

WHEN THERE WERE KNIVES I DREAMED OF IT

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by  
MARY HENN

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M.A., Missouri State University, 2018

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# WHEN THERE WERE KNIVES I DREAMED OF IT

Mary Henn, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis, *When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It*, is a collection of poems and prose in three parts. It is prefaced with a long-form poem comprised of 11 parts, which is intended to establish the tone for the work that follows. The first section, “Girlbody: A Christening with Thorns,” explores subjects of girlhood, gender and sexuality, and violence. The poems and nonfiction essays of the first section move from schooldays into young adulthood, focusing on traumas of the body. “Losing Form: Boy & Crushed Ice,” the second section of the collection, recenters subjects introduced in the first section around issues of addiction. The second section focuses primarily on the speaker’s familial relationships, specifically the relationship she has with one of her brothers. The third and final section, “Drawn, then Cauterized: An Un-Naming,” turns outward toward relationships cultivated in adulthood, while also reflecting on issues of the body. The collection concludes with a second long-form poem in sections that is meant to echo subjects that surface throughout the entire collection.

In summary, the pieces included in this thesis explore girlhood, gender and sexuality, religion, addiction, relationships, community, and loss in what might generally be regarded as vignettes. More than anything, the work of this collection stiches together

images and fragments of memory as a lens, if not for understanding, then for observing the ways in which trauma impacts collective facets of society and culture.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It,” presented by Mary Henn, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

### Supervisory Committee

Hadara Bar-Nadav, Ph.D., Committee Chair  
Department of English

Christie Hodgen, Ph.D., M.F.A.  
Department of English

Anthony Shiu, Ph.D.  
Department of English

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## WHEN THERE WERE KNIVES I DREAMED OF IT: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When I began creating this collection, I started with poetry. In the middle of my MFA program, I was immersed in creative nonfiction, specifically the lyric essay. There, I found space to play out what my poems were saying beneath the surface. As I compiled and sorted the pieces within this collection, I came back to poetry. That return allowed me to re-see my own work in unprecedented ways. What came out of that re-seeing is the hybrid forms you'll find here.

Literary critics have different ways of defining hybrid writing. Ben Segal's "The Fragment as Unit of Prose Composition" acknowledges that there are many names for hybrid work: "shards," "fragments," "gestures" (158). "Unlike paragraphs or sentences," Segal writes, "they [fragments] do not flow directly from and into their bordering text. Instead they are independent, defined by their singularity, by the white space that encases them on a page – even when they are cobbled together and marshaled into service as the contents of a book" (158). Segal cites Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Evan Lavender-Smith's *From Old Notebooks* as texts that do such fragmentary work. I will add Sarah Manguso's *300 Arguments* as another important book composed in similar lyric units. When I began writing lyric essays, I had just read *Bluets*, which investigates the color blue through a series of fragments or what might be regarded as prose poems. Nelson's ability to deliver nonlinear narratives and histories under one title is incredibly artful. While many of the essays in this collection were initially inspired by Nelson and Manguso in terms of style, the forms in which they appear eventually drifted from such

extreme fragmentation. Essays such as “Assemblies,” “When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It,” and “Where My Neighbors Crush Ice” work in nonlinear ways, but ultimately aim to divulge personal histories that connect to broader cultural and social contexts.

I wrote the essay “Assemblies” in my first creative nonfiction workshop, after reading Nelson (as mentioned) alongside Jo Ann Beard. While it is undoubtedly difficult to replicate their styles, both Beard and Nelson signify, in many ways, the power of image in narrative storytelling. I wrote the first part of “Assemblies” after reading Beard’s *Boys of My Youth*. I began with a single memory from elementary school, and the rest of the essay came later, in clipped vignettes. Prior to revision and publication in *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, the essay was much longer. I omitted some fragments of memory in exchange for a few fragments on specific, nonpersonal subjects. I found that Noah’s Ark and pigeons, for instance, provided narrative glue, which allowed me to circle back to and build upon metaphors initiated in the opening section of the essay. Those subjects also allowed me to insert shorter fragments at various points within the essay so that it could move in and out of particular scenes and themes with more formal variety. Such form, often referred to as a “braided form” or “braided essay,” became the default for many of the pieces I composed around the same time. Not all of those essays have been included in this thesis; thematically, they did not fit with the contents of this particular collection. The essays of this collection, perhaps more than anything, speak to early-life trauma and addiction, subjects I am unable to untangle from one another.

When thinking about other early inspirations for hybrid writing, Claudia Rankine comes to mind. Rankine’s distinguished prose-poetry style in books such as *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* have been labeled “lyric essays.” Rankine’s experimentation with form and multimodality makes for a reading experience that is raw and visceral. I return to her work often, each time coming away with something new. Rankine’s work is centered around event and experience—her essays detail occurrences, while also spawning occurrences. “When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It” strives toward narrative simplicity and a hybrid style. In a way, that essay became the stylistic precedence, not only for the title piece of the collection, but for the entire body of work.

*When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It*, like many of the individual poems and essays it contains, is loosely organized in chronological order. The collection begins with work centered around girlhood. It then moves into adulthood, where much of the work reflects experiences of addiction and other trauma. The collection ends (or perhaps doesn’t end) with reflections on current experiences which call back to themes that surface earlier in the collection. The title of the collection pulls its name from the first lyric essay I composed. Karen Kovacik’s “Invitation to ‘Invisible Guests’: The Poetry Collection as Existential Project” discusses the importance of titles, especially with first collections. “Because title broadcast tone and sensibility,” she writes, “they must be resonant, but they should also provide a focus and suggest overall structure for the book” (Kovacik 52-53). Much of the work in this collection speaks to trauma, which is often written about via fragments and images that contain a sharpness, either literally (through images of “knives,” for instance) or formally, through concision and whitespace.

Furthermore, much of the physical trauma discussed in this collection happened at the ends of knives and guns.

