

THRESHOLD IN BLUE

A THESIS IN
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THRESHOLD IN BLUE

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ABSTRACT

The poems in this manuscript explore the idea of shame as it is imprinted in childhood and as it manifests in adult relationships. In particular, many of these poems address shame as it presents in mental illness, and as it is reinforced in mental health treatment programs and the broader United States healthcare system. While such cultural critiques are a key part of the collection, the poems in this manuscript also capture moments of hope, belonging, and intimacy in relationships to the self, to others, and to spirituality.

APPROVAL PAGE:

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined this thesis titled “Threshold in Blue” presented by Kelsey N. Beck, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Introduction

In September 2019, I attended a reading by Ben Lerner at the Kansas City Public Library. At one point during his accompanying live interview with *New Letters on the Air*, Lerner said something along the lines of, “Write about what you’re most ashamed of.” This was not a major theme in his discussion—really, it was more of a throwaway comment. But those words have stayed with me, perhaps because they articulate what has compelled me to write many of the poems in this thesis. In assembling these poems, I have wrestled with the question of what thread weaves them together. Each time, I come back to Ben Lerner’s injunction. The poems in this thesis are about the struggle to *be* in the world—the unease and uncertainty, the fear that one is lost or somehow, fundamentally *wrong*—as they are imprinted in childhood and as they manifest in adult relationships to loved ones, to the self, and to spirituality.

Many of these poems stem from the idea of shame—but they do not, I hope, end there. It is easy to portray pain or hopelessness and call it profound. It requires much more imagination to portray joy, wonder, hope. These are large abstractions, and abstractions do not usually make for compelling poetry. However, I hope there are parts of this thesis that capture those moments in which, as our worlds tilt, darken, and become strange, beauty also gleams through, and we see that our shame—our sense of unbelonging, wrongness, or condemnation—was a trick of the light. In particular, I have attempted to capture such moments in poems like “Mid-July Peaches,” “I Am My Beloved’s,” and “The Devil’s Wife is Crying in Missouri.” While these rare, lucid moments do not erase what came before, I think they reframe it.

In writing these poems, I gleaned inspiration from several sources, many of which were introduced to me in creative writing courses at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. One book that particularly influenced the language in this manuscript is Atsuro Riley's *Romey's Order*, in which Riley often yokes nouns with verbs and uses these yoked phrases as modifiers. For example, in the prose poem "Picture," the speaker says, "Our (in-warped) porch-door is kick-scarred and splintering. The hinges of it rust-cry and -rasp in time with every Tailspin-wind, and jamb-slap (and after-slap) and shudder" (7). This deft manipulation of syntax opened new vistas for me—it drove me to push my language, to twist it into new shapes in the interest of amplifying sound and breaking open lush imagery. For example, in one of the earliest drafts of my prose poem "Mudpie," the opening lines read, "Under you, you can feel Earth turning, and your back is sucked to its crust by gravity." In later drafts, I followed Riley's example and experimented with compressing and defamiliarizing my wooden syntax. With the help of Riley's example and workshop feedback, I pruned the language in the interest of speeding my images. Eventually, the line became, "Under you, earth-turn—sucking your back to its crust. Pinned like a bug to hill-swell." Other instances of these Riley-inspired experiments with sound and syntax appear throughout this manuscript.

The poetry workshops at UMKC also influenced my use of form in these poems, which include free verse, lyric, prose poetry, erasure, pantoum, and nonce forms. In particular, Dr. Hadara Bar-Nadav's Poetic Forms workshop prompted me to attempt some of these forms (namely, erasure and pantoum) for the first time, and inspired the structure of some of the nonce forms. For example, one of the assigned readings for the course, *This Wound Is a World* by Billy Ray Belcourt, prompted me to experiment with the devices of

numbering, lists, and dictionary-style definitions (as seen in my poem “Compulsion”). Additionally, Sam Sax’s “Psychotherapy [what brings you here today?]” from *Madness* inspired me to write a question-and-answer style dialogue in which one side of the conversation is scripted, therapeutic language and the other is more elliptical, poetic language (see “Proofs”) (Sax 65–67). More broadly, Dr. Hadara Bar-Nadav’s comments in various workshops taught me not to fear the right margin—to take advantage of the space on the page and play with its possibilities. By way of baby steps and by emulating Dana Levin’s staggered lines in *In the Surgical Theatre*, I branched out from hugging the left margin.

One of the forms that features prominently in this manuscript is erasure. Dr. Bar-Nadav’s recent erasures of pharmaceutical inserts inspired me to reappropriate the language of medical documents I had on hand—namely, forms from psychiatric hospitals and handouts from these facilities’ group therapy sessions. In many ways, the implications of the form are obvious—the erasure comments upon what these documents, their parent facilities, and the broader American healthcare system do to patients. In composing these poems, I took one of the more flexible approaches to erasure—I did not not strictly follow the word order of the source documents, but rather selected the most striking and/or representative pieces of language and rearranged them as the poem required. I found that the sense of detachment and fragmentation conveyed by the stilted, sometimes bizarre syntax and vocabulary in these documents invited collage and reassembly. Additionally, I perceived that the existing structures of these documents—the detached declarations about “the patient,” along with instructions for behavior modification—were rife for satire. In these ways, the erasures in

this manuscript seek to draw attention to the dehumanization wrought by the American healthcare system and the perennial problem of mental health treatment.

