The doorman ambles away,

heady bully, trying to recover his arrows
mid-flight. You turn to me and say, *fat me.*
But it never is you. That night, I'd eaten

a hive of questions I had for you or swallowed
the kind of confession that's like poking
a honeycomb and dislodging one bee,

knowing the whole colony will follow. I wanted
your secrets released, to catch them drone
by drone, to taste them—sticky and fragile,

but I was already so full.

Last Living Witnesses

Seamus is leaving, and he's taking nothing with him:
not the feathers nor the Fancy Feast nor the red dot

that eluded him, not the plush tuxedo of his body
nor the tail that punctuated it like an exclamation point.

Today he is leaving, and it's not like a few summers ago
when your mother, who was charged with his supervision,

called you in her ancient panic to inform us that he'd gone
missing, and I dispensed equal rations of forgiveness

and blame until the third day of his absence, when he appeared
outside her screen door, chirping and prodigal, after his journey

in the suburban desert. Today you, alone with yourself
since the divorce, haul eighty essays, graded and ungraded,

across campus in the rolling suitcase you bought
because it was easier on your bones, while Seamus' lungs

stop rising in his chest like two broken accordions,
and when I lift him into the crate, he empties his bladder

on the hardwood, and, inexplicably, he is dying.
This is when the body starts giving up its burdens:

food and piss and the story of our courtship—everything
abandoning its post for higher orders—a hierarchy

in which we don't know where memory falls.

Ballad of Spring

Spring is always talking to me—selling
its birdsong and sky. I watch green surprise
the trees

even after all these years, reminding
me of what I'm missing: reliable revelation

of beauty, promise of fruit—that sweetness forgiving the cold.
Spring could sell me anything.

Makes me think I need daylight until nine, shows me what love looks like between
two blue jays who were strangers
minutes before.

Shows me how your eyes shutter when you laugh and pull off
the black windows of your shades.

All of this can be yours, Spring tells me
recklessly.

So I witness the Redbud blossoms shatter against the wind and listen
to April, the hymn
of its rain, Earth transfigured below those fingers,

and I want to swallow all cardinals and speak
the language of hope again

to learn the slow dance of feather and air
of bee and queen.

Letter to a Rock Musician Who Discovers the Piano

I used to have your entire discography but lost
it in the divorce: even your tenth studio album
you said freed you from the tyranny of the guitar.

Don't get me wrong, I like your earlier work:
all bravado and hairspray, young goths stinking
of cigarettes & oil paints, crooning about dope

& writhing under the green neon of '80s Berlin.
But by record ten, your marriage was crumbling;
you'd reached the latter half of your thirties;

you probably had a dog whose bark drummed
the plaster ceilings of your empty London flat,
rattled cups of breakfast tea rather than whiskey;

you probably had sons at their mothers' houses;
you probably had a piano & enough silence on which
its arguments could land. Those for keeping

the antique milk glass you'd hunted for the wedding
and those for dividing the library instead of selling
every book for profit. Those for wanting someone

to watch you reanimate onstage in the magic
of your art and share the burden of creating it.
Each desire, each key striking a bruise with its hammer,

soft jabbing at injuries in a swift blow-by-blow,
notes sparring & glittering from its big ivory mouth
until grief had sung bloody its victory over love

then circled back again against its own judgment.

Devotion

Even now
after what you did with the pills—
your plan to disappear so easy, like pulling a ribbon
from around

your throat,

untying

the black bow between darkest hour
and simple violence, I stand in a doorway
amid rooms, black except projection light,
grey and blinking,

film fluttering

different truths playing

at the same time:

Me, in your bed, running
my fingernail up and down
your spine as if it were mine

—that Earthly delusion of owning what we desire—

you shivering

and turning back

to kiss me or is it

you / faced away from me / your eyes green planets turned / toward a secret star inside you /
you / entering another dimension / your thoughts becoming smaller stars / your thoughts
becoming flying saucers / your thoughts becoming meteorites / streaking the alien sky of your
mind / a parallel universe in which I left you

Is imagination your sickness?

with my eyes closed / I see your figure / blacken the wing of the plane / and something whispers
/ I can save you / from 20,000 feet of blue below

belief makes the danger real
belief makes the danger real belief
makes the danger real belief makes
the danger real belief makes the
danger real belief makes the danger
real belief makes the danger real

After William Eggleston's *The Red Ceiling*, 1973

In the gallery, we are passing his later work:
some brown desert, some brown ditch—
it's not really what we're here for. We want
the greatest hits compilation. The pictures

we can point to, cry at. Photos we can take
photos of—to tell everyone we saw it
in person, and if your heart stops before
you see it, no, you haven't lived at all.