When I think about my early exposure to and appreciation of fragmentation and attention to the image, I am reminded of the imagism of poets like Ezra Pound and Mina Loy. Loy's *Songs to Joannes*, which debuted at the height of Modernism, is poetry that I return to when considering the expansiveness of the poetic genre. "Love Songs" stands the test of time, challenging what constitutes love poems. In many ways, the images of "Love Songs" are ugly and gritty, the "spawn of fantasies" (Loy 1). Loy is often considered a futurist. Such categorization makes sense when taking into account her experimental syntax and poetic form, her often violent and quick-paced lines. Futurists investment in speed and violence is contemporarily viable when it comes to writing about trauma.

Furthermore, as this collection came together in the year of COVID-19 and at the height of Black Lives Matter protests. Universal and collective trauma (both experienced and witnessed) was on my conscious in more ways than one. At the same time, I began teaching elementary and middle school art, which renewed my interest in early twentieth century art and literature. As I studied modern and contemporary art, I also re-studied modern and contemporary writing. That, combined with current events and the ever-increasing prevalence of technology, allowed me to return to modern literature with a sense of urgency. Additionally, study of the Harlem Renaissance led me to the work of Richard Bruce Nugent and Angelina Ward Grimkè, who not only produced necessary art on matters of race and sexuality, but also challenged fundamental concepts of genre. I

imagine that hybrid styles of contemporary literature owe a debt to literature of the early twentieth century, especially the innovations born in the margins, out of pain, oppression, and change.

I find that trauma is often recalled, if recalled at all, in fragmentary bursts, instead of full and complete portraits. Sometimes those memories are brought back by certain smells and noises, for instance. Often, the memory of trauma is visceral, and it becomes tempting to quiet a visceral response through physical means, substance use, for instance. That single notion is the basis for much of my work, and it is not one that is entirely unique to me or my experiences. Bessel A. van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* describes those who have experienced trauma as chronically feeling unsafe inside their own bodies. "The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort," van der Kolk writes, "Their [traumatized people's] bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves" (97). So much of this collection, *When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It*, attempts to uncover what plays out inside of the body as means to speak to collective and ongoing traumas like addiction, violence, and poverty.

Of course, contemporary poets inspire my work incredibly and continuously. My earliest attempts at poetry were inspired by poets some might consider as "contemporary classics"—poets such as Sharon Olds, Dorianne Laux, Ted Kooser, Ellen Bass, Billy Collins, and so on. It goes without saying that those poets are extraordinary writers, but as an inexperienced writer trying to imitate them, I failed. Furthermore, much of the

reading I was recommended as an early writer lacked diversity in terms of identity and experience. Later on, I began reading poets like Kaveh Akbar, Natalie Diaz, and Benjamin Garcia, poets who changed the way I understood the necessity of poetry, of trying to make sense of certain struggles like living with and loving an addict.

Natalie Diaz is a poet I circle back to often. *When My Brother was an Aztec* addresses losing a brother to addiction. Diaz, in various works and interviews, discusses the notion of losing someone who is living to drug use—a theme that is resonant throughout her poems and essays, a theme I address in my writing, too. In some ways, I have come to understand more about my brother’s suffering (which is also my own suffering) by writing it down, by tracing back memories we share. Often, I find myself writing to my brother with hope that he is still there and may return. In many ways, I understand poetry to be, generally, an act of intentional grieving.

Another critical poet for me is Emily Skaja. Skaja’s *Brute* inspired the first and final poems of this collection. Her work with poetic concision and a short line provided a way of re-seeing early drafts of my own poems. “Premonition from Running Ho[r]se” and “Miss Scarlet Outside Royal Liquor with a Glass Rose” both employ a clipped line. Skaja frequently uses couplets in her poetry, specifically couplets with the second line indented. That stylistic inclination is initiated in the first poem of *Brute*, “My History As.” I use a similar form in “Premonition from Running Ho[r]se,” but with section and page breaks to elongate the form. “Miss Scarlet Outside Royal Liquor with a Glass Rose” is also similar in form, but composed in tercets and does not use page breaks. Both the first and final poem are significant in terms of their placement and use of whitespace. I

wanted a reading of the collection to be deliberately drawn out at the beginning and end. I also wrote those poems after my return to poetry, and I consider them to represent some of the strongest work in the collection.

Returning to poetry, in some ways, was like returning to my brother, who inspired so much of the writing within this thesis. When my brother and I lived together, I would sometimes find him circling the yard, staring at the sky. In those moments, I never asked him what he was doing. Much of my writing is not knowing, is speculation. When I draft poems and essays, I go back. I sit in the yard, and I watch. I don't ask directly. I am in the distance, barely there. My intention is to witness. I am continuously drawn to poetry and prose of simplicity, to language informed by need. I (want) to believe that poetry and creative prose have a place in day-to-day experiences, that they are necessary channels for communicating personal and collective histories, that they keep those histories alive.

Dedicated  
to

Jack, always

When There Were Knives I Dreamed of It

*PREMONITION FROM RUNNING HO[R]SE*

1. Grief doesn't always follow the dead. Understand  
I need an elegy for bodies still taken  
  
by half-blinking names. Understand  
there is mourning  
  
without burial, without shifting seasons,  
without bloom.  
  
There are nights before  
hotels, no home, Horse. I lay  
  
bare bluish fragments  
of a missing boy,  
  
his unsalvageable light  
and failing skies.

2. A stranger says, *Grief is love with no place to go.*

It sticks

to my throat like a thousand toothed-aphids.

I can't stop

saying, *It's the last*

*warm day of the year,*

and brace for loss.

The aphids overwinter, survive snow, yield

wings when crowding begins.

3. Around rosebushes and poppies  
Mary statues the garden.

I played her once  
in a Christmas pageant,

was called to wear a crown of flowers,  
blood petals like tissue paper and fish skin,

black pin eyes in the center  
left thumbprints in my forehead.

4. Attempts to feel myself out of feeling  
float the same

dilemma as listening to silences, swallowing  
tapeworms, stealing Black Pearls from you. Brother,

I heard you live in your car. I wrote a poem  
six years ago, there was

an unlocked medicine cabinet. Call it  
premonition. Call it love with no home. Call it water

left running from a hose.