Though I sought to comment upon the social and political concerns surrounding mental healthcare through these erasures, I was (and am) perhaps more committed to conveying the conflicted and conflicting emotions associated with existing on the “patient” end of these documents/decrees. In poems like “The Wellness Toolbox,” “Patient Rights and Responsibilities,” and the “Emotion Regulation” series, my foremost goal was to create space for emotions that do not fit within our model of the all-knowing institution and the obedient consumer-patient. I wrote toward a different effect or motif in each of these poems, but in every case, I sought to balance an approximate representation of the source document with an absurd, surreal, or otherwise charged slant. Besides critiquing the efficacy of mental health literature, my erasures also seek to highlight the irony inherent the source documents, and the cognitive distortions with which a patient might interpret them. These critiques do not necessarily imply answers for what mental healthcare should look like, or what wellness looks like. It is a cliché, but I do not think poetry has to (or even should) provide answers to the questions it asks. Rather, if anything in these poems sparks recognition, identification, or empathy in the reader, I will count them as successful.

In arranging these poems, I have learned a lot about the process of manuscript development. I initially grouped my poems into three sections titled “Child,” “Patient,” and “Lover,” respectively, reflecting the three broad subject matters these poems address: formative moments in childhood; mental health treatment and patienthood; and relationships with lovers, friends, and the Divine. Though I dropped the section titles and have continued

to experiment with ordering, I have retained the three sections. One of the collections I referenced in arranging this manuscript was, again, Sam Sax's *Madness*, which contains several different three- and four-poem series across the sections of the book. While I have only one set of poems which I have formally designated as a series—the three “Emotion Regulation” poems—I believe that my other erasures function as a loose series because of their common form. In placing them at intervals throughout the thesis, I hope that, as in *Madness*, the ordering will create leitmotifs that prompt the reader to find connections and resonances across the manuscript's length.

At first, I was concerned that these poems would not flow together because they worked in three separate systems, broadly speaking. However, I have come to think that braiding these different poem-types together reflects a notion that undergirds all of poetry—that the poet, the speaker, and the reader are always everything at once. We are simultaneously children and adults, sick and well, loners and lovers. Our pasts and past selves are always present in our bodies, and in our bodies of work; I believe we feel our multiplicity most keenly when we create and consume art. Thus, the braiding of disparate voices, forms, and motifs in this manuscript reflects how our pasts and presents are simultaneous, and how, when we are within the poem, “all time is eternally present” (Eliot 13).

I will conclude by noting that I applied to UMKC's MFA program because I felt I was stalling in my development as a writer. Something in me was pushing me to write poems, but I had little formal training in poetry, and I knew I could only get so far on my own. My literature and workshop courses in the MFA program have shaped my writing by pushing me

outside myself and letting me develop and revise my work with a more critical eye. The program's interdisciplinary requirement also aided my development as a poet. Dr. Christie Hodgen taught me to exercise my writing muscles by emulating the distinctive styles of other authors (such as Edouard Levé in *Autoportrait* and Maggie Nelson in *Bluets*). Professor Whitney Terrell's prose workshop taught me to prioritize scene and dialogue. Professor Robert Stewart's writing guidelines prompted me to prune clichés and dead metaphors. Dr. Hadara Bar-Nadav taught me the value of compressing and defamiliarizing language and the joys of experimenting with form. These writers, among others, have become the voices in my head—the ones who converse with my own internal editor and guide me in revision. I am still in the beginning stages of my poetry career, and I hope the poems will continue knocking at my door for years to come.

Works Cited

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Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

I.

House

where we were born,
where we are still
primeval—illiterate, not yet
brushing our own teeth.

The back half-shrugged
into a hill in Kansas, trailing
gravel like a string of pearls. Tomato
vines curling in sidelocks
beside the rows of crooked blinds,
half-closed doll-eyes.

The parlor yawns in blooms
of dust—couches sigh
musty perfume. In the deepest
recesses, at the foot
of our parents' bed, a chest
of starched sheets and swaddling
for the baby brother who vanished
from the belly, his limbs
knotted like a bunch of grapes.

Upstairs, beneath
a steepled ceiling,
a plaster cathedral
with a window framing
the black blooms of oaks—
a hidden door to a room
in miniature, inside a closet,
too cramped for anyone
but children, sloped
walls concealing
our darkest hoards:

stones, leaves, the toothed
bones of animals.

Sleeping side-
by-side under hand-
me-down quilts, we dream
about the hill creeping
over the roof and swallowing us,
folded in a belly of dirt.