Like that one of the ceiling so uncomfortably
crimson it saturates your memory as if it'd built
itself red on will alone—a beating thing
that never existed without color and decided

to divide itself into chambers one day so strung
three thin white wires and hung a light bulb
at its center, as if it wanted to keep
something warm, illuminated, alive.

A room giving itself a purpose, opening
to you simply so you can say you came
face-to-face, and understood it just on a feeling.
A familiar devil exhausting itself on love.

Signs

Sometime after your message, I began to track the stars with devout intensity. I studied
their backward spins & trines, blessed the black canvas of a new moon,
deciphered the deep negotiations between Jupiter and Mars, but mostly, I watched
my phone, like a looking glass. Here and there an omen:
a Doo Wop song said you loved me, and I could finish proofing the office reports; a cat video
reminded me of your zodiac, proving I was on your mind, so I could
continue to whip the eggs for dinner. And, yes, I could eat in peace because my rising sign
is in Cancer and yours in Pisces. And perhaps I could go to bed
early because a thunderstorm just one thousand miles from you, meant you'd be caught indoors,
brooding amid a family quilt, a few books of Bukowski,
a lonesome dog
a Hank Williams record
a glass of Old Fashioned with a gilded rim
and a billion signs of my whereabouts.

And the night was quiet, like your liquid chestnut eyes, and then the day was blue, like your
work uniform, and the Dogwood petals tossed themselves in my path, like tarot cards.
And my palms read, like quatrains, while the wind whispered on and on, like a jazz jockey,
coaxing a desperate caller out of a future broken heart.

The Telling

Summer turns up with its craft,
batters the concrete, swings hope,
like the weight of a drunk,
and stumbles graceless into everything.
I spend all my best days lying
inside the tomb I carved
for your living body, trimming
my loneliness with your dead confessions:
a memory of your father
who howled beneath a sheet outside
your window, then sprung
from his shroud to surprise you,
your mother's laugh an echo
of the rare joy, and you, stunned
into love by bearing witness
to the love that made you. The house
empty during the telling, your boyhood
stood before us like a shrine scraping
our sky. I tried, with my telepathy,
to fill its shadow with love.
And you, bent into my shoulder,
your hair sweeping between us
like tender razor blades, your body
sharpened by deliberate hunger,
I shook in your holy tears and left
the prayer of your flesh unanswered.

What the Street Witch Couldn't See

I was still inside
the bar when the lights flashed on,
revealing the dance floor's archipelago of litter
that the staff swept into being in the wake
of the punk show: gleaming aluminum cans
and candy-red plastic cups, stickers, cigarettes
—the residue of our night naked now against
its will, its spell unraveled without ceremony
in an instant. A hard light can turn anything
into trash and call it the truth.

You, all this time, had been outside,
discovered by a drunk clairvoyant. She asked to see
your palms and proclaimed you'd lost a brother
ten years ago to which you replied, *no*, then
did you lose someone close to you ten years ago?
No. And on her third failed reading, she still
could not yield a parlor trick
from this imagined grief.

So she proclaimed you indecipherable,
guarded, and abandoned her account, moving
on to another concertgoer.

And I came outside to meet you in all of your
sweet unknowableness, where your possible pain
and joy spread before me, indistinguishable
and soft in the low light of evening.

After Eggleston's *Untitled*, 1965

Sunset washed the day in blonde
as a boy counted the supermarket carts
that scattered the parking lot, glittering
aimlessly, unburdened by eggs
and shampoo, grazing
at the grassy medians in the midcentury
evening. Wild as they were, he gathered
each one, driving it through the field
of asphalt to its station,
each slid into another with all
the precision a boy's hands yield.
You watched him as he guided his palm
against the metal, coaxing them together,
each indistinguishable from the next,
like one silver skeleton. Do you
remember? All gold hair/eyes/skin/hour.
America, where is your golden boy now?