5. *Whatever you do, don't let the smoke run  
red.* You said,

*It's laced,* as if you knew  
we'd take this journey together. Her name

Fentanyl. Her tongue glimmers  
knives, carries an appetite for hollow

fruit, a weeping mother,  
a rose garden bursting through the veins.

6. The koi survived, too,  
    flaked and scabbed,  
  
    blinded snow, surprised us when they swam back to summer.

7. After sharp exhale she said, *Maybe you are insatiable  
like your brother.* I

said, *We are not made of the same things*, knowing we are  
spun from the same rough coil.

Call it a trunk without branches hoping to hold leaves.

8. If the opposite of love  
is violence, then is the opposite  
of grief also violence?  
Because they run the same,  
they're thorned with aphids too.

9. *I am dying*, you told me once, *to bury it*,  
which is the same

as not knowing what to do with grief, once  
tenderness. Let me tell you, Brother, I

found it. But it didn't  
root in water. Truth is, I know it tried.

10. I cast spells, threw texts into a pixilated river, laughed  
at the stars, pleaded

with St. Dymphna,  
a name for poet, runaway and grief,

who knew the heavens  
you taste, cannot give up.

I typed I love you I loved you I am  
tired of loving and

cut my thumbs on shattered screens.  
I meant grief grieved grief grieving.

11. I burned tree stumps all night as an offering  
to kill your sickness. You

were 13. The stumps were swimming  
in greenflies too.

They already sacrificed their teeth.

I.

**GIRLBODY:  
A Christening  
with Thorns**

*BROKEN SONNET FOR THE AMERICAN SCHOOLGIRL*

Sunday: make up the couch,  
lay a sheet over its face

to keep your mother's body

from staining

it.      Monday: a school  
secretary announces the Pope is sick, code

for your teacher to turn off lights, lock  
doors, pass a basket spilling with rosaries.

Pray your father won't come home. Hide.

Tuesday: help your mother bathe, watch  
her naked and bruised, stitch after  
stich popping and dissolving while

fingers move along beads  
to muffle the gunshot outside—a veil      over the black and blue of it.

## HOW A BODY FLOATS

When as a girl I woke up in hives, the root of which unknown, I believed my body was making itself invisible. Skin knew what I couldn't say, could see the limbs suffered, heard my father when I came downstairs in my swimsuit. *Your hips are big, is there a baby in them?* Last year, someone's son drowned in the waterpark my mother bought season passes to when my skin blistered, as if the sun could cure me through reverse psychology. But I didn't leave the house, couldn't unimagine the manmade waves pounding into naked stomachs, the chance of a locker room. People are always drowning. When the hives came, the air conditioner gave out. Sweat pooled in the folds of my grandmother's quilt on the living room floor where I slept, the way I used to stay with her when my father called me *whore*. For three months, hives covered all of me, stitched themselves to my eyelids like sequins, spread in spite of medicine and water and light—the flesh's jeweled response to a locked door. *Can I take pictures?* one doctor begged, and I undressed the welts, tried to trace the blood source. If my mother had asked, I would have told her I didn't eat anything unusual or reminded her that, other nights, when my father was gone, we made the floor a bed and the marks on the ceiling a galaxy. She took me to doctors anyway. They cut my back a hundred times to tell me it was dust. That is to say, everything ate my body.

## WHAT WE TAKE TO GRAVES

My mother breeds fleshy peonies for her mother and brother's graves, and we drive them into Wood Heights, where black dirt rises behind a for sale sign and overgrowth consumes everything. We pass feed stores and dead ferns and busted shutters. Near the downtown diner, we pass Salem Christian Church, where cats and meth loiter and god is a pro-life poster. From the backseat, my brother says the houses look like incest, and I think I understand him. In the forested, untouched space of this town, he says, *You could dump a body here*, and I think of the bodies we cleave to instead. When I was 10, my mother asked if my father ever touched me. With my back against the laundry room door, I said *no*. I couldn't say, *I don't remember*. But we keep on, past the street where my mother was raised, where Carole Robinson got pregnant their senior year and everyone stopped talking to her. My mother shared her sense of betrayal. Before his heart attack, my mother went to see her brother and a stallion he'd purchased. After seeing him on his side, flank washed in dirt, spine touching stable door, my mother asked if he was sleeping. But no, he was struck by lightning in the open air.

*HOME VIDEOS TELL US AGAIN*

He tucked into velvet-  
upholstered chairs as we painted

pictures of girls in front of his  
lime-tinted glasses, wide enough

to kill her frame by frame. Each brush  
and stroke of the shoulder a glare

in the lens of a previous day, before  
we knew what he had done.

The way he watched his daughter  
before the car accident, her tanned legs

in short shorts and the end of April.  
Her stillness, like rain pressed to glass

in his truck as he drove across country,  
one hand on the wheel.

## *ASSEMBLIES*

We hold out through the morning hours for recess. In sixth grade, our Catholic school uniforms are rolled skirts, knee-high socks, and spiky-multicolored earrings to give us an edge. I have one less roll than other girls and stockier legs. Earrings do not give me an edge. When we reach the door, we head for the hill. Wind folds my skirt upward, and I hold khaki pleats against my thighs as other girls yell out that they don't want to see my underwear. They laugh. My teacher calls me back after I'm halfway up the hill. "You aren't wearing shorts under your skirt? I thought you were one of the good girls," she says, face bent in disappointment. I apologize, and she tells me to remember shorts tomorrow. I race to the top of the hill where there sits a miniature wooden boat, a playful emblem of Noah's Ark. It is a boat because of its shape, a steering wheel, and a flag, all made of wood. The flag is not real. It does not move in the wind. The boat has two stories. There is an upper deck and a crawl space that only allows children in its belly to sit upright, never to stand up. We pack five of us in this space, leaving room for one boy. We talk of things we know nothing about. We don't make believe that we are on a ship in the middle of an ocean. There is no captain here. We know that we are in a small box of wood on top of a grassy hill in Missouri. We find a condom. Only one of us knows what this is, and it's not the boy. At eleven, I know more about intimacy than I do about sex. What I know about sex is kissing and romance and holding hands. There's speculation about who has forgotten the artifact, who has left it behind. We take turns touching it until a whistle blows, and I wonder who would do that here, because I wonder how a box can be romantic. Down the hill, there

is a new stillness in the teacher's voice. I slide into my desk, knees pressed together. I don't want anyone to see.

