Ambering: Fragments of the Body

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The truth is ‘the family’ is always an event of some violence. It’s only years later, in that retrospective swirl, that you work out who was hurt, in what way, and how badly.

—Zadie Smith, Feel Free

“re cognize u are a facilitation a sorrow between solids”

—Jamie Hood, How to be a Good Girl

What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly? ... That if you return somewhere often enough it becomes infused with your energy; that the past never leaves us; that there’s always atmosphere to consider; that you can wound air as cleanly as you can wound flesh.

—Carmen Maria Machado, In the Dreamhouse
The House of My Childhood

my body has been stuck for so long in violence. our home is slicked with sap, the floors a mirror-top surface colored by my silence, rainbowed & spectral as it glints off walls. i feel my body burn for the warm skin of a womb, a shelter safe from her oleander, his air-rush of thunder. i have become the dust specking our floors, while sapphire pill bottles, ruby-crusted skin, & amber cases of preserved shouts have cluttered the memory of my young life. as words have boiled brutish from under their tongued bruises, as from under their bed-frame her blue lips & labored breath have stained the stale air, i have held my resentment hot like a coaled pill, everglowing in my mouth. within the floors of streaked sap & stuck feet, my body cannot move from her casket of amber. my body has pinched itself closed, i have tucked my little self into the womb of my bed, & the ceiling is cold glass waiting to fracture.
Red

the longest wavelength densest color power passion sex
sweat sunburnt skin singeing the first color to appear on an abrasion

the color of my father’s face when he’s woken
in the middle of the night by my pillhead mother

slapped skin my mother’s blood crusted
on concrete planters ambulance lights flashing in our front yard

color of the ugly alligator watch a strange man gifted my mom
rage pushed through my arms into fists pounding out onto the carpet

paint i smeared on raw canvas etching in “why” over and over
throwing thrifted glass til it glimmered spinning across the kitchen floor
Oleander

delicate and soft skin-
pink in the shape of a pinwheel poisonous in all its parts

in secret my mother eats the flower whole with swollen fingers she reaches for her full crystal bowl plucks one and flutters it to puckered lips ‘til she bruises skin-pink petals on the rough cliffs of her purple tongue streaked-pink petals slide translucent as they wet down my mother’s throat

for months now in secret my mother has collected flowers in the pot of her stomach

a lonely pile of sorrow and sleep oleander her vehicle of freedom she has swallowed herself to settle against her silver-lined stomach full of petals satin-thin her lonesome pinwheel set to spin
Star-Spangled

we carried our quilt up the bluff / a floral pattern folded huge / against my little body /
my mother took one corner / i took the other and together / we threw the quilt / against
the wind / watched it swell in its belly / as we lowered it to ground / i took my sparkled
jelly sandals / and placed them on opposite corners / so it wouldn’t escape like a secret /
while we shuffled our feet to the beat / wet lips on a microphone / ringing through a
humid cluster / my brother handed me a cone of air / and i picked pink and blue sugared
cotton / plucked it on my tongue / and felt sweetness trickling / inside my small mouth
the cloud-like caramelizing to a crunch / i always loved light / how in the mushroom of
crackling heat / the sky’s real sugar sweet fluff lit up / and spit little flares / on the river’s
mirror-top surface / after a while my stomach turned / sour settled in the pit / no food to
wash / the limed tequila / i watched pour / down my parents’ throats / their breath stained
and stumbling / as my brother and i skipped to the car / with the sky gone green

/ the beginnings of a bruise / i always loved light / for instance / the flash of a siren
approaching / as i peeked around cursed corners / how the blue silence glinted against
walls / bathed me / then burned out
When Will You Get Over It?

drowning in booze
& i am trickling into memory:

mucus in lungs

from the tip of my tongue
dipping
or descending
into a childhood
of no brother

my brother is driving
& he knows nothing of my wilderness

later drunk & bloated with tears
and i breathe in the scalding steam
til i cant tell
whether the water is leaking
from my body
or cleansing it

& i count off my list of grievances
resentment boils hot
like bruised blood pooling
in my mouth

& my ears drown
in the wake of my mother’s question:
What do you remember?
What did you feel?

