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A POET'S GUIDE TO LOVING YOURSELF

By

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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 2021

A Poet's Guide to Loving Yourself asks the question, how do we move from grief of losing another to a place of empowerment and fulfillment? The poems explore the dual nature of being human, such as wanting independence while also desiring the affection of another. The use of narrative and emotionally driven language show the evolution of a woman transforming from a place of self-doubt and insecurity to one of wholeness in her place in the world and an understanding that she is valued for simply being. The use of the aubade is heavy in this collection and the speaker moves from private voice, to create emotional rapport with the reader and public voice, to share with the reader the speaker's lessons. The collection moves through a story arc that reminds the reader the paradox that when we accept ourselves, that is when we can finally transform and step into who we are meant to be.

Table of Contents

Section	Page
1. Epigraph	1
2. Air	2
After pulling The Judgement tarot card for the 5 th time	3
The Hands are an Extension of the Heart	4
Wild Salmon	5
Facts About Peppers	6
In An Attempt to Understand My Mother, I Write Her Story	7
Poem for my Inner Child, Whose Heart is Learning to Beat Again	8
On Wanting to Be Saved from My Loneliness	9
In the Time of Trump, Covid, and Global Warming I Place My Faith	10
Aubade for Desire	11
Invoking the Muse: Mary Magdalene	12
3. Fire	13
Fuck Being Left	14
Dearest Shakespeare, I Know You are Honored	16
Oranges	17
In Defense of the Word	18
In Conversation I use the Word Fierce	19
Aura	20
Late Night Prayer to Mary Magdalene: A How To	21
Mom Says	22
Montage in a Car	23
Ode to Living Alone	24
4. Fire	25
Violence	26
Machine	27
We Decided That When I Returned From My Trip to the Beach	28
You Would Be Gone	28
Dear J,	29
<i>You okay by yourself?</i>	31
On Telling My Hairstylist I Want to Shave my Head	32
I Speak Mantras in the Bathtub Guided by Mary Magdalene	33
5. Earth	34
Ovulation Under the Full Moon	35
Sestina for the Reptilian Body	36
Speaking to a Wolf in Captivity	37
Spider's Web	38

Summer Bull Frog as Celebration of My Body	39
When I Say I Want Money	40
<i>What have men ever done to you?</i>	41
Midnight Phone Call with Mary	43
Ode to the Moon	45

“He has prepared us so that we might become fully human.”
Gospel of Mary 5:8

Air

After pulling The Judgement tarot card for the 5th time

I start finding feathers everywhere.
Owl feather in my mom's back yard,
Symbol of healing and strength.
White feather in the front seat of my car.
Symbol of peace.

Like a child bending down to pluck
wildflowers for her crown,
I grab one after the other.

Before I know it,
my life is a path of feathers,
compass to death.

Dead birds on the side street
dead hawks on the back lawn.

And like the birds, every night
I die, but I continue to wake
to life as consistently as the light
of morning. I have another chance
of return. To give back to nature
what was never mine.

Sometimes I open my mouth
and hear a song,
the noise of an animal.
Sometimes I open my mouth
and hear the sound of longing,
the sound of being human.

The Hands are an Extension of the Heart

When a bird flaps her wings before she flies,
the meditative motion before lift-off,
she gifts the world gratitude. What of the
bird with wings that cannot fly? She shows
her gratitude by eating shrimp and algae.
By resting on one leg. By creating heat
standing shoulder to shoulder with other birds,
eggs unhatched at their feet. Chanting
the subtle notes of nurturance.
Ritual birthed from their blood.

What if my hands, my own flightless wings,
find nobody to touch, nobody to hold?
Would my own love be enough?
What if, what I've heard about idle hands,
isn't true? I want to believe that
the most important work takes place
in my own body. I want to believe that
hope isn't contingent on some grand gesture
like an unknown step off a cliff.

What if I never stop grasping for another,
would it mean I am broken?
How will I continue to reach for a book
at the top of the shelf or for a pen
to move on paper? How will I apply pressure
to my bloody wounds with a merciful tourniquet?
I grasp at pain to open a window that
lets the morning birdsong in.

Wild Salmon

In front of a jury I place my hands on
The Bible and vow to tell nothing
but the truth. I wasn't summoned
by the courts. I'm a voluntary witness.
I signed my name on a letter
to the Judge, *I want to share what I've seen.*
Thought I'd be good at it, I am
always staring out windows.
As a child, when my brother
came home from playing, blood clotted
in his nose like a bowl of smashed blackberries,
I knew who did it. In school,
I could spit out every variation of the
color green in a single leaf on the Magnolia.
But now, I'm not being asked to
regurgitate silly observations from a
second story window of a pink painted room.
Council keeps asking me to point
to where the pain is and I say
my eyes, my throat, my ears.
I fail to mention the violent
thrashing that happens day after day
in my heart. Like a wild salmon pulled from
the stream it whips up and down. Desire constantly
buzzes. A subtle ring of the ears that over time
I learn to ignore. I fear if I name it, it will kill
me.