Cowpond

It goes like this: early-
March midmorning,
I tell you we should run
away like the kids in books
so we leave grandma easy-
chair snoring in front
of the hot cathode-
ray TV. In a church
basement somewhere
our parents are speaking
the tongues of angels,
assured they are God's
anointed. No one watches
us tromp through the wreckage
of fir needles, abandoned
deer heads, and barbed wire
(thorns in our sneaker-soles),
to reach the property line
marked with orange-and-black
warnings: *TRESPASSERS
WILL BE SHOT*. We streak
giddy through the dead-
grass field, past the herd's
cloudy stares and hanging
bellies, to the hedge-apple
tree leering over the green
cowpond. With withered white
rope we pull in the makeshift
sun-bleached raft, just wide
enough for the two of us,
and use a fallen branch
to punt across the twenty-foot
expanse. We are wind-
slapped, red-cheeked and roaring,

trying not to spill
off the edge and that's when
I see it: bloat of black
hide ballooning just below
the surface, swell of drowned
cow-belly. Squinting into the white
sky at a horde of inscrutable
birds, you do not see,
and I am too scared
to look again. I say,
We shouldn't be here,
and you don't know why,
but you listen to me,
which is one of the reasons why
I love you. That night,
when we are muffled
in quilts under grandma's milky
eye, I cannot forget
the carcass, cannot undo
what we've done. Later
I will wonder—was it
a drowned cow I saw
or a black tarp billowing
from the pond's bottom,
were we there together,
did we really run
away the days,
the years I heard
the voice of God whispering,
You shouldn't be here,
in a still small voice
that sounds like mine.

Mudpie

Nine, and backyard-dirt-sprawling, spread-eagled, chin uptipped, squinting the August heat. Under you, earth-turn—sucking your back to its crust. Pinned like a bug to hill-swell—

Under haybaled cumulus and blue nothing, neighborless miles and streams of hog-mud from upwind pens. Hedge-apple woods brooding with ticks and coyotes quiet in sunlight. At the trees-edge, the sun-bleached swing set. The foot of the hot yellow slide, where the dogs drag in deer-heads hunters leave behind.

Mini-trenches under the swings. Dug by heel-pounding the dirt for higher soar—naked ground where you streamed hosewater and hand-hollowed the brown batter.

Dirt is all of us dead. Yesterday's mudpies, crisp-crust and glued to shortgrass.

Dirt is the tiniest animals, worming your permeable. Peering downbody—*bacteria, microbes, germs.*

Under you, earthworms. Grass, thick-bladed, bristling the skin where your shorts ride up, scoring your thighs with x and x and x—

Compulsion (noun)

1. After church, your parents huddle in the dark duplex living room with the pastor again. You're six, waiting on a couch coarse as dead-grass-scratch; your eyes find the light-splinter beaming in the back window.
2. Being blown forward by an invisible wind.
3. Feet are suddenly slapping linoleum, but it's no longer you—it's a movie, and you are just watching. The camera shakes—hurtle toward the panes. Right hand center-frame, fingers fanned like a burst of feathers.
4. The hand smashing glass, breaking out the other side, flying into humid air.
5. Your parents drawing your arm back through toothed glass, lacework-streaming.
4. Mother-shrieking like distant crow-cry.
3. The pastor laying hands on your head, imploring the Holy Ghost to take over your body and mind. *By His wounds you are healed!*
2. Eyes open during prayer as you await flight.
1. Your hands will always crave the glass.

Incarnadine

I, too, was once an eyelid in black
swimming the skies
in the morning dark.

I flashed in, pulsing filament,
to join you in warm tissue folds
where we swung from umbilical strings.

I floated in fluid;
you spun, orbited,
tossed by waves,

while your shrimp-brain
throbbed lightning,
alight with holy storm.

I spewed from a fish-mouth, dripping pearls
while you traversed the desert,
starving, burning, lost.

I roved Golgotha,
calling your name,
tumbling down hillsides—

Staggered, seeped, pierced
my side on a stake planted
in a swell of earth.

I lay there, desiccated,
 shrunken to bone,
husk of apostle

whittled in stone.
 Awaiting your return
with the tide.

Your Likeness

In the enameled shine of a high-gloss mural on the Sunday school classroom wall—white robed & peach cheeked on acid green slope, cumuli-clotted sky. Thick-limbed children swarm your feet like kittens, and you gaze into their black & yellow faces.

In Woodward, Oklahoma, on the 4th of July, spanning the Baptist-church-projector-screen—milk-skinned & blue-eyed as a Disney princess, this time wrapped not in a robe but a flag, sinking from heaven's uranium glow in red, white, white, white & blue.

Your snuff film—the loin-clothed flogging, nine-tails-whipping, shoulder-blade-ripping. Your Hollywood incarnation: 6' 2", spray-tanned & of course, extremely fuckable.

On every wall of my priest-uncle's rectory in New Almelo, the baby pictures in which your high-breasted Mother cradles you bug-eyed & doughy in her ivory arms—

& at the family-reunion mass, your nudes. You hang overhead, 3-D & dark for once in smooth mahogany, all ribcage & thorn, the blood & water streaming from your spleen, your body not flesh but water pouring holy—a basin where I dip my fingers & anoint my skin.

Bed at Blue Hour

Sunk in the dough-soft mattress
 with flower-blotted sheets yanked
to the chin, worn thread-
 bare with years of my father's,
mother's, sisters', brothers'
 sleep—a cotton record
of defenseless hours stretched
 unselfconscious after days
harvesting sweetcorn
 in the sun. Nine years
old, tatty pajamas knit
 with Cheshire-cat faces
and it's too early to go
 to bed, and the air is not yet
a velvet curtain over the firs
 but suffused with blue.
At the head of the bed,
 through arched windows
vaulting into black woods,
 there are panpipes playing
somewhere in the haze, past
 the garden-bed piled
with squash and fat perfumed
 tomatoes, teasing wild airy
notes like some erratic bird-throat,
 and underneath, a faint hollow-
wood beat taps uneven, the ghost-
 song from another world—distant
enough to make you wonder
 if it's really there.