\\

I am moving out of my first apartment and begin to strip the mattress, pulling the bedframe out from against the wall to reach the storage boxes underneath. I find a condom on the floor—tucked into the furthest corner of the room. It's from my boyfriend, the first time we had sex. I remember losing it. We worried when we couldn't find it, and afterward, he made a joke about the disappearing condom. I never laughed.

My mom is a few feet away, cleaning the bathroom floor. She is on her knees, bent near the edge of the tub. She has come to help me pack, but offers to scrub away evidence of my living here too. I pick up the condom. *I thought you were one of the good girls*, I can hear her say if she saw it there on the floor, and how careless it would look to have lost it.

\\

After recess, we study history. We read about The Crusades from a textbook as if wars are holy. Nobody guides us through words we don't understand, are unable to utter. We are cloistered from war, from the outside, our desks clustered together into a makeshift table. My teacher, an ex-nun, fills empty spaces of the room, peers over shoulders, and hums loudly. She jingles keys in her pocket to make herself heard. I read and pretend to read, until she grabs my ponytail and pulls back on my head. She rests her knuckles against the nape of my neck, waits for my friend to look up from her book and gasp. I see the ex-nun's other hand high above my head, black scissors open and moving in like a pointed beak.

“What are you going to do?” she asks. I say nothing. “What are you going to do?” she asks again. I don’t move. The entire class is watching, gaping, mouths open and ready to eat—all of us wondering if she’ll make the cut. She lets go, “You were going to let me cut your hair, weren’t you?” My friend doesn’t laugh, neither of us moves. The ex-nun jingles and glides away, letting out a slow chuckle from across the room.

\\

In the store, two men are stocking shelves in aisle 9. I ask, “Where’s the bread?” They say, “You’re just an aisle over.” I say, “Thank you,” and walk to aisle 10, still within earshot. I have not been in this supermarket before, and I don’t know the layout or the men who move in and out of aisles, who glide up and down the street like pigeons. I grab bread from the shelf. I choose a whole wheat, low-calorie loaf because I am concerned about my hips pouring over my pants into someone else’s path. I hear them say, “She looks like she likes bread” and, “I know where that goes.” “I’d tap that,” they decide, as they stock and stalk and gawk and cock.

\\

My father overhears me talking to a friend in the backyard. We are playing, my friend and I are playing in the backyard, and everything blurs and twirls with the wind around him, my father. It’s warm, so we take off our pleated skirts and let our uniform shirts hang over our undershorts, feet naked in the grass. We talk of boys and the awkward bodies we inhabit. My friend is skinny and pretty, though, and she could be picked up and swept away in the spring breeze or by a boy. *I don’t want this body*, I think. My father knows this, and sometimes, when he is angry at the way his life has turned out, he reminds me of it. I walk

to the deck for water. My father has heard me say, “I want to be skinny.” He waits for me to take a sip and replies, “It doesn’t matter how big your belly is, the only thing a man cares about is if your tits stick out further.” I am too young to have tits, but not to know that this air is plump and pressing. My friend who has been blown across the yard has not heard him, and I do not tell her. I do not want to tell her.

\\

School mass is suspended between caged lights and a stream of blue bleachers. The priest and altar boys wear white albs even though there is no altar. There is no altar because we’re in a gymnasium. It’s over quickly because there is a guest speaker, and listening to her is not optional, neither is forgetting her. She is thin and pale and shifts the weight of her tiny frame back and forth on her heels. I have been sitting on plastic, and the tops of my legs are numb as she begins to talk about sex. This is not sex education. She is not demonstrating how to roll a condom onto a banana. Instead, she is here to say, “Once a girl has lost her virginity, she has lost value.” She reminds of us of other things too—how a girl should keep her body in check, keep her skin from shedding. In this fluorescent, converted space, a boy doesn’t have to worry about the lack of altar or making his body a temple.

\\

On Valentine’s Day, my boyfriend buys a card from the gas station up the street and signs it with orange marker he finds on the living room floor—just his name, scribbled and smudged. He doesn’t bother to say anything else because it’s tiring, having conversations in indistinguishable languages, tongues fat with longing.

Once he said, “Oral sex just isn’t part of my culture,” which is to say that vaginas are untouchable, unholy even. I wait six months to hear “I love you,” and near the end he says it, “and I want to show you,” as if he is capable. “No,” I say, not because I don’t want him there, but because I don’t want him to see.

\\

Male pigeons are usually larger than female pigeons and are said to be easily agitated, quick to anger. Females, on the other hand, stay calm in most situations and are less vocal. Men coo and woo the girl pigeon, spread their tailfeathers to impress her. *I’m not impressed*, she would say if she had a tongue or the capacity for language, *but this is life—to go quietly around and round until the wind picks up and scatters us into bone and feather.*

\\

The priest who presides over my high school rides his Harley through the gymnasium during an assembly. He revs the engine to stir students, drives in circles around the basketball court. Driving a motorcycle makes him unlike a priest, almost cool. During summer, he crosses oceans to organize mission trips, takes candy to children, and marches against abortion. He has been growing his beard into opaqueness for months, and his glasses are tinted from sunlight that hides behind him as he rides into the building. The doors shut. He parks the motorcycle and sits in a chair facing the crowd. One student, a girl in the senior class, grabs an electric razor from a table stationed below one of the goals. She shaves him. Hair falls to the floor. He says it’s for charity, this act of unveiling, and

we believe him. We are told to believe him as his face sits strangely in the waning daylight and uncovered youth.