Facts About Peppers

after Dorianne Laux's Facts About the Moon

Bell peppers only have one type of seed—
that means, if you are anything like me
and go to the seed store and ask for red pepper
seeds or orange pepper seeds,
the woman working behind the counter will
look at you funny because apparently
it's common knowledge that different color
bell peppers are just peppers pulled at different
stages of their growth. It makes me long
for the orange and yellow peppers
that I learned recently are the early stages
because it seems people only want the red
or green peppers which are the late stage
which reminds me of the dean at my high school
standing in front of us giving a speech
with his red pepper heart cracked open towards us
begging that we stay present because
he always wished he was in college when he was
in high school and always wished he was married
with kids when he was in college and there we
were smacking gum and rolling our skirts
way above our knees and passing notes and there
he was wishing we would understand but
knowing we couldn't just like he couldn't.

All I ever did was try to escape those days.
I wonder how he felt when I, a young blooded orange
pepper walked into his office to tell him that on Hillsboro
road, right in front of Vanderbilt University, on the way
to see The Chili Peppers, I was pulled over for smoking
weed and drinking—
wonder how he felt when I told him that wasn't
anywhere close to the first time. I would have
given anything to trade places with him then.
But now, I wish someone had plucked me out
of the ground in that moment so I could stay a
young pepper forever.

In An Attempt to Understand My Mother, I Write Her Story

Her mama told her
Don't come home until the sun goes down.

She held it in most of the day,
didn't relieve herself in the sandbox
or down the street at the basketball court.

She raced home early, banged
on the front door. *Mommy please!*

Knew she was home. The burnt tobacco
hanging in the air.

And then on the front porch it came,
her urine, out of her control,
dripping down
to the welcome mat.

She waited, soaked in tears and piss,
until the sun went down, when
her mother finally came to the door.

With her head under water in the tub,
her mother's yells and door slams sounded like
a distant battle quickly advancing.

Poem for my Inner Child, Whose Heart is Learning to Beat Again

Heart shaped birds in my yard coo and fuss,
winged sparrow, my brain beats for you by impulse.

I watch their flight from a window like prayer
Because life stole our heart, my brain now has a pulse.

Watching the flight, I remember the cage
of long tables lined with adults. By impulse

we put our hands to our heart anew
to see if the gaping space still had a pulse.

The bark of a tree we never climbed once,
because a short childhood deprived us of that impulse.

Unlike the morning birdsong the music of my heart
never left my throat to make melody, but just pulsed

in my thoughts, collecting and building
as I grew older. My brain now has its own pulse.

My heart left me sometime between fear of
cracking eggshells and being expelled.

Joy is the missing thing I'm trying to make for us—
the world stole our heart, so our brain has to pulse.

Little Massey, deep down we are made of wonder.
Our heart is growing. It beats for us now, by impulse.

On Wanting to Be Saved from My Loneliness

Who would have said no?
I had grown so used to
my fingers wrapped around the
bars like ice in my hands
that wouldn't melt.
Grown used to the way I knew
the sun was rising
even though I couldn't see
it, by the warmth of orange and yellow
that coated my dark blankets and pillows.
Grown used to the nights echo.
Silence. Solace found
in a crow's cry
and the falling of rain.
I swear, I could hear the tapping
of a spiders legs on the stone floor,
noise birthed in the twilight,
my only companions.
If I had known how to,
I would have prayed to be saved.

And then I was. Entered a new place,
one with a burning fireplace and fancy
clothes, but I could barely breathe.
I had a new window where I could see
the sun. It was thrilling to belong
to another. Slowly the corsets around my
ribs grew tighter. I could barely eat
or speak, there were invisible strings
that sewed my lips together.
But I still had my hands,
my heart. Became an expert
on how to scale a man's body,
Tried to bring him pleasure
but he was numb. And in his moment
of weakness I ran as fast as I could,
toward the sun.

In the Time of Trump, Covid, and Global Warming I Place my Faith into A Protection Spell for Myself and My Dog During the Fall Equinox, 2020

Rest balance abundance, the words I carve
into a white candle with a broken
pencil. Cut an apple in half. Look at
the star in its heart. Place the candle in.

Light it up. Let it burn. Read the words from
a book, “Element of Earth, may I always feel
your protection,” chomp into the other
half, look down to find my dog Circe watching.

On her behalf, I read: “Element of
Earth, may Circe always feel your protection”
and bite another piece of the apple,
remove it, feed it to her like a bird.
Read her rites to air, water, and fire.

The candle burns down and the flame burns out,
while she eats the fruit sweet, core and all.

*Quote from Gabriela Hertik’s book *Craft*

Aubade for Desire

I watch you shave,
gold hair falls into the
sink like snow. From
the bed watch the slow
unmasking, the uncloaking
of soft cheeks.

I read you poetry
while you bathe. Cleanse your
body in *duende*. Lather your hair
with the shadow of the moon.
Massage you with witness.

I tend to you but never lie
down on the bed and
beg like a moonless
night, bruised and endless.
I never tell you I need you.

Turn off the faucet.
Close the book.
Set down the razor.
*We're running
out of time.*

Invoking the Muse: Mary Magdalene

*I am the bridge between heaven and earth. I am fully human and fully divine.
-from Megan Watterson's The Divine Feminine Guidebook*

She readies her mind for the spark of
opportunity, learns to speak her word,
patiently. Sticks to the task. Believes in
visions for a different future. Others can't.