The Anxious Child's Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Guide to Dream Interpretation

Dream: You wake in the indoor playground of a fast-food chain in Woodward, Oklahoma.

Do you . . .

A: Beat greasy palms against the glass? (*Go to 1*)

B: Tear through the padded flooring? (*Go to 6*)

Dream, recurring: You wake in a petting-zoo-style-pen filled with shiny red and blue reptiles.

Do you . . .

A: Walk for days through an unknown desert? (*Go to 2*)

B: Knock at the door at the back of the pen? (*Go to 3*)

Dream: It's the middle of the night and you and your mother are driving home in pouring rain.

Do you . . .

A: Warn her? (*Go to 9*)

B: Beg God not to strike you down? (*Go to 4*)

1. Hours; the stink of cheap plastic. (*go to 2*)
2. You always return to this place. (*go to 10*)
3. A shadow answers. (*go to 6*)
4. You are too late. (*go to 5*)
5. You didn't pray hard enough.
6. A dead eagle with golden feathers. (*go to 8*)
7. Enters your body. (*go to 4*)
8. Twenty-foot wingspan. (*go to 10*)
9. Collision and flame. (*go to 4*)
10. Molting decay. (*go to 5*)

Mid-July Peaches

too soon but still we state-highway the sighing miles to the only open u-pick farm past New Melle—down scant-graveled paths to rows on rows of undulate trunk, leaf-curve & sway—

grocery-sack-swinging, side-stepping jaundiced clingstones, we beeline the redhavens, hunting their blush

you teach me to stalk them—red as reddest darkest bruise—finger flesh and flick, practice pick—the tightest won't unfix. nose stem and downed skin—the ripest scent you their breath

trunk-circled underfoot are the ones we leave—mud-dropped & sweet-rot, yeasting a brew that intoxicates or toxics

the ones that want you will yield to your pluck, flush so soft your hand could crush—

in grass-scratch between trees, my legs are bare & red-welted, chigger-swelled. blood-break beneath. you say *it's because you taste so sweet*

Puffball

that barely-spring

morning i make

you run away from home

with me, we plunge

the treeline, straggle

the undergrowth (ankle-
bit) & from all around

spindle-thin branches

rake our hot-pink

windbreakers, stickers

leeching to our cotton

pants.

follow the deer

tracks (look for two
almonds, a heart

or a pair of lungs)

till we find the balding

used-to-be-grave

of the rust-bitten

Ford F-100, & at the center
a white cluster

of crooked molars erupting

from leaf-littered dirt

(mushroom-swell).

wordless we huddle

& finger-stab

a white cap—

the tissue-thin skin
gives, splits, sighs
a green wound (dust-puff,
cloud of spore).

what the dust could do:
plant fairies, grow toads, enchant
the slug on the stalk
to soar over the tops
of the bluegreen
Douglas firs.

it is all possible—
until we boot-
stamp the cluster, trample
them like rancid grapes.
& afterward, the gusts
of our breath—
green-drinking, coating
our tongues, our lungs
with it—dust-halos
snuffed, secrets
swallowed, all for us.

Cassandra

On what would have been
your twenty-eighth birthday,
atmospheric furor. Choked
roiling and thunder, nimbus-
blackened sky. Split
limbs bristle in dark.
Hours. Rain burns
to August noonlight,
swells the breath-
damp, florid Missouri
sky. Neighbors stream
from corners of the complex
to keep vigil in the steaming
parking lot. Mirrored lenses
set in thin cardboard frames
preserve our retinas. Between
the faded stripes of empty
parking spaces, we watch
as it begins.

*

Partial—
sun-disc bitten
by shadow.
Tracing the lunar
silhouette, I think
about a woman:
your namesake, Cassandra—
the prophet no one believed
when she testified
to strange signs
in the sky—tearing
her red hair, watching
her city burn.

*

Your body,
celestial—physicians
did not glimpse the shadow
in your throat until
it was too huge to radiate,
and you choked
on the omen.

*

Totality.
Silver ring, halo
for a dark head—
we crook our necks
to see the sun
consumed in moon.
(Tiresias
went blind staring
into the sun.)

*

The dead do not orbit
the earth. Yet I am
here, in a body older
than yours will ever be,
keeping watch
with neighbors
as referents refract,
shadows fold
in crescents—fall
like leaves, sink
in the ground.

II.