\\

It's said that Noah lured males and females on to the ark for the purpose of reproduction after the flood. Birds were included in the count, suspended in the belly of the ark despite their wings.

\\

A portion of the school day is dedicated to confession. Space has been slotted for it, preserved and bought back from history and science classes. We congregate outside of the church up the hill and shuffle past the trickle of a baptismal font. It is in the center of the church, but could be easily missed, fallen into if one lifted their head to look up. There are many priests gathered in their black and white. Some have been called in from other places to soar through aisles and around pews. They bow and pray and hide in wooden boxes. Sometimes I pretend to pray. Other times, I hide in the bathroom. Today, I follow dim lights and incense toward a room at the back of the church to sit across from a priest. I lie about lying to my mother and ask for forgiveness anyway. This doesn't satisfy him. He listens and says, "Do you ever masturbate?" I say, "No," and he pauses. I imagine his lips pleated into a grin, his aged hands moving up and down the tops of his thighs. What is aired in the wooden box never leaves—everything is secret. Nothing is holy.

\\

Months after the assembly, the priest starts the engine of the same motorcycle in his garage. The air changes, has changed. Doors are closed to help gather fumes. Someone finds him

before he is finished. Someone else finds his laptop holds a collection of girls. Some students take turns visiting him in the hospital. There are prayer groups initiated in his name, attempts to cover what the body is unable to forget.

\\

It's snowing, so we play drinking games inside at a folding card table. It's a table because it has legs and a flat surface. The top is made to look like wood, but it's synthetic, scratched, and sticky with need. We don't pretend we're not in a tiny apartment in the middle of Missouri, drinking cheap liquor. My friend and I are visiting a guy she is talking to and his friend. It looks like a double date, but it isn't. She tells me, "We aren't having sex tonight. He hasn't earned it yet." So we play games for hours as snow crashes down around us, until my friend disappears into a bedroom, and I am left with the other man. In the midst of flurries, concealed by the popup table, he slides off the condom and continues. I say nothing. After finishing, he gets up quickly, trips over to the kitchen and pulls open a drawer. He tosses a towel to where I am on the couch. "Here," he says, and I notice liquid glazing my belly. It's the first time I've seen it, but he doesn't know this. "Thanks," I mumble, to be polite, and he shuffles over to the other room, where my friend is with his friend. "It's time for them to go," he says, and I drag my pants up from my ankles, plaid fuzz of the couch rubs against my legs as I stand to leave. "What happened?" my friend asks, and we drive home, quiet as white blinds the windshield.

*FILMBOUND*

My tillandsia drinks in a wine glass  
above the kitchen sink, film gathers  
around her blushing body. She has  
returned from many deaths, many

nights without dinner. She calls  
to the 8-year-old girl on her knees,  
who begs to be hit until there's nothing  
left to want for

when the girl on the big screen  
emerges from an alleyway where two  
armed soldiers led her into shadows,

her dress is faded-pink and torn  
to crotch, legs covered in soot

from the trenches. You will  
become her, hoping your date doesn't  
see memory move across  
your film-reel eyes—

the kitchen, where wet tea towels  
snapped, their necks wrung  
in the bathroom. Tile  
still cold, he has nothing  
to clean his mess  
when it's over, he'll throw  
a towel to wipe cum  
from your belly, the soft-  
focus glaze  
stinging. There is  
no death here.

*MEMORY OF A CRUSHED DAISY*

I tug loose threads of Melinda Coleman who shot herself at the edge of winter. Pulled open ends of my sleeve rub against paper straw, and I continue to scroll as two preteens enter in pale crop tops and high-waisted Levi's. One pulls a vintage Canon from her rattan handbag, one takes pictures of coffee in noon light with a three-camera-ed iPhone, and one sedan after another passes in the window behind them with each man's neck snaking from the street to the girls to the point of discomfort. The one with the iPhone sips an *iced vanilla latte with raspberry syrup and white mocha drizzle*—anything to dull the bitterness of man's beaten grin. As I read about Melinda's daughter, Daisy, I can't keep clichés from coming to mind—flowers, symbols for girl bodies, the fragrance of youth emitted when they're crushed. The blood of a dumb berry. What haunts me about Daisy and Melinda is only partly the image of a mother cradling her daughter's ghost or that ghost being a ghost for nearly nine years before really being a ghost. The larger half of it is familiarity, the way those who can dominate will. Car after fucking car. That only a sheer pane of giggles rests between 12-year-olds and men drunk with curly baby hairs and milk-stained lips. I want to say, *The memory becomes a recurring dream in which you are alone with your body but never fit inside of it.* Maybe they know that. 103 days Daisy spent wearing her body like a borrowed sweater. What haunts me is what happened to her is happening now in a café with lavender lattes and blueberry scones, tonight in a basement, under covers of loud pop music and peach-flavored hard seltzer. It's teething at my sleeve. Let me end with an image you'll understand—the creeping drip of a berry pierced by sunstars. Don't tell me it's beautiful.

*THESE THINGS I KNOW ARE TRUE*

People are often experts about rooms / in which they've never  
found themselves. // Women don't always believe / women. // My cousin  
bought a fainting goat / for her mother's birthday. / The thing about fainting  
goats is / they're born with a condition / that affects their response / to fear.

The Lyft arrived at 5:23 / in the morning. / I woke, throat vacant / as a dumped  
ashtray, hair sweat-tipped. / His thumbnails serrated / my clavicle. I rolled / over,  
hid / in a bathroom, tiled shards of night-gone shadows. // My friend / was missing.

The goats' muscles don't tense and release. / They lock / like memory's imprint  
on a body. // I ordered the ride at 5:02. / Exhaust arched from the back / of a minivan  
like knuckles pulling / from glass. // There was a man.

*A pretty girl like you / should be having fun.* / At 5:25 in the morning, / despite a swelling  
sun and my clutching / the doorhandle, the driver / probed about pickup / lines  
and bodies. // Another thing / about fainting goats / is that you have to watch them  
or at least not leave them.