The hands of time bring darkness in one
moment, hope the next. Doubters don't witness
how she clears her mind, in elemental
ritual celebrates union with earth.

Leaves of trees cover her. Dirt paints her feet.
She leaves behind what doesn't serve. No need of
anyone but herself and god. When she hears
voices of angels, she replies in the daylight.

I don't have to risk my life, but I still have doubts.
I ask her in prayer: *show me your fears, your weakness.*

Fire

Fuck Being Left

Fuck that time at the Italian restaurant
down the street from our home.
We threw away our dirty pennies
into the wishing well. I asked you
what you wished for and you wouldn't tell me.
I wished for you, you wished for you too.
Fuck Italian restaurants.
Fuck wishing wells.

Fuck learning all the words
to Free Bird in high school
to look cool for the guys.
Fuck Van Zant for teaching
young men and women it's poetic to
always want to leave and it sounds
even better if you can draw out
breaking the news that you're deserting
the person you love for the length of
a nine minute guitar ballad.

Fuck gender roles
Fuck that I spent so much time trying to cook
the perfect meals for us. But not too good,
wouldn't want to gain weight.
Fuck aprons
Fuck absentee fathers
and fuck that my father was perfect
on paper...because no one would understand
why I have daddy issues.
Fuck alcoholic mothers
Fuck daddy issues
Fuck all the guys I fucked
that didn't love me
Fuck me for always wanting to fuck
even when deep down I didn't really want to fuck

Fuck that I keep watching
the same man drive away over and over
Fuck that no matter how many
times he leaves me
I'm always waiting with open arms

when he gets back and there's no one
to blame but myself.

Fuck that by the end I was screaming,
loud enough for the neighbors to hear.
People slowing their cars driving by
to get a glimpse of the mess we made, for shame.
Fuck that he couldn't hear me.
Fuck, he wasn't even there.

Dearest Shakespeare, I know you are Honored
*In response to Sonnet 130

for your wordplay, but why trick her?
trust me. It's not a fun surprise.
She has already been insulted and torn
apart limb by limb. And if it wasn't by the boys
on the playground it was of her own
doing, in bathtubs while shaving her legs
or looking in the mirror while putting on
rose colored blush. What she really
wants is for you to grab her hand
tell her you love her. I see where
this is going as you as you jokingly
list the ways she is not divine, how you
will make her wait for you to tell her that she is "rare"
and that really nothing can "compare" but it
will be too late. She may let you kiss her goodnight
and let you sleep in her bed, but while you drift off
peacefully, she will be up through the night. Listing
and considering every compliment you've ever given her.
Considering how they now all sound like lies.

Oranges

Oranges wake me at 3 am—
no bother dressing myself.
Let hunger lead my moonlit skin,
cut one plump down the middle.
Bring the vesicles to my lips
tongue tastes the tangy treat.
Juice drips down my chin,
makes it way down my neck,
spills over my nipple.
Ripe over my round belly,
cleanses my legs.
Bare assed on the counter,
legs open wide,
head tilted back
mouth a cackle,
I'll never apologize for pleasure.

In Defense of the Word

The satisfaction that comes
when saying it. Want to make an entire room
cringe? Easy. Say it—*moist*. Say *moist*
is your favorite word.
If the hatred comes
from the sound of the word, what of
rejoice or foist? Don't blame phonetics.
Blame the cringe at a table
of 12-year-old boys in a school cafeteria.
Their table of bread crumbs,
mayonnaise smears, skids
of Cheeto fingers. A table of girls
behind them roll
their eyes at the boys' sloppy
attempt at eating but blush
when they lock eyes.
One of the boys pulls
a cupcake out of his lunchbox. He brings
the cake to his lips, crystalized
icing on his nose. He mumbles with a mouth-full,
Delicious, so moist.
The other boys laugh. *Moist? Moist?*
Vaginas are moist!
The young boy—disgusted—
spits it out.
Later, he tosses it in the trash.
The girls cross
their legs tighter.
Moist is a rebellion.
It's a pointed middle finger to the sky.
It's the sweat under the armpit
at the women's march.
It's the detox blood
into her panties every month.
It's the tears in an abortion clinic
waiting room.
It's the damp spot of pleasure on fresh sheets.

In conversation I use the word *Fierce*.

I contemplate the word choice. Who was the first to utter the consonants and vowels in the way I know it now. Imagine the drag queen perfecting their tuck and galloping off to the stage with their fake tits jiggling back and forth. Or maybe it was from one black woman to another, lining their lips in the bathroom mirror. Recognition of the beauty white culture used against them. Imagine the way their top teeth tapped their bottom lip as the f like fuck left their tongue. And the ie that I imagine rubbing against each other like wood sticks. The ether before fire, the magical air that signals the commencement of flame. There's a complexity in the word. Reminds me of the women in the darkest hours of the night that say *come to bed now. I want you to hold me. But don't think for one second I couldn't live without you.*

Aura

I look at him sitting in the floral chair that was handed down to me by my grandmother.