First Night

cold-curl'd in the middle-
dip of the vinyl-
sealed mattress,
platformed on plastic
bed-stand (bolted
to the ground,
no room for hiding
contraband)

watching for the nurse
to return for bed-check
and re-check
at intervals impossible
to measure—

no clock, just the tick
and hiss of the vent
overhead— cannot
get warm

flipping on hip, twisting
bleach-fried sheets,
trace the shape
of your roommate's
back, unblanketed
and unstirring as when
you arrived six hours ago

the almost-invisible
grid of ceiling tiles,
the smooth plane
of the wall, the smoke
detector's red-winking

bed-check and re-check,
chest is electric,
you cannot
heat—

the walls curve, over-
curl, the ceiling-
grid shrinks. think
of the grandfather
you never knew, who
lived for years in a room
like this and died
not from electricity

shot through his skull
or from the noose
in his closet, but
from the hospital's
asbestos-crystalled
walls, lung-burned—

door-crack and bright
fissure, a body
back-lit. *alive*.
on her clipboard,
the nurse records
the time.

snap back
to dark. breath echoes
off walls—the smoke-
alarm lasers
your eyes.

Body Check

After the intake—the screenings
and questionnaires, repeats
of repeats, the ones you can't
remember now because you
are no longer in your body—
the nurse tells you
to undress and wheels in
in a privacy curtain. The exam-
table paper crackling.

Other staff knock,
crack open the door.
You already in here? Well damn.
How'd you get room 3? I've got an intake
I need to finish.
The nurse shoos them away,
tells you not to worry,
Everybody's always bitching
around here.

Shed the limp
t-shirt and leggings
you've been wearing
for three days, your heat leaves—
the unwashed animal

smell, sweat and salt-soured.

Skin check time, she says.

*Gotta make sure
the scars you bring in
are the ones you take
out.* She glides
nitrile-soft fingers over
your throat, wrists, belly,
hipbone. Goose-
bumped legs, purpling
from the cold. While she traces
them, your hands hang
bluish in fluorescent light.

Not a mark on you,
she says admiringly.

*Good willpower—
not tearing yourself up
like everyone else in here.*

Skimming your back,
she tells you she used to work
as a coroner's assistant
in Platte County. *No one realizes
how many people kill themselves
every day*, she says. She fingers

the safety pins fastening
your bra straps to the band,
but leaves everything intact.

Morning Check-In

Rate your mood on a scale of 1–8 (1=implosion, 8=nakedness, freeway-speeding)

Rate your anxiety on a scale of 1–8 (1=none, 8=god is real & you are his mistake)

Rate your anger on a scale of 1–danger

Rate your satisfaction w/ matter added (alprazolam, venlafaxine, trazodone) and matter subtracted (urine, blood, razor wire)

Rate the quality of your sleep, appetite, & bowel movements

Rate your fellow patients' karaoke-singing

Rate your roommate's night-terror screaming

How many hours are you into your 96-hr hold? (weekends & holidays do not count)

Are you seeing / hearing / conjuring things that aren't really there?

Are you thinking about killing yourself or someone else? If so, list plan here:

Did you accomplish the goals you set yesterday / the day before / the day before?

Trazodone

On night two it comes paper-cupped, milk-white and middle-slit. The blue-scrubbed aide slides it across laminate countertop, pale and flat as a communion wafer. The blue-scrubbed aide is not my priest. He only takes note of what I swallow with my juice. The body and the blood.

For hours it seeps. At the end of Hall 2, I buoy and bob at the wall-phone hooked by metal-wrapped cord, pressing beetle-black enamel to my cheek. A voice through the cables, but the tides pull me out. Like legs treading waves, pulsing strange heat. Crash of currents. Down on my knees, I drown to sleep.

PHQ-9

Erasure of Pfizer Inc.'s PHQ-9 (Patient Health Questionnaire)—a scored questionnaire used to screen for and measure depressive symptoms

Having the following problems ?

overeating the newspaper
concentrating on thoughts of hurting
speaking so the television notice[s]

Or, the opposite —

pleasure in restless energy ?

How often ?

(use “✓” to indicate trouble)

If you checked:

“nearly” “somewhat” “several” “extremely” or “more than half”

Patient yourself .

Appetite failure .

Take care that you arrive at the right TOTAL .

Hilltop in Otsuchi, Japan

Survivors encase
 themselves in glass and spin
disconnected numbers into a finger-
 wheel, weeping
in the black mouth
 of the rotary receiver—
a booth with a view
 of the sea that devoured
their dead. *Kaze no denwa*—
 wind-telephone. I heard
about it over FM
 airwaves while driving
to the Barnes-Jewish Cancer
 Center, a month before you drowned
inside your own lungs.

Missouri has no time
for ritual—just a church-basement
 supper and your open casket.
Through stained
 glass, a view of the sweating
 cornfields, swelled skies,
treelessness. We tell ourselves
 we do not linger

in our grief, do not dial
spirits. But on the other side
 of liquid crystal
 iPhone screens, the grasping
at static air—the captioned
 posts, shadowy photographs
 of photographs cast
 into empty space, *R.I.P.*, rip-
 tide. Some nights
I still text your ghost-
 number.

The same waves that vanished
families from the Sanriku Coast swallowed
the reactors. Twenty miles
up the highway from your cancer
ward, West Lake Landfill incubates
leftovers from 1945:
uranium decay swallowed
into groundwater and subterranean fires.

Midwestern tongues
too thick for the crisp clip
of consonants, the low voweling
of *Fukushima*. Still, we try
to utter some defense, cast
one last message into air—
Shinpai shina.
(You whom I loved, you
whom I could not save—):

From the other side
of copper lines and trembling,
the living have little
to say. Only *ganbatteiru*—
I'm doing
my very best.