Musician

A sudden tremble of strings,
and the notes pierce and fall,
resolving for air, and, like all
milk teeth, departing

in equal shares ease and sting.
A tongue loosens the drawl
of silk ruin, drags into a crawl
-ing howl, each plea winged

into an ear, each ear just skin
blossoming toward its desire.
Song is the study of the flesh,

so, sweet Blues baby, I've been
noticing how each sound fires
ready to lie beneath the next.

Summer Storm

There's a porch in Memphis,
where I sit with towers of pines

in their yellow smoke & grass
in its suffering & mosquitoes drunk

again on someone, and all else
working, in the cloying heat,

on wine, sprinklers & blood, waiting
for the real thing, studying

the smell of water in the air
until we think we can recognize

it next time. But nothing comes
from the sky on will or wishes.

Clouds flower furiously overhead
of their own volition. Wind sighs,

and all of us lean into its relief
& accept its power. Then sudden

& familiar, cutting through what
it touches, taking dominion, rain

answers the tenderness we asked for
—senseless beauty flashing brief

& indiscriminate in liquid and light,
splitting us, then returning to sky

in some final act of cruelty against
we who, even after the last storm

that ripped through our homes
& left us to rebuild & order the rubble—

want—inexplicably—to own it.

After Eggleston's photograph, Untitled, 1975

Everything was the color of summer—the grass vulgar green shag, the woman's body a cross of white cotton paisley obscenely abandoned by consciousness, her hand a careless eggshell reach for her camera, her hair a web of strawberry, each bloom dotting her gown the same rose of her mouth, which rested slightly ajar, just south of her high, gold cheeks, her eyes fluttering blue in the cheap ecstasy of sun and Quaaludes, her heart a deep purple peony in her chest, flowering furiously, saying what August says, saying what a photograph says, a little death in each.

Beaching

After, a boy knelt
in its shadow—his fingertip testing
the white blubber
in shallow jabs. It was colder than waves
beneath the parachutes
of his shorts, colder than
the violent-blue eyes
of another boy who'd looked back
at the carcass
before bounding out of view.

Alone with it now,
after all who'd come to see it breeched
in sun had groped
the fork of its tail and pressed
its belly's loose ooze,
his eyes traced
the ridges spoking up its jaw:
the head's precision yielding to glut,
like a church being built
from the top down.

He wondered when
it had sailed to him and if
it'd been living when it did
and what it would be like to touch
the raw beams arcing
high and wide
along the roof of its body
or hear his voice skip like a smooth stone
against its halls or cast
a flashlight over its impossibly large heart.

He wondered how
something that charted the whole world
in water could wait so long to be taken
by the tide and the cold and the boy
and enough dead fish
to make sand.

Journal Entry

It was all beautiful and terrible, and it made me think. There was certainly a man involved or maybe even a woman. There was light diffusing on someone's soft-strong shoulder. Something smelled like something, which reminded me of my mother's red robe or my father's love of the Beatles and himself, which reminded me of my ex-boyfriend. There was weather—so much weather—and it was just as much within me as without. Imagine the setting but animated to the point of character. It said something important, whispered an affirmation: *Yes, what you're feeling is love or misery.* Picture a certain bed. An inevitable moon. It gazed into my eighth-floor window, covering me in bright sleep. Or it hung behind the clouds and just the smoke of it flashed with loneliness, asking me to meet it somewhere at a quiet hour, asking me to jump.

After Man Ray's *Tears*, 1932

He shatters beads against the mannequin's heart-
shaped face like cold, wet stars—

colorless

except for shadow, ordered from lashes to lips
like a map of Orion suspended in

clay.

Like something a god would do.
He upturns the ivories of her

eyes,

fixes their dark centers outside of the frame.
Two hollowed moons sail

skyward

beneath their artificial brow, toward a grief
of his making. Like something a

god

would do, he doesn't show us what we need to know—
instead cuts the image into just the

monochrome

picture of a sculpture—the likeness of a girl chosen
to wear her sorrow like so many false

diamonds.