He tells me about his father and brother, troubled male relationships handed down to him. I can't help

but wonder, if his father had held on tighter, interrupted less, was quiet more, then maybe he could

have done the same for me. A gold light hugs him, illuminates the outline of his body against the wall. My Thor,

what I called him. And I try to listen but all I can see is his gold aura, the bright light against white wall, what I told myself,

my friends, and family over and over *he shines so bright on the inside.*

The overhead track lights point down on him like he is on a stage, the star

of my show. I made him a God, his blonde hair and scruffy beard glow. I see now I never really saw *him*, his aura, just an illusion of light and dark

against a warm body. And we, just two people in a room made of all the things that have been passed down to us.

Late Night Prayer to Mary Magdalene: A How To

Step 1:

Take a deep breath in counting to 5
Take a long exhale out counting to 6
REPEAT 3X

Step 2:

After your breath, consciously bring your awareness to your heart center

Step 3:

Say this prayer into the ether:

Dear Mary, apostle of the apostles,
I ask that with the help of your spirit I am able to quiet my fears, biases, judgements, and doubts so I can hear from the ears of love what needs to come through and what you have to share with me. I ask that I am open to receiving this message in a loving way and apply it to my life to serve not only myself but humanity for the highest and best.

My heart is now open to you.

Drop into your heart again.

Step 4:

If you have one you may ask her a question. Mine today is: “how do I love myself?”

Step 5:

Impatiently wait for her response. Her response might come through in a feeling, vision, “knowing” or even a voice in your head.

Step 6:

Yell into the void: “can you even hear me? Or am I just talking to myself?”

Mom says

Mom says *go to bed and stop asking so many questions.*

Mom says, *Oh honey* whenever I start to cry.

Mom said *you should have won*, when I lost the student body president election. Mom says *pass the merlot.*

Dad says mom never drank or smoked when she was pregnant, but that's not what she says. What does it really matter, we all turned out fine.

My ex says my mother is mean to me because she is jealous that I am younger and prettier and didn't have to go to rehab. But she treats everyone this way.

Mom says *when will I be able to stop apologizing?* But she never actually said sorry, unless saying sorry is allowing your kids to talk openly about their troubled past.

Mom puts pink roses next to the bed whenever I come in town. Mom says *I'm grateful for this time we have together.* I am too.

I tell mom *I don't know if I'll ever be ready to have kids.* She agrees, *I don't think you could handle it.* I cry in the shower.

Mom says *you have to train her every day, every hour*, about my dog. I lie and say I do. I think *my dog doesn't need that she just wants to have fun.*

Mom texts me from upstairs *I'm sorry for being ugly earlier.* I say *it's okay.* She says *it's a tense time.*

Mom says *isn't he cute* about the waiter when we go out to eat pizza. I tell her to drop it, *I'm not looking.* She says *oh come on, I'm just having fun!*

Mom says *the only way you'll know if you're ready is if you put yourself out there again.* I disagree.

Mom says *I've met someone new!* She runs to the phone every time it rings. Mom says *you're projecting* when I tell her she caters to every guy she dates.

I try to be happy when I see so much of myself in her.

Montage in a car
*after Eve Ewing

I am four and in the backseat of my mother's friend's car who my mom left me with for the weekend. We stop at a gas station and she says "I'll be right back." I have no sense of time. I start getting scared. I can't take it anymore and I crawl up to the front of the car and slam on the horn until she comes running. // I am six and ask my mom a question, she says, "why do you ask so many questions?" // I am seven and just left a softball game. My father takes us to McDonald's for dinner and stops before pulling out to check our orders. A man starts honking at us to move. One thing leads to another and the driver of the other car says he's going home to get his gun. Dad says "Good, go get it!" My older sister and I beg dad to speed home, we are scared we are going to get shot. // I am eight, a babysitter picks me up from school, again. I don't know what Leukemia means, just that my parents and little brother won't be around as much. And we get lots of presents. // I am ten and seated in the passenger seat of my grandmothers Mercedes. I like the sound the blinker makes. It's sharper and quicker than the ones in my parent's car. Nothing bad ever happens with my grandmother. // I am 12 in the passenger seat of my grandfather's leased BMW, we stop for gas on the way to the cemetery to see where my dead relatives are buried. // I am 15 in the backseat seated next to a boy I barely know, he's friends with my older sister's boyfriend. He touches my thighs. I freeze. When we get home I run to my room and lock the door. I feel the tingling where his hands touched me for a week. // I am 16 and smoking my first joint, I ask "Is the car rolling away?" the two people I'm with laugh hysterically. We listen to *Don't Stop Believing* what feels like twenty times. // I am 24 and on I-41 to Atlanta, I get a text from the guy I lost my virginity to, *just passed you, shame to see you haven't quit smoking.* // I am 27 and watch my boyfriend from the driver's seat stomp his feet on the asphalt of a Holiday Inn's parking lot outside of Memphis. After a drunken fight outside a bar, I demanded that we go home and to give me the keys now because I would drive through the night. He screamed "I'm supposed to make you feel safe and this situation is the exact opposite of that." // I am 30. I drive a Uhaul from Nashville to Memphis. I am alone in the car.