i remember my mom tasting her martini mouth when i was little, i peeked as dad struck near the front door through the camera i held heavy in my hand her stumbling against the concrete i felt fear become a knot in my throat

Click.

i remember blood dribbled wet as rubies as my parents’ clamor wrestled as he waited for her to shriek in hallways, i watched my mother’s lime-breath hot on wine-stained teeth eye ballooning like the confusion i felt

Click. Click.

i remember my mother in the bathroom telling myself this feels wrong how the light scathed her skin as numbness coated my little fingers with the shade of over-ripened grapes and my mom searched for her pose

Click. Click. Click.

i remember she sprawled on the green cold tile the green stripe across the camera’s body slick beneath our feet, camera shutter matched the color of the bruises closing slower than blame spread the numbness now my body’s blanket

Click. Click. Click

i remember my dad recorded over my cake i wasn’t supposed to be awake, to see instead my mother’s green face a body so overcome sallow and cratered on the screen by a rainbow of colors

Click.

i remember sitting in latin class
the next day, i felt sad with my head heavy
in my hand, falling asleep
Lavendered Lips

haven’t left my house for three days,
my aching bones won’t release.
being alone is dangerous when the presence
of others causes distress.

i am standing in front of my mom, asleep on the couch. i think she’s asleep so i shake her
shoulder, but she won’t wake. i know something isn’t right because my mom has pills crushed
around her bedtime lips, a lavendered lullaby. her shoulders don’t move, and her chest isn’t
moving, and my mother is asleep with her head resting on a pillow.

broken fragments of awful dreams, woke up
and forced myself back to sleep, only to avoid overthinking.
in my dream, i thought about how easy it would be to die,
then flung my eyelids open, thought of sunlight through water.
the next morning, i burst into tears because i didn’t know
whether or not it was okay to be sad.

i am seven years old and i don’t know what to do. her body isn’t moving, and she looks so
peaceful with her lavender lips and sleepy scent. i think she is asleep on the couch, but she can’t
hear me when i call her mommy. my little body shakes with fear even when hers doesn’t. my
baby hands reach for hers, cold, reach for the phone. baby body waits ‘til red lights and alarm
bells pierce through afternoon clouds, lavender light. my mom can’t hear sirens. i am crying in
front of my mom, waiting for her body to be carried off on a stretcher.
Veiled Violent Words, Unspoken
An erasure from Virginia Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”

veiled darkenings suffused the air with rages unescapably
the mistress knew about cruel truth violent words

her face under stress of shadowy corners
a black form loomed crude composed of heaviness

as if it would dislodge everything
word after word a profound sigh to cut the saddened
evanesence of things and fall in silence
she was filled with the unspoken

in the looking-glass everything dropped the hard wall of herself
she was nothing perfectly empty
Lullaby Reversed

III.

i become the big spoon slurred speech slides through her mouth
she makes me want to eat my teeth so i sing her a lullaby through them

and glide my fingers across her face trace same patterns her hands
once made i hum the lyrics her voice would guide now in replace

my lament bathes old air her voice is quiet now and i listen for her sigh
slow and deep like the salty drop that creeps across my face

II.

what do i find a grown-ass man-child looms over his wife
as his hands close around the nape of her neck

her words escape frantic gasping from her diaphragm
his attempt to shush her cries for attention

i try to remain calm my voice cold glass waiting to snap
so i tell my father go to bed i will hush this goddamn-whiny-child

I.

eyes closed inner strings at ease when words pierce
through thick night seep under my bedroom doorway

my muscles respond like a pressed coil waiting to release
the house drops several degrees and the heat in my body boils

til i fling out my anger into the hallway
like some fucking vigilante seized by a hero complex
That Time My Ex Dropped Me Off at the House with No Key

i think what a douche not a glance to make sure i get inside
when he buzzes off in his shitty gold-dipped chevy impala

the green van is in the driveway but there’s an itch in my chest
like something isn’t right when i ring the doorbell

no answer just echoes off the thin walls sappy floors
of that shitty house i go to the back deck and drop my bag

pick up my phone almost dial him he probably wouldn’t answer anyway
i go to the side of the house peek into the window