I looked for street signs / and found only / trees, snow-covered, / color-drained. The sky  
pulled moonlight back into clouds, / hung like wet fabric. / My thighs  
burned. // My cousin left the goat / near the edge of deck steps. / It hardened,  
fainted, / fell and broke / its own neck.

Each out-of-the-way road fogged / before. // My friend / said, *Death of a body  
carries possibilities / for an end / to pain.* A raccoon road-killed, / soaked in horseflies.  
When a body / is left- / over / after unfinished causalities / it bears its own kind of  
torment, attempts / to piece together / a thing that can never be / what it was.

The goats never lose / consciousness / during the faint, and I have never been able to  
interpret that as something locked or opened, / a faucet turned / a quarter of an inch.  
With age, they can learn / not to fall. // *Girls can be / so easy to pick up / and drop.*

We are told, / *say thank you* / as we choke, / chest jammed like backwater. // There were  
two ways / it could have ended: / she jumped / and froze, or / she froze and fell. Either

way, she wasn't unconscious, / remembered the scrape of each splintered step.  
Either way, white concrete / blunted / sharp edges of night // and I was alive.

II.

LOSING FORM:  
Boy &  
Crushed Ice

*ODE TO A MAKESHIFT HEROIN PIPE*

Construct

the empty Corona

of muted cells and mock stars, of stolen  
brother. Recall what a child was  
made of, once unaware of.

Rim the lip

with sugar.

Watch residue

crawl to the bottom circle  
where flame has gone—a glass space  
of forgotten birthday cake.

Sliced open

palms reaching

for lost crowns and crayons,  
hands full of blood and lighter and bone  
and the sting of what does not burn  
after being set on fire.

*HAND-ME-DOWN BEATER*

Picture: father chasing: hubcap down three lanes of traffic: while driving daughter to school: hubcap from his own father's hand-me-down beater: rolls twenty feet into the intersection: even after the light turns green: he chases: even though shiners have aged past green: continue to reassemble the scene: he catches the hubcap: only to cut palms: hands won't stop bleeding: hands hit your Jack Russell Terrier: when she takes hold of the remote: she bites the back of his right arm: skin breaks: she takes the remote and runs away: instead of drowning in a pond: instead of being buried by your mother's father: your own father won't put a hole in the ground: there's no language for it: no sound for the light turning from red: the weight of pulling up to curb with metal in your lap: and wishing for rain.

*MY BROTHER'S LEFT FOREARM CRADLES A PIRATE SHIP,*

flags winged, it doesn't bleed like homemade tattoos  
or summer in the Ozarks. Our grandfather's drawing  
of dotted lines to candy coins and wheat pennies. Metals  
dulled out of sun's grip, under porch steps and sparrows'  
nests. I couldn't make believe they weren't a distraction  
from our father who would drive three hours south  
to find us. Some days, my grandfather took my brothers  
fishing to search in deep waters. I swam near the bank,  
came out covered in leeches. My grandmother plucked  
them off, wiped spotted blood from my hands. Then,  
she fried catfish, hiding brown sugar in the flesh. *It smells sweet  
before you smoke it*, my brother said on his way to rehab, unable  
to recall the initial bait held sharp metal, warm-bladed death.

*WHEN THERE WERE KNIVES I DREAMED OF IT*

He runs around the shed in our mother's red raincoat, his body painting blood circles against a blackening sky. I watch as he moves across the yard, syncopated to the flashes of lightning—this is the beginning my brother's disappearing act.

The act is twofold: there's a leaving and returning to the shed. My ride watches the return from the curb. She has come to take me out of town for a few hours, thinks it's good for me. "What's he doing?" she asks. "I'm not sure," I say, "but he's wearing our mom's raincoat." We laugh. I watch my brother in the sidemirror as we drive up the street. It's more than a manic episode. My brother is searching for something, something he's left behind.

We continue to laugh until I forget the reason for laughing.

My brother does strange things sometimes, but I don't know what to do with this rain. I hold my hand outside the window and let the water run into my sleeve, mocking his movements. My ride giggles. My brother continues to shrink until he disappears completely.

I don't look back.

\*

When we were kids, my brothers and I gathered sticks from the yard after they had been scattered in a thunderstorm. We brought a few inside and measured them on the couch. I picked one up, ran my hands down the dampness of it and swung in a circle. I picked up another and moved closer to my brothers, swung again. Suddenly we were hitting each other with sticks, our legs and backs red, our nails black after taking them from the wet dirt. Later we put them back, scattered sticks in the dark.

I was eight and my twin brothers were four years old when we moved into our family home. The house had a playhouse adjacent to it, and the two were painted the same color—one meant to resemble the other. The playhouse had a yellow slide and an upstairs crawl space perfect for hiding. My brothers and I would shrug the summer heat to sit in a box of wood. We even moved in a stained rug our mother had put out at the curb.

When we outgrew the magic of our miniature home, it was converted to a shed. For years it housed a lawnmower, tools, gasoline, and whatever else needed to be concealed. When we were teenagers, the space filled with roaches and pocket-size McCormick bottles. As adults, we had forgotten about the hiding place, except for my youngest brother, a twin but younger by a minute. And this minute stretched on and on over the years.

\*

My mother worked nights at the Ford plant. I made dinner, insisted that no one eat until she was home and at the table. I made tacos because they were easy, burnt my hand

frying the tortillas. My father did not like to wait, did not like for things to grow cold. When I said “No,” he chased me with the longest knife from the wooden block. We played hide and seek without laughter, without sound. He wedged the knife into a door frame, surprising himself with how he could land the blade inches from my right eye.

I woke up thinking I had imagined it—my father’s girlfriend chain smoking from a safer distance. If she was there, my mother was not.

I tried to forgive my father’s games for them having been learned, to forgive him for finding his own mother dead on the floor of her apartment.

It took days to find her.

\*

I find my brother behind a Dumpster as I walk out of Chipotle; he works at a Chinese restaurant next door. Sometimes he runs delivery, and sometimes the delivery is more than food. Sometimes he stops at the shed between orders.