Ode to living alone

Today I did a strip tease for my books,
I let Dorian Gray size up my
cellulite hamstrings and Mary Oliver and
Emily Dickinson clap as I let my hips gyrate low.

I bow then have some cheese
and crackers on the couch.

Yesterday when I woke, I turned
on every light in the house and yelled
rise and shine at the top of my longing.

On every square inch of surface I place
an orchid. I tell them stories about my jaunts
down aisle 9 at Kroger and how I spent \$16.99
on 4 ounces of vanilla because I got a craving for cookies.
Orchids are really good listeners considering
they have so many mouths.

This morning, I kept the covers
over my head 'til 10. I try not to converse
with clocks anymore.

All month, have ignored e-mails from
my online banking app, put everything on credit.
My mother calls, tells me to go outside so
I walk down the 111 steps from
Tennessee street to the Mississippi River.
I am hypnotized by the current of the mighty mmmm
river and right before I jump in remember
my friend who said *the river will carry you away*.

I think maybe I should call her and ask her over for dinner.

Water

Feral Heart

It's 4 days into Scorpio season
And I want to be violent.

This morning watched as a woman who wouldn't look
me in the eye, stuck a needle into my skin. Drained

my blood as I tapped my toes to the song playing from
the stereo. I wanted to grab her face

look her dead in the eye and scream
do you even see what is going on?

There's death all around me and I can't
even muster up the strength to slam

my tight fists against a pillow. I imagine the
sensation of losing my mind in a grocery store

or on a street corner as a man says *hey sugar, nice
ass*. How I want to let my arms and legs lose

all control, how I want to let my blood
rush to my head. The only time I really lost my shit

was outside a beach house rented by sorority
girls the spring of 2009. Screamed at the top

of my lungs that *nobody knows how bad this pain
feels*. Hid in my room for days, heard the whispers

of how I'd gone crazy. And now I want to lose it
again, on purpose. To allow my feral heart

to rejoin the wild oceans and dark forests
I've come from. To let the riptide drag me away.

Machine

When pulling into the carport this morning mistook the thud under my tire as a flat, as I opened the car door realized I had taken a life, there a mouse on its back barely breathing. I wanted to find a way to honor this life, found a spot in the backyard to bury the body. But the dishwasher repair man was at my front door. *Hello? Hello? I'm here for the repair request.* What was I to tell him, *come back in an hour when I know how to respectfully get rid of the body.* Took a deep breath, pretended everything was okay. It felt so urgent to figure out what to do with the dead. Maybe because murder is a part of my bloodline, I used to say if it had been me, it would have been different. I bury the innocent in the backyard as an offering, selfishly, to try to pay the debts of my past. I've hurt a lot of people, I've hurt myself, made poor mistakes. The repairman called to me from inside, *ma'am there's nothing wrong.* But there was something wrong. I don't think we spoke the same language. I don't think we were even looking at the same machine.

We Decided That When I Returned From my Trip to the Beach You Would be Gone

The August sun cascaded into our dark
home, the scene like a dream
the day before I laid my body down
on the couch opened my eyes
couldn't stay from worry from sorrow from fear
so I slept in the middle of the day felt someone near
someone close by and opened my eyes the sight there
of you standing across the room falling tears on your face
and I couldn't say the words I lifted my hand to you
laid your body down beside me lay my head
on your chest you stroked my hair I'll never forget
the texture of you underneath me next morning you drove me
to the airport outside of the car we kissed like lovers parting ways
in a letter told you that outside of our earthly plane is where our love
exists meant for another life a universe outside ourselves
I am forever changed your reply

Dear J,

This is a letter to tell you good-bye.

To try to make music out of our sadness.
To say sorry. I'm sorry for sitting on your lap,
with my head tilted upward in laughter
at a wedding reception, for saying how delicious
the double scotch we shared tasted even though
I hate scotch. Sorry for my head nodding in
cynicism and placing wagers with you on
how long this one would last. I'm sorry for
rolling my eyes at the crying children
in the row behind us on the way home
from Vegas. Each kick on my seat
a reminder of what we may never have.

Sorry for complaining to my friends
and family *I'm not his mother*, about the dirty dishes,
missed calls, and joints in the house
instead of coming to you. Sorry for never crying
in front of you. Sorry for never telling you I need you

at the Christmas dinners and family cook-outs.
For wanting to blame you in conversations
with my friends, family, and therapist.
For their condescension and misunderstanding.

Sorry for this poem for making it seem
like our relationship was simple,
like an ornate houseplant. I promise you were more
than a place holder for my emptiness.

I want to say I'm sorry for waiting
so long to tear us apart, to pluck you
out of the place you learned to call home,
but I can't apologize for that. I'll never regret

the seconds that turned to hours
watching sunsets and talking late into the night
at the place we called home. I'll never regret
Savannah, Charleston, and Atlanta adventures.

Letting you cry in my arms
after your grandfather passed,
or when you failed the bar exam.
If I had left any sooner
there's so much we would have missed
and if I had waited a second longer

I may have died,

Massey

You okay by yourself?