Forgiveness Doll

You can turn the brass key
at my back, wind me up & listen
to my track looping absolution
in the high-pitched voice
you say I use only with you.
I'll stay smiling with my whole
plastic body. See? You can tell
because my arms & legs don't cross,
so something about me is always
slightly ajar & holes invite
everything to fill them.
It's not the everything's fault.
Trust me, I was made this way—
a pardoning machine in pink.
Just speak the code I LOVE YOU
and my circuit board core pings
all green lights. GO. *Fuck her*
& *don't explain*. You are
just a human man & she was
riddled with holes. I am lifetime
guarantee. I am nylon pin curls
& permanent red mouth frozen
in understanding as if you never
shoved me back in my cardboard box,
where through its plastic window
all I could see was her real body
with you inside it and your nightstand
lifting a figure of the Virgin Mary
who watched me immovable
and wept.

Argument for an Unreal Baby

last night i dreamt of the baby again

 i didn't know whose it was except mine

a thing made entirely of my own desire

 beating its wings inside my head

until i recognized its will and caught it

 elbows scrambling the bulb of my belly

the baby & its warm alien weight answering

 the pit of my body like a bright red animal

i can't sway any man to swallow with me

 little beast of fiction imagined pink

little egg that never hatches home/body

 last night again the baby reminding me

of that which makes me real

 me & my body my body & its yoke to time

me little mollusk that may never make a pearl

That Feeling When You Tell Someone Mom Tried to Kill Herself

Something like taking your clothes off
and erasing all of your best features—

your small hands, your wide, dark eyes—
leaving only the parts you've been hiding:

hideous violet heart and all, naked
on the pedestal: bad angles

in unkind light. And you are only
the little girl searching the trash cans

for pill bottles. You are only the note.
You are small hands but trembling now,

dialing 911. Your eyes still wide
but more importantly, witnesses

—sockets carved by untimely grief.
You are the only one home to imagine

what the world does with a motherless child.
You are police station, statement, courtroom,

statement. The only foster child your friends
know. Your audience looks away from

the shadowbox in which you've pinned
your beast of youth—shy in their discomfort

at feeling guilt. And then you look away—
shy in your own guilt at causing

their discomfort. You step out of the spectacle
more alone with your ugliness than ever,

reminded of what keeps you separate—the creeping
ill of loneliness and your own folly

for believing in it. But sometimes the feeling
is different: You take off your clothes

and the light is soft to your beholder, and the poem
is much shorter then. It goes, *intimacy*.

After Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*, 1963

What Lichtenstein knew of despair was water: a woman capsizing
in a squall of ink and paint, in the pale blue arms of unnatural disaster.
If we are to believe him, we must believe that a woman can be overcome
by the mystery of her own tears; we must subscribe to the endless cartoon
wave of grief; we must succumb to her unexplained martyrdom; we must assume
that, perhaps, she wants it this way.

What Lichtenstein tells us of love is drowning: the way the tide frames
the pink curve of a woman's shoulder or makes her weightless against the current
and carries her like a sailboat blown out of a harbor and into the eye of a great storm
and how she learns to want the storm
and tightly shuts her eyes
rests her head against the tempest
lets her left arm fall below the surface
and sighs

I don't care

My Mother Watches *Walter*

My mother watches *Walter*, doubtless the same as twenty years ago, when young and married, she wanted to know if she'd ever find love. Now, at evening, she has seen any impossibly curvy talk show host herald his return in the brief interlude between cereal ad and Spanish soap opera. She quiets the young and old children of the house: mouth puckered to finger, 1970s-styled eyebrows curling down—her facial muscles no less fluid than a child's. Her voice, a Spanglish music, diphthonging at the *cállates*. She sings a rare silence over us. Walter appears on the television. By name, he is man, but to see him, is much more. Sometimes a ring-gilded hand cuts over a crystal ball as a throaty jazz of astrology bellows from his inflated mouth. His cheeks have been built up like pyramids and smoothed over into high domes like mosques. His eyebrows, like my mother's are lines, matching disco-era capes and jumpsuits that float around his body in violet, eggshell, emerald. My mother imagines that she is sixteen again, practicing dances from *Saturday Night Fever* with her brother, the twirls and struts turning her feathered red hair to scarlet wings in her father's basement. She imagines flying to a heaven full of cocaine and childhood crushes and where Walter presides, genderless and omniscient as he is onscreen. By name he is man, but by my mother, mystic. I watch her as she watches him chanting through sun signs and third houses. Her pupils gaping and liquid, devour him with desire, fill themselves with enough of his warnings and promises to keep her from mixing the pills with liquor again. I watch him, too. I read his oversized gestures. I study the way Gemini sounds with short vowels. When it's over, my mother will ask me if I've understood what he said. To this, I will lie, yes, and she will smile as I struggle to translate my horoscope. When it's over, she will find the rest of the children of the house and deliver their predictions. Sometimes one will feign interest; mostly, they will try to talk her out of forecasts of great loss or love.