The Wellness Toolbox

Erasure of “Action Planning for Prevention and Recovery” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Center for Mental Health Services

For this exercise ,
you need

a favorite medication,
a three-hole face, and
a set of five medical instruments .

Make a list
of things you must do
to become a good regular human .

Think of this as a toolbox
to help yourself .

Help yourself .

If the routines stop working—
eating sleeping trying—
take action while you still can .

Write down everything in a three-ring binder
and insert it into your breaking body—
an abundance of choices .

Breaking Down or Getting Worse

Erasure of "Action Planning for Prevention and Recovery" by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Center for Mental Health Services

In spite of clear instructions

troubling feelings and symptoms advance .

You may feel very uncomfortable dangerous

oversensitive and fragile with fewer choices .

Wanting too much may mean loss of control .

Early warning signs include

inability to experience something that doesn't really matter

being obsessed with not feeling quite right .

Others may be concerned for your crisis or loss of substance .

Take immediate action :

do three deep-breathing relaxation exercises for as long as necessary .

No one else can do it for you .

Proofs

The blue-eyeshadowed, rainbow-stripe-socked social worker proposes, *Think about diabetes. Diabetic people, they die without insulin. We don't shame diabetic people for needing insulin. It's the same for you.*

If I am a corresponding value, does it follow that diagnosis \equiv diabetes? If $A \rightarrow B$, diabetes \approx autoimmunity = the body destroying its own cells. If a mind self-destructs = natural selection (hand of God)? Shame is the remainder

This doesn't mean you're a bad person.

Body \leq mind \leq eternal soul? Which exist(s), which / 0 (undefined)?

It's just that the chemicals in your brain are wrong.

= FALSE () Chemical = Compound, substance, matter {empty set}

You could also think of it as "faulty wiring."

√ My fault = inflammation of the brain, acute. Does not appear on scans, but heat pulses, swells against bone-plates.

We've got some really smart doctors here who know a lot about medication.

Body as a placeholder \leq body as a vessel for pills

You'll be feeling better in no time.

To solve, isolate the radical expression
A line has no end

Weigh-In

The fastest way to get out is to finish all your food, she says, skimming nitriled fingers over your arms, waist, ribs. Sniffing for track-marks, razor-slits, bruises. Showering and bed-making help too, but Dr. V. loves a good appetite.

At 8:00 am / 11:30 am / 5:00 pm, you herd with the others for your dome-covered tray. Mucous oatmeal, withered baked potatoes, gelled apple crisp. Your stomach is full of hot tendrils.

A sharp-eyed tech, leg-jiggling for a cigarette, sits at the front and records what percentage of your plate you cleared. You are good. You are full. You are full of good.

In the morning, after margarine-slicked toast, they call you to the scale in the Day Room. You step up in rubber-grip hospital socks, and the tech slides the black anvil to the middle of the beam. *Forgot my glasses, can't see shit*, she grumbles. *Tell me what it says.*

You don't know how to read it, and the tendrils are curling. *103*, you say. She records it, and for the first time since you arrived, you feel giddy.

After weigh-in, you're given a worksheet in group therapy titled Personal Agency. Question 5 demands, *What's your special talent?*

You use a bitten pencil to cut into the paper: *Disappearing.*

Patient Rights & Responsibilities

Erasure of "Statement of Patient Rights" and "Statement of Patient Responsibilities" from Signature Psychiatric Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri

As a patient, you are granted appropriate language to reuse.

Alternatives are not recommended.

Not following the proposed course of speech may damage.

Telephone calls are against medical advice.

Help the hospital understand your injury.

Help the hospital understand your grievances, impairments, and violations

(Hospital will not be responsible for management of pain) .

Understand:

The hospital makes every effort to inspect your Advance Directive and to provide a copy of your bill.

Commute

At mile-marker 229,
 cheating the speed
limit, I see
 my uncovering:
chomp of steel,
 the kiss and grind
of sheetmetal shells.

 part of me lurches
into the Impala ahead—
 my flesh-self flying,
the whiplash
 and crack pitching
forward, cranium crowning
 the windshield
and onto the highway.

 I see my shatter—
rib-twist and lung-
 puncture,
my cheek peeled back,
 orbital shatter. White-rasp
of bone on pitch—
 white-grind. Open
honeycomb
 split to marrow—

 I am not skin-
stripped on I-35,
 but hurtling gritty-
eyed through the right lane,

staring into one
of my futures. Dr. Liskow
will tell me these
are *negative visualizations*,
a term I confuse
with some sort of spiritual
emptying, a going-clear—

Still, there is a comfort
in seeing my bones
stripped clean, polished
to a shine on asphalt,
my road-whittled skull
wind-whistling,
glinting toothy
in headlights.

Your Individualized Checklist for Daily Functioning

After “Action Planning for Prevention and Recovery” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Center for Mental Health Services

1. *Describe yourself when you are yourself.* If you can't remember, describe what you might be like. *Examples:* thoughtful, shy, severed, sclerotic, exanimate, exsanguinated. Refer back to this list as needed.