my mom is laying on the couch lavender a cloud around her
the itch crawls into my knot throat i knock on the window no answer

i bang on the window no answer ptsd lodged like a steel pipe in the base of my back i run
to the back door almost slip on the slick grime path

i bang a ladder against the wall force the window open with pry fingers
end up pushing the whole fucking frame into the house leaving an octagon hole

i slither through running down the hall into the kitchen i slam
my fists against tile counters and rattle MOM her body answers whams awake

and slurs into the thick air my dizzy lighthead thins out
as my words boil foam like hot spittle escaping a kettle FUCK YOU

i’m glad i put the phone down and didn’t call him left my SadGirlShit for myself
he probably wouldn’t have answered anyway
Guardian of the Keys

Today my mom’s a flame raging
against the stuck sap of the house
there are couches overturned chairs spun
cabinets split glass and porcelain angels
opened to pieces drawers cracked with pearls
pajamas & empty pill bottles spilling everywhere

usually I hide my mom’s keys in the linen
    tucked safe like a child between cotton
    sheets and fleeced throws
    or nestled underneath the box spring
    like a flower pressed for preservation but today
I want to wear them proudly on the hook of my jeans
so I walk inside the house and see the hurt
    the angels the pearls the cotton mountain I step over
    finally my home looks like its violence
    I want to vomit this tightness
    that creeps up my throat and add to the mess
but instead I search for my mom
find her walking out the front door
    she says I’m going to the doctor
    her eyes are glazed like a capsuled pill
    the motor of the green van vibrates
    in my ear keys dangle from the ignition
I run in front of her sit my ass down
tell her I’ll drive & she becomes sharp
    and firm like an arrowhead
    refusing direction she grabs my arm and yanks
    but my limbs have grown teenager strong
    my core a rock in the bed of the seat
instead she reaches for the keys

my stone thigh lifts and the pad of my foot
         pushes into her soft stomach
          my knot throat yells get back

          I win the fight as tears stream
down my mother’s face and I leave with the green van
still vibrating in my ear
Orange

high energy, an active color  the tennessee flag stretched across the door
 leaves littering the ground  crunching under my feet

my ex-lover as he fell asleep  on the stairs at midnight  doused in fluorescent light
 candleflame lighting a wall  when i learn my friend’s dad is dead

embers sparking air  like a cloud of butterflies
 the color of destruction  of a gas stove left lit overnight

color termed most ingenuine  my mother in rehab
 three times  swearing to me  she would get better

my parents married in codependency  where long wounds  degenerated
 pretending  the walls of our house  were still standing
Three Tells of Resentment

holes punch entire walls like gaping pits they sit in little coffins
tattered with edges of gypsum cemented in a dark rage the last solid surface of our house my brother decimated one clenched fist at a time

❍
teeth tearing through civility and self-esteem biting words that leave dental records on the mind like the fractured tooth my dad pulls from his skin my mom splits him shining her pearly whites like knives

❍
numbness binds my body in statued movements muscle memory cotton fills my ears automated monotones stain stale air it’s like my body is being carried wire nerve endings programmed every engagement overridden
Housing Orange Cord

the space in between my shoulder blades is filled
with knotted worries. what do i carry?
what is it that my body wants to tell me?

i find her in the farthest corner: an orange cord
slithers around the wooden bedpost, drapes in a slope
to the floor, then dips back up to meet the base of her neck. i follow
the line, my fear a lump all the way to her throat. i see my mom slumped
against frame and floor with cord around her neck and i am screaming. i am screaming
because i am scared and i run from the bedpost and the cord.

my mom decided to escape reality often.
she indulged in her inner world instead of
caring for me; i wonder if this is what all love
feels like when it’s hard, or if it’s just me?