I'm fine-fantastic-fantastically fine-Stop asking about-my heart-heaven in a tin can-beating a
beat- honey-shuffling-shuffling-shuffling-the devil-temperance-the sun-flipped pages-set my
eyes on the glue-hold it together-mail manned knocking-socks crisping-lips unfolding-edges
crisped-refresh-refresh-refresh-cnn-see in-sea inn-wish I was by a seashore-take a bath-affirm
myself-i am loved-I am kind-can't you see I'm fine-take a bow-gas leak-rotten eggs-trilling-
trilling-trilling-answer me-sick puppy-teeth on the couch-inhale-exhale-cushioned sacrum-hold
it-hold it-hold it-release the pose-release the hounds-release the beast

On Telling My Hairstylist I want to Shave My Head

they've told me no they've told me no
I avoid my own gaze in the mirror
in front of me scared to see the tears
scared to see myself so helpless
I wait like they told me for help, manager
tells me there's nothing she can do
there's nothing she can do for me I pray
for another brave soul to come from the back
room where they eat lunch imagine she sets
down her turkey sandwich and picks up
her cutters and says I'll be the one
but no one comes
but no one comes

I Speak Mantras in the Bathtub Guided by Mary Magdalene

I am powerful

I am respected

I respect myself

I respect myself

I respect myself

I love my stomach

I love my stomach

I love my stomach

I lovingly love my stomach

I lovingly love my loving arms

I lovingly love my loving arms

I lovingly love my loving arms

I lovingly love my loving body

I lovingly love my loving body

I lovingly love my loving body

I respect my body

I respect my body

I respect my body

I respect myself

I respect myself

I respect myself

I love myself

I love myself

I love myself

Earth

Ovulation Under the Full Moon

When I dream about my future I think
about sex and then I make it stop. Modern
women should yearn for things that don't require
a man. Financial independence. Career.
I know deep down I desire pleasure
for pleasures sake. The chocolate soufflé
before the meal, I want to melt in my
mouth, savor the sugar, coco, and milk.

If I had to lie I would say: I must
choose between vegetables and dessert
for the rest of my life. That I only
am meant for what society deems "good"
and "fit" for my body and not the wild
fruit that harvests under the fiery sun.

I pray to the moon to live
in a world where it's okay to ask
for what I want. She tells me, don't ask
but to go ahead and do. So I lay
underneath her and receive.

Sestina for the Reptilian Body

All this week there was a turtle awaiting burial in the refrigerator, dead.
We got him over 22 years ago, is was what mom says.
Like a chicken that's to roost, I've just recently returned home.
Unlike times before, I now pay extra attention to the reptilian body:
How much to feed it? Has it had enough sun? Can it hear the birdsong?
Couldn't find any instruction on how to save a dying heart.

I wanted to save this little slider with all my heart.
Even though, I knew all the melodies in the world couldn't keep him from dying.
I did what I know best and sang him my imitation of birdsong.
Opened my mouth to make a sound, barely remember what I said:
*Sweet little one, there's something new for you beyond this body
don't worry about feeling pain, it's time for you to return home.*

On Saturday we will bury him behind our home,
with my nephews in toe, the most innocent and sacred of hearts.
We'll say good-bye and let go of the transient body.
And like our beloved turtle, I have had many deaths.
Have sat frozen in a shell of desire that I wasn't able to express.
And just when I thought I'll never love again, I'm awakened by birdsong.

I've been waiting to be plucked from a tree, like a bird. The song
of someone else I believed would lead me home.
I was caged by my longing and immobile with fear. I say
now that there is a renewed fluttering of my heart,
that I couldn't feel or hear without first feeling death.
Where there used to be an empty space on my back body,

there are now large fiery wings that carry me. My hands, my body,
and my mouth make loud noises. With more resonance than timid birdsong.
The self-doubt and insecurity are leaving by way of permanent death.
I keep opening my mouth again and again to call myself home.
The ritual and ceremony of my own burial pump blood back into my heart.
There are truths that I used to be so scared of that now I can say:

that I'll always take care of myself first, not matter what critics say.
And the things that I yearn for, the desires of my animal body,
that I ask for from another don't make me weaker of heart.
My own love will always move through me, more constant than morning birdsong.
This cycle of wanting another then returning back to my own home,
just as steady and natural as house pet's deaths.

And now the day has come to honor the dead,
I know this isn't a departure, but a returning to home.
And as I step away from the grave, above, the sound of birdsong.

Speaking to A Wolf in Captivity

I went to visit a wolf in captivity.
She lived in the place
where the grass meets forest.
I asked her *may I talk to you* as I sat
outside the tree line looking in,
with a big steak in both my hands.
Its juice drizzled down like the blood
of a freshly plucked heart, my offering.
I laid it down next to my feet for her.
She told me yes with her eyes. Her grey
and black body slowly moved
toward me with a confident swagger.
People think the wolves here don't notice
the fence that surrounds their home.
They have acres on acres of lands to roam.
She tells me, she knows she was born to travel
further than this fenced in castle they put her in.
But she also knows this is the life
she was handed and it's only temporary.
If she was the type to wink, I think she would
have wanted to. I asked her if she had any
lessons for me? What could I learn? She said
*when you are a wolf, meant for the wild,
limited to a field, ultimate freedom comes from
knowing who you are. That is the pillar of truth,
trust yourself, even in the confinement
of your own limitations.* And if I had the ability to,
I would have given her some of my heart,
even though she would never take it.
A wolf doesn't want to be anything but a wolf.
I asked her *may I come back to visit?*
She said, *you could, but you don't need to.*

Spider's Web

Lazily, I step into my slippers
and make my way out
into the muddy yard.
Pulled by my pup,
through the foggy morning air,
through half shut eyes,
I see the spider's web,
woven between two limbs,
with remnants of days of rain
pulped on its silk translucence.