Guide to Selecting a Plantain

Everything starts with the plátano, waving
at the height of an island palm, within the safety
of numbers. Here you'll find the starch variety
—the flesh that's not yet pinked by its tropic summer.
If you time things, you will arrive at the right moment
to separate the young fruit from its sisters.
You always want the green ones. The ones
that don't yet know what to be—will let you decide.
The kind you'd never see Carmen Miranda wear
like a crown as she Salsa'd across the stage partnerless
and wagging her hips against her skirt's metal skin
like she was her own shining armor. You want
the unripe kind—costing next to nothing.
Meant to absorb the flavors of whatever touches it
—indistinguishable from, say, yucca
by its good-natured texture, its colorless body,
its heart for accommodation. You want it that way:
four servings of nothing, dense air. Boil it for mangú
or let your hands deform and shape it
in the image you desire. Call it mofongo.
It tells you it loves you. It takes a bruising.

After Church's *Niagara*, 1857

Wet lace clouds the drop and drapes
its deep greens in white. Earth hangs it
glittering like a lonely bride fastened
to the cliff as if by vow.

From every coast, men come to see it.
They freeze in marvel at its fullness:
the way its water laughs over the rocks
that scatter its borders, then crashes

into the low roar of longing, or rounds
its jagged edges, then falls violently
into view as if baring itself
for the first time. They watch the living

current and measure their bodies
against the width of its mouth. When
they leave, they do not take it with them.
When they leave, they do not fall.

Silence, Sympathy & Other Self-Erasures

The water on the stove hasn't reached boiling point
inside the kettle because tea is mostly a waiting game
another timeline through which I accept my subjugation
prove love is accommodation a virtue is the skirt of a bell
or what becomes a bell if only his hand decides it should ring
if he calls what sound it makes pretty otherwise fear
the vague mirror of any silver or what becomes a mirror
if he should think to behold himself for his best version
his unbroken smile or the time he delivered gallons of water
to neighbors in his parish after the hurricane not the moment he lost the truth
to his secret madness forgot himself and me in the noise
of his psychosis. no one could hear me talking over it. when water is quiet
unstirred doesn't it turn to poison soured by mosquitoes
disease something about the act of running we say means it's living
roaring over the shoulder of a cliff murmuring against stones

Apology Poem

I'm sorry that you hurt my feelings. I'm sorry
that I'm capable of pain. I'm sorry that I'm wearing

this bleeding tongue in my mouth, this bruised plum
in my chest. I regret always wearing something so sentient.

It's all my fault. I'm sorry that this is too much for you—
that I'm always too much. Too much nose from this angle.

My breasts too heavy. My head too full. I'm sorry
that I can't be less for you. Me-lite. A thing so weightless

it's worthy of love. I'm sorry someone taught you to want
so little, sold you an empty throat as a well at which to toss

your wishes. If I could diminish. If I could be noiseless—
flower, air. I'm sorry that the only language I've ever learned

is confession, so I told you a story about the church
your hands could build if only you let them. It's too bad.

I'll have to live with this guilt of making your feel
guilty. That just my kindness makes me culpable—

it makes me sick. Let's be fair, I asked for this. I took off
this dress; I made you this offering; I asked you to like it.