escape is outside but my legs feel as heavy as boulders in wetted pockets. i feel sick
to my stomach, worry a knot i can’t untangle. but i make it to the door and open it to breathe
in azalea air. i am breathing in plant-scented oxygen because there is no orange cord
around my neck. i am small, a speck of dust documenting the surface of the stoop.
outside of my house, i am sitting on the steps with little hands on my face.
the sun shines golden, and people pass in cars or walk their dogs
as azalea petals fall in beds next to my feet.
my mom sits in her chair
with soaked sweat fabric
from years of poppies
floating in her blood
hair matted on her hot forehead
a wolf’s teeth clamping, how can she be
like the knife that rips her stomach
& her resolve to kill the toxins
she goes to war with poppy receptors
her pain an alarm flashing crimson
as her eyes dart around the room
a loud guttural sound pops from her throat

i miss school to watch her withdrawal
my body bitter watching hers twist
looking like so much pain
I call my mother’s mother
she tells me fentanyl is
100x more powerful than morphine
take your mother
to a damn hospital right now
standing stoic in front of her
i learn the Latin names for everything
I whisper papaver somniferum until
the word cracks into red bloom on my lips
Fever-Dream at Five

i’m walking through a forest of muck, gummed dark
surrounding the canopies of trees try to swallow me
in spotted fungus leaves their dust molding around my face
fear blankets my eyes so i push little thumbs
against my eyelids try to wipe
away the night

but my bare feet slip
against the tufts of puffed-up grass
my twiglegs become encased in mud
as one foot tries to follow the next as i trudge
with sludgelegs atop a spinning globe
one wrong move & snap

i wake up scared
shivering my skin is singed
& burnished in sweat
as my mom stands
over me
slurring
happy birthday
The Scene Where My Life Is Supposed to Flash Before My Eyes

The car is an extension of my body and we are both gliding
control slips out of my hands
and somewhere a rainbow lollipop is crushed against pavement

I’ve seen this before on the big screen
except the screen didn’t show a fast movie
of memories, no image of knotted space between life and death

one moment I am driving when headlights flood my eyes
the next I am observing I am the metal that rakes
the airbag crawling slow as it creases my face the seatbelt reddened

into my flesh the glass panel splintering
under weight of the truck a chevy the color of my dead grandmother’s hair pewter

profanity boils from my mouth
like the smoke that flies
from the steering wheel

on the big screen, black flashes:
no shattered moments, nobody else to observe the damage
only my body to feel the aftermath— the residual imprint of aching bones stirred
Yellow

sunrise infiltrating blinds dreamsicle light bouncing off mirrored panels
Aurelia: always golden the latin name i chose for myself as a child

jaundiced my dead brother’s face when he was born when i sat in a room
with this color i saw a shadow of myself in the wallpaper

anxiety and mental illness smoke still sticking in my nostrils
the last color to appear on a bruise like my dad’s arm healing from a fight

my complicated ptsd their shouts petrified i still hear them sometimes
in the background my heart racing palms sweaty

color of chronic pain electric shocks piercing my back sitting in a bathtub soaking
away the sore of memories ambered violence preserved in my body
Ambien Stuck in Amber

My childhood stuck in amber:
the floorboards of our home slicked with sap—
every time I took a step, I was nowhere.

My mother’s eyes like moonstone marbles glazed
ethereal blue as she stared past me toward a shadow figure,
mind-whispered voices stuck in amber.

Pills shaped like sleeping eyes swirled to sewage,
only to pop up in her hand one minute later.
Every time I took a step, I was nowhere.

Body frozen in the doorway, I watched my mother
trace the butter knife over my father’s forehead til fiery drops
pilled, blood stuck in amber.

Violent shouts bouncing against fluorescent-lit walls,
I tiptoed towards them, tried to follow them down the hall.
Every time I took a step, I was nowhere.

I peered into their hands, pink with rage, and stood so still
they probably didn’t know
I was there, little feet stuck in amber—
every time I took a step, I was nowhere.
I’m a Mother to My Mother

I wish I could be as soft as the skin of her womb,
melt the sharp past that has iced me.

But still, I’m a mother to my mother.
tears string down her cheek, her lipstick clownish upon her face.

I think about bitter words that I mouthed, how the skin of my womb
has sat sorrowed and tattered on my tongue.

I want to feather my fingertips, trace the lips of my mother
wipe away the stain that defaces her.

I am corded to the skin of her womb,
oblided to keep her safe from the hurt of her patterns.

I tell her be good and cloak my arms around my mother,
I tell her dad will be home soon and kiss her damp forehead.