I call out his name as he enters the back door.

He has more orders to load and carry, but he comes over to the car, says, “How are you

doing?” like he’s forgotten who I am. His nails are newly blackened, his eyes like pins. I stare at his hands until he says, “I just changed Tommy’s oil.” But that is a familiar joke, and I already know the punchline.

There is no oil. There is no sunlight in the back of the parking lot.

\*

I come home to a man in a military uniform waiting on the front porch. He asks for my brother by name: “Patrick said he was interested in the Marine Corps. We had a meeting scheduled.” I don’t tell the man that my brother is in the hospital or what’s happened. Instead I say, “Sorry. He’s unavailable.”

The night nurse brings a camouflage pillow for my brother to hold when he coughs. “It’s supposed to perform as a shield. Remind him to hold it along the incision,” she says. His new cut runs from below the navel to the lower chest. “The pillow should take stress off the staples and help with his pain,” she adds, halfway out of the door.

I wonder if every patient receives the same camouflage pillow or if it’s reserved for young men as some symbol of bravery.

\*

On weekends, without the distraction of an office job, my father would pack his clothes into a suitcase with a toothbrush, comb, and one razor. He'd grab whatever was sitting on top of the dryer, shove it in the case unfolded, and run to the driveway. "Fuck you," he'd say, threatening to leave for good, suitcase half open in the back seat. Then he'd reverse the car and pull out, just missing my brothers' toes as they stood in their cartooned underwear. My brothers would chase him up the street. Each time, I stood at the door hoping he wouldn't come back. Sometimes I laughed at the absurdity of it. My brothers should have known he'd come back, that he had to come back, that he only packed enough for the weekend.

\*

When the trauma surgeon entered the waiting room she was crying, which I assumed to be unusual. Then she began to count the holes. I kept track on my fingers, making constellations of the wounds. She explained, "The first entered his neck, near the jugular. The second went into his back, just glimpsed the heart." I kept score. "Another, further down, missed the spinal cord. Another almost punctured the liver." I gambled the odds, waited for the one that landed the final blow. She was still crying. "His legs were stabbed multiple times," she said. "The right arm was cut through to the muscle." Then, "He's stable. They're sewing him up now."

They were stitching the night sky.

When I finally saw my brother, blood crowded his hairline and buried itself in knuckles and under fingernails. His breath was quick spun glass, every organ fragile. Only one eye was visible through the swelling and his iodine-matted hair. It was obvious that he had fought, or tried to, that the bear mace in the back seat of his car hadn't worked, or that he couldn't reach it.

The catheter pooled with blood. Beside him a tangled IV provided a morphine drip that came in ten-minute intervals. Always, around the eighth minute, my brother's eye would open halfway, and I'd guide his thumb to the red button that only he could hit for another dose.

Later, his arms floated above the bed, parallel with the walls—a sign of withdrawal. He called out for people who weren't there, but he never said my name.

How strange it is to watch someone converse with the dead.

\*

“Dad,” my brother cries out, “Where is dad?”

I tell him, “He's not here.”

Because he never is here.

\*

Our father's girlfriend used to pretend she was a taxi driver when she took us home from school. She'd wait until there were no cars in sight, her moves always calculated, then she'd jerk the steering wheel back and forth until my brothers and I begged her to stop. Some days she'd roll up onto the curb and into the grass, crying, "Pay me money now!" Those days we laughed. Other days she picked us up smelling like gin, her eyes half closed and the car filled with smoke.

People said she died of an overdose.

\*

It was long, watery day near the end of the year when I took Patrick to a psychiatric hospital for the first time. His SUV sat in the driveway after school with a flat tire and missing sidemirror—he forgot the bruising and passed out in bed. When I called to him, he came out of his room and fell down the stairs. I told him to get up, but he pulled his knees to his chest and began rocking. He wouldn't open his eyes. Instead, he called out to our father. I picked up his body and put him in the backseat.

He was admitted to another hospital for withdrawal years later. After being discharged, he told me he didn't remember me there, didn't remember me pushing black vomit across

the floor. I changed the bedsheets every hour when the nurses wouldn't. I gagged at the smell of it.

On the way out of the body, it shifts. Heroin isn't sweet after being held in, it's vile—  
somewhere here is a metaphor for longing.

\*

In the middle of his heroin addiction, Patrick left a crisis center and returned to the shed to collect his stash. By then, I understood the disappearing act for what it was. He'd learned to take the heroin with him to each place after the initial intake. When he was caught, he told a social worker on call that he knew he could go back home to get it, that no one would be waiting for him there. "Sometimes dad waits up for my brother, but no one ever waits for me," he said.

\*

I stand in the checkout line with my mother, our arms full of readymade sandwiches, chips, and canned drinks. We have been taking shifts sleeping at the hospital, but with my other brother there now, we leave to get food. The two men and the woman in front of us have almost collected enough coins to pay for their frozen dinners. One of the men, whose teeth have left him, whose skin is tight around his chin, tries a final form of payment. This is not a new scene. It's not shocking or sad. My mother pays for the rest. This is not charity. When the man turns to thank her, his eyes wide, he reminds her of her

son. My mother looks like she could cry, but doesn't. She tells me, "I had to, it looked too much like him."

\*

The people who stabbed my brother left his body on the January street with no shoes. After waking up in the hospital, he couldn't walk. Each leg had been stabbed five times—his feet twisted and coiled away from his calves, attempted to run away from the scene.

Imagine him curled upon concrete, half naked and bleeding out. Never imagine him crying.

\*

Once my brother told me he envisioned a belt when he thought of ending his own life. The details are tangled now.

\*

My mother hangs clothes in the sharp winter sun, hoping they'll dry instead of freeze. We have spent weeks in and out of the hospital to return home to a broken dryer. There is no one to fix it. Her face slick in the light, she wipes it on a kitchen rag from the laundry basket. Shirts move against the wind. "I know it's terrible," I say, "but he's alive." I take the basket inside, and she follows me. "I asked him why," she says. I pause. The front

door still holds the notes he taped to it before the hospital. They ask for different things—a pack of cigarettes, five dollars, someone to wake him by 3 p.m. “He said he was sad,” my mother tells me, and I think of all the ways we’ve tried not to feel our own bodies.