When I was young, I was never tired.
Remember running through the dense
trees in my backyard without the
slightest thought of rest. I never
stopped to examine the webs hung
on the branch, even after the spine chilling
event of accidentally running through one.
Took so long to shake the phantom
webs that hung in my hair.
But back then, there was nothing
to work for. No rents to pay,
credit card bills, or late fees.
No one asked for proof of
your worth through a job title
or bank account.

I wish to live like the spider
tending to her web. I want to
create something gently and
meticulously. I want to do it
not because it will be seen and not
because it will last forever,
but because it is so deeply
of me that I didn't even recognize it
was mine until someone else pointed it out.

Summer Bull Frog Song as Celebration of My Body

Tonight I sing
that bassy rhythmic sound

once rejected from the chorus line
the under-valued notes

not to be mistaken with a call
or a demand of action

it's my chant of the night
my guttural noise

That comes from my under
belly, my deepest depths unknown

of the water
of the land

I sing in honor
of the body I call

home

When I say I want money

When I say I want money what I mean is I want to fill my house with flowers. I want my house to smell like roses. I want plants that climb up my walls and out of the sinks. When I say I want money what I mean is I want to buy new hair this month. I'm purple maybe next year orange and when I change my mind I'm a Bardot pin-up model. When I say I want more money it doesn't mean I want more. I mean I want to feel safe to let go of what I don't need to someone who really wants it so I can get something else I love. When I say I want more money what I mean is I want what I want without having to tell you. When I say I want more money what I mean is I don't owe anyone shit. That I don't have to beg. That I don't have to chip off the parts of myself I love because of need or fear. When I say I want more money what I mean is I want society to stop telling me it's wrong to feel desire. When I say I want more money what I mean is I want to build a home for the loners and the outcasts and the hungry. Dessert would come at the beginning of every meal. Listen, when I say I want money what I mean is I want all the people I love to have the space to be whatever that thing is within themselves that they've told themselves can't be real. I want them to praise the ether of the un-grown oak seed that grows the deepest of roots and branches to match. I want them to fill up the world with the salve of their own growth. When I say I want money what I mean is I want to see a world of my own creation with my own eyes. And if that's with rose colored glasses that's up to me. When I say I want money what I mean is on some Sundays I wear gowns to breakfast and there isn't anybody who can stop me.

What have men ever done to you?

You ask. *What do you know of the smell of blood?*

Having already decided my explanations aren't enough.

I tell you of the smell of it in my panties, the fear,
the red that pooled in the bottom of my being like death.

And I tell you what else came with age and growth, the threat of abuse,
strange men who say they want to bend me, slap me, pin me. Yet I must find trust

for the men that I know personally, because they say *trust me, I'm not like the others*. Then how come everywhere I look there's blood?
And the locker-room name calling of jugs, never to my face. Far from abuse,
I know. Just jokes between sidekicks. But how much hurt will ever be enough?
We are tired of not being believed until it comes to death.
I've tried to tell you with my stories the amount of fear

and violence on every corner, tried to give you my fear
when I told you of the screams I hear of women burned, you do not trust
when I say that the smoke that smoldered one of us, the death
of one, is the death of us all. There's no one else to blame, the blood
is on all of our hands. When will it ever be enough? Enough
of the apologizing. Enough of the abuse.

You sip your coffee as the headline reads another story of abuse.
There's one thing left that's worse than the threat of fear.
The sin of ignorance as you decide what is and isn't enough
of a story or proclamation and what kind of woman to trust.
I want every man to rip their heart out of their chest, dripping with blood,
and place it at my feet. I want them to tell me about their own death

of their doubt as their arms reach out to me and promise to protect, not just from death
but from harm of every kind. I want an oath you'll stop commencing the abuse
of silence. I beg you gather your father, brother, uncle to say *there doesn't have to be blood
for it to leave a mark*. Ask them to *look into their woman's eyes and claim they don't see fear*.
We are tired of explaining the chill in our spine that tells us to run, begging you to trust
what we cannot define. Stop calling us crazy, we've had enough.

Don't you see, this honesty isn't a betrayal to you. Being alone with you is trust enough
because whether I like it or not, your size and testosterone could bring me death
at any time if you decided to be another type of man and betray my trust.
I don't want you lynched in a crowd or pinned to the cross, abuse
of silence and otherwise I want to be believed so I can walk in this world without fear.
This shouldn't be so hard, I shouldn't have to apologize for my natural blood,

the thing that makes me woman, part of the reason of abuse.
So please, my lover, the one of I've chosen, the end of fear

can start with you and me. Let's end the unnatural shedding of blood.