I wish I could stay as soft as the skin of a daughter’s womb—
but I can’t. I’m a mother to my mother.
do you know you’re the most precious thing in your mom’s life
how she held you for seventeen minutes longed for pined lungs to grow
for your yellowing skin to lighten since then you’ve sat in her heart
like a leaden bullet little oleander pill stuck in her tight-closed throat
i’ve never seen your face this fraying picture of you is all i have
swollen cheeks to match your mom’s eyes jaundiced hand wrapping her finger
since you left her womb i have been your mother’s protector
she hasn’t slept in 23 years since your fingertips went cold on her skin
but i still recognize the imprint of a hand on your mom’s blued heart
Green

being surrounded by leaves sitting with legs crossed
watching vines as they wrapped around a tree covering me in shelter

the film camera my mom made me use to take pictures
of the bruises my dad left on her body

color of martinis gone bad limed mother in a wheelchair
my vomit in a toilet whiskey-soaked from the night before

grass under feet when i would sneak out of the house i took a walk
around the block in my fuzzy robe isolation tightening against my throat

alone in audobon park my feet pressed against the bark
of a magnolia i wanted to climb just a little bit higher
A Stranglehold: The Neatness (Of Being a Woman)

An erasure from a Sylvia Plath interview

I was quite small, nursery old.

From then on, I’ve been birds, bees, spring, fall;

I feel taboo, peculiar, private.

I’ve been the new, the very personal experience—

I who straddle the dangers of gentility

a stranglehold: the neatness, so evident everywhere,

more dangerous than would appear on the surface.

Young women would come up to me and say terrible criticism falls upon me for beginning.

I remember when I first felt the full weight, almost paralysing.

That is where we began.
When I Was Born My Body Was Opaque

as the knives of your teeth
still shining from the warmth of your womb,

you bit the fleshy string and told me to become the crawlers
that coat your floorboards present but silent

once, you told me you never belonged to your body
my body ached because you believed that

yet i have watched my body stand still, feet subject to sap
& stuck as a worm in a cocoon

my body the luna moth greening
in moonlight tails pinched off mid-flight

my body the remnants of your body
becoming less opaque
How Painful

To grow her belly
for six months and learn
the seed has expired,

To feel the bud
wither and decay
in her womb,

To see his lungs stay small
little poppy seeds
on a monochrome screen,

To finally flower a child
yellowed and scrunched
from her lower soil,

And then,
to feel the wind whisper out
seventeen minutes later.

To hang the ornament
inscribed with his name
year after year,

To funnel the poppy’s seeds,
her mouth becoming
a memorial.

To dig a hole so deep
in her womb’s pit,
nothing could fill it.
Blue

the sky reflecting oceans my pulse slowing as i dropped to the bottom
  of the pool grief scratched at my lungs as i looked in the silver mirror above

the color of my mother’s lips when i found her overdosed on sleeping pills
  i still check for the rise and fall of my mom’s breath when she takes a nap

cop lights bouncing off walls ambiguous loss loss of childhood
  loss of innocence just loss

fear of abandonment baggage wrapped around my throat like a scarf
  or an orange rope tied tight and flagrant field poppies being choked

color of being a doormat of being talked over silent invisible
  my life as the see-thru girl never getting over it
Instances in Which Someone Tells Me to Get Over My SadGirl Shit

My parents throw walls & I call my mother’s mother
my fingers fumble over landline buttons when my father’s mother takes the
phone clicking it shut she scolds me

our business is best kept
slept in our hot mouths.

We walk on campus under oranged light
the boy I write a hundred poems for sits with me at an iron table when I ask
him why he’s been absent he whispers

your lips have killed me
with your mother’s pills.

My ex on his bed across from me on a computer screen
I tell him since moving back that my chest is filled with leaky water & that some
days I can’t wear mascara for the threat of black tears his words frown

you need to find the light
that lines your purpled cloud.

It’s thanksgiving brunch at my dead aunt’s house we sit around the couch sipping
milky whisky and talking family drama when my father spits from
his mouth well why don’t you just write

a whole fucking book about us

I foam up over the slivers of silence and blurt

you know
I just might.
Sestina in Which My Body Becomes Solid

When I am born, you can see through my body.
From hospital windows, sunlight melts my pores
until I transluce, veins glinting cobalt blue.
My mother’s tit floods with milking amber
and drips through my lips to the floor,
I’m invisible, a metaphor born of her phantom womb.