Talking about Fireflies

Because the beauty of the firefly is so obvious, / its magic is performed every year— / its talents well-documented, dissected, / a child could tell you it's worth catching. / But did you know, sometimes one can starve / for the three months in which you witness it / blinking its yellow lantern in search of a mate, / flashing a lightsong with every chemical / in its body. The world tells me / I'm too romantic every single day / when no one watches the red bird rest / its warm breast, its bright wings / on the chain link fence and everyone babbles / about insurance. I have never bought / heart insurance; although, it is arguably / my best asset; although, I wreck it constantly. / But it just keeps going anyway. No one cares / about the heart anymore. Passé. When we met / you said something about burdens / and the things that carry them. Did I ever think / fireflies get tired of being our guarantee of joy? / I haven't seen you in days. From the porch, / night makes the sky indistinguishable / from the dirt. The same darkness.

Elegy for an Inner Demon

It's only that we grew

closer over the years us hand-feeding
it spoonfuls of fresh red worry watching sadness devour
 dribble demand more
sometimes it's the fighting that creates the intimacy the way teeth
 are said to *bare* it yells back calls us our own
names for defeat and we emerge closer in the end having survived ourselves
 something in the way it has a natural talent plays our losses
on strings paints them all in the hands of the masters or wants to knit us a quilt
 with locks of hair from our dead satin from the wedding
hope steps in is sweet but doesn't take so we stroke the hair
 of what's sleeping this devil we know half-wanting
it to wake it goes on like this for years people ask us how it's doing
 to this we must say *I'm fine* there is only
one story recovery allows we do not crawl back into the crook of its arm
 we do not publicly miss the monster we do not search the eyes
of healthy people for it we are the healthy people the healthy people now

Homing

For years my mother filled the charged and charred air
between us with *I'll send you to your father*, which didn't stop

when in the summers, I began to board planes alone
to visit him on the East Coast. To be sure, he was charming,

just as she'd said, his ties skinny as a Beatle in 1964, eyes colored
from the same green gene that his father and son had inherited.

His jokes terrible enough to endear men and women to him,
his arm never empty of some beauty he'd only introduce as "friend."

I never saw the knife my mother claimed he chased her with while
both peaked on rum and coke (not Coke) nor heard

the threats he'd pitched her way like razors shearing
what little romance was left between them. This was all history.

After years of birthdays without cards and aches without comfort,
he'd summoned me to fly across the country to see him—myself, nine,

a little bird without trill. He praised my choice of slacks and split chin,
having decided at some point in his life to never pass up

the chance at another mirror. He sang "Strawberry Fields" and spoke
of his hairline or about my brother who'd wisely forgotten him.

Then one summer, I'd come to spend more time with him
than ever before, which is to say that I barely saw him

as he'd not taken time off from work during my stay, and he'd not taken
on any sense of how to feed a child after all these years.

So when I asked to eat something that wasn't Raisin Bran or to leave
the apartment at which I'd been trapped, he replied that he'd send

me to my mother, at which point I realized they both had won
and I was free.

After Alice Coltrane's *Firebird*

no dialogue between the clarinets / the woodwinds quiet of their softer plots / the harp delays its
chance to interrupt / the nylon strings pull low against a wound / the organ makes its case for
certain doom / the horror of the bird so close to death / inside Prince Ivan's fist and then released
/ in spite of creeping bass and marching blood / the bird regains itself one feather less / the
violins explode like shattered glass / and notes wave from the harp as climbing wings / gold
breast gold pulse a cymbal splintering / a horn a bird celestial and light / a thing survived another
sky to sail / and Alice in the wing conducting flight / a jazz transcending loss' endless strike /
Stravinsky yes but never at this height

New Year

January travels slow but appears suddenly,
like an impending swan
so long a dream of down at the horizon
until, closing the distance, it cuts
its unmistakable form from thin grey air.

Its terrible wingstroke an unyielding ax
of muscled white, shearing
away what's passed:
a stag soaked in floodlight on the highway,
darting behind

the woods' black curtain. The speed
at which certain death becomes life again
& again. The moon leaning icy yellow
against a bridge from which the girl
did not jump. Everything witnessed and survived.

The cruelty of survival—not the war,
but that we must exist
in its great white infinite wake.
The wing forgets its brokenness. I forget
myself, beginning & beginning.