Midnight Phone Call With Mary

Mary: *Massey, I hear you... you focus so much on what is wrong or what you don't like. But there is a litany at your disposal of the beautiful things about you. It is 3, 5, no 10 times longer than the list you make of your wrongdoings. You focus on the shorter list, for some reason it makes more of an impact, but there is a much longer, more loving list that you could be focusing your attention on.*

Me: Can you help me see what to love in myself.

Mary: *Of course, first I'll ask what is it you see in me that you love?*

Me: Your commitment to love. Your bravery. Your courage to go against what everyone around you told you was true and real. Your ability to trust the divine within you and the messages from something greater than yourself even when others said you were not worthy of such interaction.

Mary: *All of that is in you too...*

Me: But I've never really had to risk losing it all like you...

Mary: *Our circumstances may be different but my story is your story. What do you love about yourself?*

Me: Okay...well...I don't want to sound conceited but...I am warm and loving. I have a nice smile. I can make people laugh.

Mary: *Okay you're getting there...but I'd like more...*

Me: Oh I don't know...I love my eyes and my lips. I have great boobs...

Mary: *okay and more...*

Me: I like how I talk to myself and sing to my dog, that's pretty cute...

Mary: *and more....*

Me: I liked myself this morning when I got out of the shower and hadn't washed all the shampoo out of my hair. I was mad at first but then had to giggle when I ran my brush through my hair and mumbled to myself *oh shit!*

Mary: *yes! And more...*

Me: I love how I get burst of energy out of nowhere and dance like a bangee...like that time at the beach when my sister took a video of me dancing to Dua Lipa.

Mary: *more*

Me: I love how sensitive I am, that I can feel the shift of a room. I'll never forget that one day when I worked in a shop at the mall, I was there alone and a customer came in. She smiled at me while she window shopped. And I went up to her and grabbed her hands and said "are you okay?" She looked at me as she burst into tears *how did you know?* I like that I cuss under my breath even when no one else is around *fuckeroni* or *oh fuck!* I love that I hate good-byes and carry them out way longer than they need to...even the insignificant ones like when I leave a restaurant and the maître de says "have a good night" and I say "you too" and she says "come again" and I say "I will" and I could keep this exchange going back and forth like tennis all night long. I love when my voice gets louder when I'm talking about something I care about. How the younger version of me would be proud that I stand up for what I believe in even though society tells me to quiet down and keep it clean. I love how excited I got when a deer let me get close to her in the park and then I realized it had a hurt leg and watched it hobble away. When I got home I sobbed on the bed like a character of a soap opera.

Mary: *yes and MORE*

Me: I love the attention and devotion I give to the things I seek. I love that even on my worst days when I can barely look in the mirror or hold my own gaze I recommit to myself again. And I love that even though I get caught up over analyzing what everyone and their mom thinks of me I show up when the rain ends. I only allow myself to give in just enough to the doubt and then I return to myself again and again. As a consistent as the sun in the sky. I love that whenever it rains I look for rainbows in the sky...because I've found them before and fully trust they will find me over and over. I love that I know how to be alone and that I love to spend time in solitude. I love that I want a partner and I don't tame my desires because I'm scared. I love that I hold a vision for a better future for myself and the world around me. I love that I am truthful, sometimes to a fault. I love that sometimes it's hard for me to take criticism. I love the little girl in me that wants everyone to love her.

Mary: *you could go on couldn't you?*

Me: yes, I could.

Mary: *let this list, these truths about yourself root down like a tree. Let them live in you like an old oak that stands tall through the storms. Let the wind come. Let time pass. Let the buildings come up and be torn down around you. Let the birds perch within it. The spirit of you never has to end.*

Ode to the Moon

My Goddess.

My everything

I aspire to.

You night dweller.

You grow

so large,

I could reach out and touch you.

Holding my nephew, we point to the sky,

little wolf pups chanting your name.

You were disseminate

The day of my birth.

Meaning: I was born to express,

to shed, to give. If you were born

on Earth you wouldn't believe in
capitalism or socialism. You would know

better than to label yourself with those things.

You are beyond labels. You are the

essence of listening. You never question
your body and what she has to tell you.

When it's time to grow, you grow. When it's time
to shed, you shed. You have no choice

but to dance to your own rhythm.

You must laugh at us down here

collecting myrrh, mallow, mesquite

or opal, selenite, labradorite

in hopes to feel closer to you.

I bet you wish you could yell down,

you don't need anything more than your body to feel me.

I bet you get a kick out of all the new life and

chaos that comes when you're full and

the stillness and contemplation

that comes when we can't see you.

I bet you wish our plans were less

about 401k's and bank accounts.

I bet you wish we would stop trying to sell you.

Moon, have I let you down? Even I try

to package you. Do you want more from me?

And when I say more I don't mean more

likes or checks or clients but more

skinny dips under you, dancing in the mirror,

kissing on the lips, holding of sweaty palms.
More howling like a wolf for no reason.
More laughter during orgasm because
sex doesn't have to be so serious.
Moon, I can hardly say I live
by you. What good is my worship
if the qualities I love in you I don't live by?
I have to remind myself, even Artemis wasn't perfect.
I wear your light like the most sacred talisman.
And I will remember that I too
can grow and grow and grow and then
let go of myself completely to
begin again.