I’m a fly spit from the walls of her womb,
As my mother’s hands reach for sleep, slip from my body.
I crawl like a bug on the sapping wood floor—
my wings see-through and broken by curses poured.
Their wall-thumped bodies a surge of amber
in the clamored house, my lips are stitched silent, blued.

Soon I grow into the stained silence of blue
walls, my eyes hard white pills in the absence of her womb.
In my throat I choke on my parents’ flaming amber
but still, they side-step my embodied
sap, until their limbs crack with gushing pores,
bleeding like rubies oozed to the floor.

Splintered glass and spilt pills scatter the floor-
boards, my own limbs becoming blued
from their mouthed outpours.
House an empty womb,
I stay so still, my body
wounded in amber.

Violence ambered,
trapped by the sap-soaked floor.
My wings crack away from my body
as I watch my skin bluing—
a great bruise enwombing
my pores.

My suffocation in-pours,
slams me in sticky amber,
I have writhed in the eidolon womb
of our house, spiracles choked, my head floored
by my parents’ fists, blue
as a wingless body.

I remain a fossil in the housed womb of my bug body,
petrified by poured violence, bruising in amber.
On the wood grain floorboards, I stay stuck, tongueblue.
Broken Ghazal at the Port of Marseille

The sun lies on my body & my body
    spreads over water, filling caverns below.
    Raising lazuli bumps across skin, rainbows pulse streaks of lightning low.

My body in the womb of water, my body floating in the navel of uncertainty.
    I allow waves of glass to pull my chest closer to,
    farther from, the sand below.

I loll in water, wish to linger in water. Curdled against my skin,
    the gulf keeps my loose tendrils
    from unraveling into seaweed below.

Piles of jagged jetties surround & lovers lounge,
    part lips, glisten as the sun blankets their bellies;
    but I am alone & full of blue, sanding below.

Ocean tosses in my ears & blues rock behind my body.
    Cradled only by water, I am alone—
    lulled by shadows that whisper below.
Indigo

my third eye melting in meditative memories running through images of a blurred life introspecting emotions to the point of isolation

the feeling of frozen icicles piercing my chest scratchy sheets effacing the skin of my eyes color of a doubled life body split in two whole halves

the third color to appear on a bruise like my mom’s puffed-up eye or me getting too drunk to bike the skin of my arm shadowed for months

color of being a sadgurl of being too sensitive as a kid i was bullied one wrong look from a teacher and i burst into tears

my lover in early college would avoid me because i talked too much about my mom
American Sonnet for the Womb I Built Alone

Why search for the impetus
of my metamorphosis? Should I shell
the shroud of nightscape and approach prism-light, glowing
with womb-salve still tacked to my skin? Should I expose
my goosebump flesh, sky-dive with a body
still for so long, finally shine my wing-scales in the dawning light?

But the sky doesn’t dawn—
I am wrapped in silks and nuzzled
by dark. My body is warm here, am I not good enough as is?
I opaqued this case to slam against the air-rush
of thunder. I have kept myself safe as a cyclone
shelter, have hushed out my bruised
memory of the life that strikes.
Poem in Which I Save Myself