2. *List dreams and goals.* If you don't have dreams or goals, check Instagram for inspiration. A sense of purpose can be productive.

3. *List daily essentials. Examples:*

- *Eat 3 healthy*
- *Drink 6*
- *Go outside for 30—no more (melanoma), no less (despair)*
- *Talk to 1 human (at a minimum)*
- *Ask yourself how you're doing (emotionally, physically, metaphysically)*

4. *List your most important lists.* Carve their bullet points into your forearm. This way, you will avoid the pain that comes from forgetting.

5: *List the things that no longer make you feel better.* You can tear up the list and light it on fire in your blistering palms. Burn deep enough and nerve roots will numb; this is also called coping.

III.

On Our Way Back from Urgent Care

we stop at the Walmart
pharmacy a half-mile from home
for weekend supplies: alprazolam,
hydroxyzine, venlafaxine,
trazodone, and bite-
size pecan tarts (an offering
for the church potluck)

a week since our third
wedding anniversary —
another night
measured in milligrams,
medically-induced
tranquillity

from the cramped parking
space we unfold
into a lot blacked
with oil drippings from semi-
trucks—strangers
rushing for milk and eggs,
silhouettes
dimmed in rain

cratered blacktop refracts
the streetlights, glinting
like water,
and we are unmoored,
skimming its hidden
depths, the shopping carts
gliding like canoes—

orange lampglare,
 neon rainwater pools
a message hangs overhead
 burnt in sky—
fluorescent letters
 throb in the dark

 you drift ahead
and I am
 caught in your wake, swimming
toward your back
 from such a distance
I cannot close.

When You Were a Ghost

This summer you ghost
your way down hospital
halls, spill pills
from orange bottles,
glide behind
blackout curtains—

You are skin
but do not want to be.
The impossibility of feeding
so much meat—

With hunger you are
purified, whistle-
clean and whittled to
a broken tooth, an open root
for breath and water to rattle
through—

If you do not believe
in the body, how
can it hold you?

In the other room,
you run the bath and make-believe
someone else is there,
so that at any moment
you can burst in, kneel
on the bathmat and cry,
I'm sorry, I'm sorry,
without knowing why.

I Am My Beloved's

O let me lay down at thy feet
of burnished bronze that blaze within.
I'll carve those shalt-not-shalt decrees
in labyrinthine patterns on my skin.

There is no judgment but the Name
written in skies by pillars of cloud.
Move in the censer and fade in the flame—
one to reveal and the other to shroud.

You roll on firestorms outspread
through wave and storm and fiery lake—
You fly in, a white and swelling head,
splitting oceans in your wake—

I'll give you a body that's hungry and drawn
and hollow bones that whistle your song.

Emotion Regulation I

Erasure of “Emotion Regulation Handout 11” from DBT Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition, by Marsha M. Linehan (2015)

Follow these suggestions when your emotions do NOT fit :

Unclench teeth
Relax facial muscles
Half-smile
Repeat .

When acting is not effective ,

be sensual (inhal[e], look at, touch, listen, tast[e])

and adopt a “bright” body posture :

Knees apart
Hands on hips
Heels out
Repeat .

Sad urges

contaminate .

Instead,

increase PLEASANT EVENTS .

If you have lost something or someone permanently ,

remind yourself of why love is not justified

(rehearse the “cons” of loving) :

pictures, letters, mementos, close enough to touch—

Instead, engage in another nonviolent activity :

Unclench smile

Relax teeth

Half- face .

If your personal characteristics or behavior are made public ,

DESTROY grace .

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS .

Repeat.

Visiting Hour

after my first week inside, he enters like a debutante through the keycard-access-only-double-doors—the ones i corner-eye all through dinnertime (vegetarian option: baked potato, butterless—i was ascetic when i completed the meal form)

he comes to me name-tagged & escorted by Tim, the bald bag-eyed orderly whose job responsibilities include recording what percentage of my plate i cleared (tonight: 60%) & asking if i've been hearing voices again

& then he is across from me at the square table in the northeast corner (the same table where on Friday Tim & an intake nurse announced, good-cop-bad-cop-style, that due to liability concerns, i would not be going home after my free mental health assessment)

at satelliting tables, other hall b patients (the bulimic marketing exec who sketches baby animals, the unshowered college student who's reading *Infinite Jest*) are transfigured beside their beloveds (a mother, a son)

if i am transfigured, i don't feel it—unshaped, crumpled into powder-blue scrubs like a bug-smear in napkin. un-figured. the table between us jigsawed with mix-'n-match questions:

am i not

dead?

can i make you

enough?

better off

happy?

instead of crying i say, *happy anniversary*, and, *let's pretend we're out to dinner*.

Ode to the Ribcage

And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman.

—*Genesis 2:22*

You necklace looped from
a spidering sternum;

you cartilage chandelier,
lashed with sinew;

white clamshell halved,
cracked clean by a god-hand;

living corset
for a throbbing clot;

open vault
trussed with blood-fed stone;

fragmented frame
crystallized in a single desire:

Female or
fracture.

Inpatient Discharge

Erasure of discharge paperwork from Signature Psychiatric Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri

Patient demonstrates understanding of severe danger.

Admit your medical needs:

Routine self without psychosis

(Place patient here.)

Important message from major disorder:

Remove and discard all discontinued ideations.

(Place patient here.)

Care requires access to firearms .

If you experience emergency ,

stop taking these precautions :

compliance reason risk

Swarm

couch-sprawled
 after moving day,
you spot the first
 of them crawling
 the sill, and thumb-
crush the chitined
 bead to a blackberry
smear. but by morning
 the stain draws new
troops, a fresh regiment
of glossy bodies.

still more creep
 in with the freeze—
 streaming the door
 jambs like molasses
drips, hiving the lip
 of your Coke
can—and when i poured
 the water in the rice-pot,
the hundred pinpricks
 floating to the surface—

we perform the rituals:
 dust the threshold
with cinnamon, paint
 the lintel with Raid,
the kitchen
 sweet-smoking
with lavender-burn.

still, no space
 between—three of them

nesting in the cat's
paw-pads, the dark hair
on your forearms,
the hollow
between my breasts.

we wonder what we did
to deserve them—what crumbs
scattered, sugarbowls
unlidded,
hidden filth or spill
gumming the unseen
corners within corners—

more and more death
on the windowsills—
empty exoskeletons
crunch under-thumb.
caulk in the fissures.
we infested first.

Emotion Regulation II

Erasure of "Emotion Regulation Handout 11" from DBT Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition, by Marsha M. Linehan (2015)

Something in you violates .

Other social

group[s] perceive threat :

Unfriendly POSTURE AND EXPRESSIONS .

If you want to stay secret,

1. Oppos[e] your urges .

2. Private your intensity and disgusting BODY CHEMISTRY .

3. PUBLIC some pleasant teeth .

4. CHANGE THE EMOTION BY ACTING .

Example:

1. Be a little nice when insulted or threatened by an attacking person, animal, or object .

2. As your chest unfolds , rehearse reasons why *GUILT* is permanent .

3. If rage arise[s], GENTLY AVOID .

4. ASK WISE purchasers of this book:

“ Is my head innocent ? ”

If not , AVOID AVOIDING physical MASTERY .

Eat, drink, embrace what you found disgusting .

Maintain eye contact . REPEAT

shame over and over .

The Devil's Wife is Crying in Missouri

Cloud-stain. The vapors smudge, smoke the close-hanging air. Frosted-glass sky.

Missouri July. Watch from inside the duplex, window propped open with a can of chili beans. The rotten frame admits wet breaths from outside. Across the street, garage-door paint peels like pea-green bark.

Street-smells steam and rise: gasoline from Jiffy Lube, fry oil from Popeye's, grass and shit and wild onion from the abandoned lot next door.

Airless teeming. And it starts—tin pinging on the roof, oiling the rheumy glass eye.

And then, from the unscreened window, the embarrassing triteness of it—beyond the knots of dandelions cracking through concrete—

wide, shallow beauty pooling at the end of the drive.

Amid the emptied miniatures of Hennessy and Fireball, the cherry pie wrappers and scratched lottery tickets. No longer lining the flooded ditches, but mosaicked, refracted.

Storm in sunlight. Water-beaded power lines, silver-glittering—spiderwebs.

Amitriptyline

I'm saving
white pill bottles
on the bathroom shelf
in case of emergency.

White-pilled bottles
mushroom the shelf
(in case of emergency,
do not resuscitate).

The shelf mushrooms
to a 90-day supply
(do not resuscitate
any of this).

A 90-day supply:
\$40 with insurance,
all of it
automatically withdrawn.

The bottles insure,
cover what's already broken—
automatic withdrawal
leaves me shaking.

What's already broken:
the bottles' safety seals—
see me shaking before
150 milligram tablets.

The bottles are safe, seal
off thought.
Side effects of 150 milligrams:
drowsiness, weight changes.

The cure for thought:
13,000 milligrams.
Drowse & wait for
tachycardia, tremors, toxicity.

My fade awaits
on the bathroom shelf.
I tell myself I don't need
saving.

Emotion Regulation III

Erasure of "Emotion Regulation Handout 11" from DBT Training Handouts and Worksheets, Second Edition, by Marsha M. Linehan (2015)

As a sad, sad client

YOUR BODY love[s] harm .

Violent desire damage[d] INTERPERSONAL SKILLS .

You want to change ?

If so ,

Repair your open head

and cut stomach .

Control facial transgressions ;

hide lost teeth and point[ed] shoulders.

Photocopy and print a new , clear

chest .

Stop EXAGGERATING repulsive ear muscles.

INHIBIT DESTROYING your eyes .

CHANGE YOUR BODY :

Relax knees and maintain

willing hips.

Take in deep fingers ,
animal hands.

Stomach your breath. Muscle their touch.

Do what you are afraid of ... consider

fire .

VITA

Kelsey N. Beck grew up in the eastern Kansas countryside and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in English from MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, Kansas. While earning her undergraduate degree, Kelsey studied abroad at the University of Oxford. After working as an editor at a local publishing house, she joined the University of Missouri-Kansas City's MFA program as a Durwood Fellow. During her time in the program, she also interned for *New Letters* magazine. After earning her MFA from UMKC, Kelsey plans to keep writing, publishing, and contributing to the Kansas City literary community for many years to come.