my mom is driving and her car holds heat like the sun hot and gaseous
air from the vents is bitter as it dusts my mouth
my mom is driving with crystal glazed eyes lids heavy and half-closed i watch
the van grow brisk fear hard in my throat like the pill she has swallowed
my mom is driving towards pillared houses and we approach the familiar beige curb
charcoal mailboxes and vine-covered houses whip behind me
my mom is driving and to my right something screams against the mirror
i am ten years old behind me is the van on fire and my body pinches itself closed
twisting into my own skin 
i leave myself behind in the hot van
my new mind a false womb 
a damp soft shelter 
my body becomes
like lavender 
falling through water 
i open my eyes
to an island of sunken 
faces like funhouse mirrors
all i see are sapphires as pupils 
rubies as lips 
amber pills on tongues
and spools of gold 
like hair unraveling 
into depths below
objects bend into different shapes 
the green van now a toy sunk below me
it is not reality 
i know what reality looks like 
even if i’m not in it
i am walking the concrete stippled with yellow warnings when an emerald spark
flies blind into the curve an itch tightens my throat i scream with blood-
curled lungs still the van steadies metal vs. metal rakes in my ears i peel myself
from pavement limp to the van a vine wrapped around steel guard
my mother’s moonstone eyes glazed and drooped slur-tongue muttering in her mouth
i look past her to goldenspun blonde blue eyes wide little hands
grasping legs seatbelt burned into her i reach through remove her
from the wrecked womb i name her Aurelia this version of myself i can save
my body must look like a sculpture / carved of ice / pimpling goosebumps / i turn violet
as my body glides / in the coldest water / like needles pricked over skin / i move slowly
to stare at glimmerglass / squint my eyes til i see lavender / blooming over lips / there’s an entire
landscape / sunk near the bottom / i let my body float down / dive deeper
til i see cliff / face staring underwater / she floats above / the sanded bottom / where a green
van is scrunched / in the sand / the girl’s eyes glow blue / mirror empty as my mother’s
but her hair is a wave in current / stinging gold in rivers of light / my limbs
reach glacier heavy / to rocks in bed with her skin / and algae that hugs
her cracks / my fingers grow purple / so numb i want to prick my toes
on the jagged / edges of her drowned face / i am sinking in the sea
and the boys that are here / are already warming / sun on fine sand
bleaching away their blues / they teach me / how the untroubled float
i pull my body from the water / drag my boat / into the current
that tows me into uncertainty / digging into the swells and dips of the tide

i look below the waved mirror / where the girl still floats / trapped below
me are the jagged / faces of my past / before me a cove / i pull my way
to the cliff-face that climbs / one hundred feet above / rocking against
the coming tide / a knot forms in my chest / the little girl’s voice

whispers / i allow her to push me / towards a crack in the mountain / i want to
observe the waves beating the rocks / but the past hovers / and i feel the knot
tighten my chest / the side of the mountain crevices the skin of my eyes
and the front of my boat / splits the current / my body in violent accord
The waves a few feet in front of my body are towering. I approach a slit in the rock, barely wider than I am, slip into darkness. Dampness clings in the air, light from the outside illuminates wet walls like jewels, and I walk slowly on soggy stone ‘til a star of light grows brighter. Leaving darkness behind, I want to welcome the warm sun, let it dance on eyelashes. But the forest is thick with its unknown path and I’m shrouded in green. My chest grows tight, and I follow this thread of knot, place one foot in front of the next like a spool come undone before me. The foliage grows lower, glows with golden fire—when suddenly a giant structure of my face forms, marble and solid like David, the pupils a hole carved to inside. I climb up to the eye ‘til my arms buckle and I fall in the hollow. Slits of light cascade around me as I spot a mirror and face the reflection. A girl with golden hair that spins to the floor stares back. I notice jagged things in her pocket and pick them out one by one: bits of amber, sapphire, and ruby. The girl in the mirror tells me to open the wooden chest on the ground. It’s empty.
the marshwater surface stares back
dimly lit with doubt
her muddied eyes gaze past me
the hurt on her face
blooms into a cry
holding wounds rooted beneath

will we ever shake off
the past that haunts us both
the silt soaked in our pores?
this mud that has cased our body
has glued our mouth in silence
has ached til it cracked our tongue
will we one day
let the red bud bleed bright
press it to paper
and escape from this treacherous dirt?

even so, we will always be a part of
this body, a found warm home
where the mire has trapped us
our blood crusting like the earth—
the lotus will flower from our wounds
Repeat after me, she whispers. I am not
the daughter of an addict. I drop the amber
in the box. I am not a sad story. The sapphire bounces
against wood. I am not resentment or violence. I clutch the ruby
once more and let it tumble from my fingers. What now?
I mouth to the girl in the mirror. You have to go back.

My body cracks open like a shell. I leave the mirror,
the golden-haired girl, the wooden box. My body is scraped
against concrete, smoke hot in the holes of my nose,
and I open my eyes to a paved street.

When I met you, the girl whispers in my ear, I felt a hole
here, she points her finger to the soft skin
of my chest, the crevice where my ribs split,
and when you left, I waited.
somewhere behind me metal vs. metal rakes into my ears. i peel myself from the pavement. water leaks from my eyes, slides from my nose into my throat. i limp to the green van, a vine wrapped around a steel guard. i recognize my mother’s moonstone eyes, glazed and drooped, slur-tongue muttering in her mouth. i look down at the mirrored head of goldenspun blonde. blue eyes wide, little hand grasping mine, seatbelt burn still on her shoulder. i deliver her into shattered glass, buckle her up, slip my arms from the soft skin of her knees, and place her back into wrecked womb of the green van. she looks at me confused, lowering her watery eyes. the grief of her stings my throat, but i take her hand in mine, whisper—Aurelia, i’ll always be with you, and one day you’ll hold all the keys. your mind and legs and arms and eyes will grow tree big, root strong. one day, you’ll learn to fight.
Violet

the color of the sky a tornado approaching a lavender that’s soft
yet foreboding color i associate with violence
the color with the most energy shortest wavelength like its cells are rubbing
wool on sandpaper i’m put in a trance my body overridden by muscle memory
sometimes the body knows things like in middle school miss elmore
call for you dread flooded my chest what if she got into another wreck?
or like when i moved out of the house i still knew when
my mother was fucked up my skin would vibrate an itch i couldn’t scratch
emdr therapy feverdreams flashed behind my closed eyes undoing the
incantation i’m the daughter of an addict my identity
The Body After Trauma

As a child, I would sit on the floor of the shower, thighs pulled to my chest, forehead resting on my knees. The water a hot stream, holy as it blessed my body.

Cursing pierced the walls, echoed around my eardrums, and signaled cells to fire, saying freeze as it silvered my veins—a steadfast frigidness flowed through my body.

At the pool, I pushed air out of my lungs, dropped to bottom, and stared at the wavering image above. Steel blue surrounded; a feeling of unease encased my body.

I stood in front of my mother, stared at sapphire crusted in her mouth’s corners. Eyes flooding over her breast—I waited for her to breathe; pin-needle fear caught in the throat of my body.

Even now, in a bathtub miles from home, empty pill bottles and purpled skin pound the muscles of my neck. Hand over my chest, I beg—Annalee, please release the past from my body.
Poem for Ambiguous Loss, Chronic Sorrow

I think of my mother and her pain,
our pain. My body is rocked against the tide,
my heart an anchored knot

as I close my eyes against saltwater
leaking from my body, washing
my body. It started with memories

of how things could be: her hands slicking
my golden hair, her voice soft in my ear,
the sweetest of lullabies sifting through time.

Have I not also mothered her? Do I not now
sing to her, comb her curls, wipe away
the lipstick that has stained her face?

I want her to change, but the twist of my want wrings
the air from my throat. If I let my expectations recede with the water,
they will come crashing back and the current will sweep me under.

Have I not also taken care of her? Do I not now
lift her from the cold tiled floor with my own
mothering hands, carry her to sleep?

This love pulls my body apart,
and I cling to anything
with a heartbeat.

Are all these things
not good and loving,
even if they hurt?
Intergenerational Trauma

There are so many things I don’t want to tell you about my parents like how I have loved my dad even though I have witnessed his violence

How when I have asked him about throwing fists he has blamed his own sap-slicked house he walked on with bare little feet

How as a child his mother would throw parties gulping scotch in floral-faceted lowballs while he ran around the neighborhood in a sagging diaper

How when I was young my dad would treat me to breakfast every week and we would talk about books I was reading the language I have loved

Or that somehow I can still hold my mom and her sickness soft in a warm womb because she has held her own family like a sad pill stuck in her throat

How she had to care for her 15 siblings always a baby gripping her finger my mom chose to leave the house at 18 her mom chose not to attend her wedding

Sometimes I still think about when I was a little girl head in her lap how her fingers would stroke from my forehead down my nose to my chin

She would brush over my hairstrings call me her goldenspun girl there are still so many things I don’t want to tell you but I should