\*

When my brother comes home from the hospital, he paces the kitchen, places his palms face down on the pale countertop. He says, “He hung himself,” and looks relieved. “Who?” I ask. There’s empty space as he looks down at his hands, knuckles still shattered and cut. “The man who stabbed me.” He lays out the details. I gather them from the white.

The man who stabbed my brother took turns stabbing him with his girlfriend. Later, the man hung up his own body and left it in a friend’s stairwell. I imagine this too, without sound.

I dig for the obituary, but it has been brushed away. What I can string together, from Facebook posts and news articles, is that the man who tried to kill my brother is dead. I put him in the space of our childhood, in the stairwell of the house where my brothers and I grew up, where we slid down the stairs on blankets and in laundry baskets.

\*

It's been nearly four months since the stabbing, and one of Patrick's legs is still numb. After an NA meeting, he rubs the top of his right thigh over his jeans, says, "I can't feel it completely." I shrug, "Maybe it's the body's way of forgetting."

"A woman at NA said she saw me at QuikTrip the night it happened," he continues. "She told me she needed to see a therapist to un-see the blood because there was so much of it," he says as he drifts into the bursts of light. After being left in the street, Patrick crawled to the nearest gas station where the attendant called an ambulance. "She didn't recognize me at first. She couldn't see my face that night. It wasn't until I mentioned what happened in group sessions that she realized who I was, who I am. She thought I died," he says.

"Of course she didn't remember your face," I say. It was pressed in. The orbital bones were tiny specks swimming under the skin. Seeing my brother at the meeting must have been a relief to the woman. For her, seeing him alive was a shift, a realignment of the same stars that hovered over his body in the street.

But death waits patiently in the back of an ambulance. When my brother relapses, the medics will laugh and call him Rambo because of the scars spread like galaxies across his body. They don't know what the night holds. I will clean his wounds again and again, count where the stitches were, mop up more black bile—gather the void he leaves.

\*

I return to where it happened in June. My body recognizes its place and tries to scatter. I drive up and down the street in attempt to collect what is being called into the light— somewhere beneath this street lies a missed birthday. Elsewhere candles are blown out and we dream the night without flashes of knives.

\*

When she calls me from the next crisis center, my mother is sitting in the car with my brother, waiting to admit him again. I hear the rain against the windshield, it holds them, suspends them in time.

“He wants to talk to you,” she says, “I’m going to put him on now.”

We feel the thunder as our tongues forget the rhythm of our own names.

“Sister,” he says, “sister,” until she takes the phone back.

*I THINK WE SPOKE OF PARKING LOTS*

and the Mandela Effect, the result of time spent  
in some other universe, which I think is bullshit, and I think

he thinks so too. But there is something captivating about it, in theory,  
romantic. Elsewhere, we weren't on the phone at all, weren't talking

about his neighbor who, by a glitch in the matrix or drunkenness, attacked him  
the night before last, slashed his face with a kitchen knife, cut through his earlobe

like overripe fruit. *The world has gone to hell. Maybe we've all been living  
in a parallel reality*, he said, but how tempting the memory of pain is

without gravity. Sometimes, he skips class in fear of a man  
who will enter and blow him away, which could be

related to the effect, a particular fate gusted through galaxies  
to land on his nose. Once, while working at a summer school, I watched

an SUV tear through an alleyway unfit for its body and wondered  
if brick buildings warped side mirrors to make space. A man hung

from the window, bent a gun at an unreal angle. I walked in and prepared  
lunch without saying anything about the boy from elementary school

whose father shot and killed him in the school parking lot, who, by some  
mangled will, took the bullet meant for his mother, or the time my brother,

who called from a different city last night, had his head split open  
with the end of a pistol in a thrift store parking lot. I told him to go to class,

*It could all end tomorrow. Somewhere, it already has.* How  
strange, I think, that I don't remember the sound of gunshots.

## WHEN I READ ABOUT PORTLAND

wet pine and Instagram-able donuts no longer come to mind. Instead, I think about how I am in Kansas City, where federal occupation happens, too, but to a lesser degree. Instead, I think of my boyfriend, a Black man, and how any city will betray him before he turns 30, if he makes it to 30. I hear rifts in his voice when he calls after being pulled over. I say, *Be polite. Don't reach for anything. Call me back when it's done. Turn off the music.* It takes 31 minutes to verify a Black man purchased a Mercedes. He wasn't speeding. They say the presence of military force in the city reduces violent crime and murder rates. At night, in the city's core, I lie awake to sounds of fireworks and sirens, but I can't see their light from my bed. A friend tells me about a conspiracy theory where the intentional increase in thunderous noise is a tactic for chaos, for sleeplessness. My friend posits that method heightens tension around protests, that it mimics sounds of warfare—in this scenario, I'm not sure who the soldiers are or where home is. When I read about Portland, I think about how, a year ago, my brother was stabbed 17 times and left to bleed on a January street. How, despite police confiscating and never returning his cellphone, the two people who tried to kill him didn't spend a minute in a cell. They were white. My brother was 20. I had nightmares about them coming into the house my brother and I shared and trying to kill me, too. Instead, I quiet fear—first running, then plant collecting, now Seagram's. Sometimes, it's screaming in the shower. Other times, it's heavier than rain. Once, my brother's friend left his Glock on my bathroom counter, and I mistook it for a hair dryer. I let my finger run against the trigger after steam cleared, even after I realized what it was. When I read about Portland, noise rolls back like lightning and teargas—the song loops—somewhere I'm called to listen to a body bleed open on pavement. Again. And finally. And over and over.

*BEFORE MY BROTHER WAS STABBED*

he was a boy in a park brimming with water  
and geese. He leapt, flailed, and sunk  
in a pond, tiny curiosity pulling him deeper  
despite our mother's flinging  
after his chaos, hair dripping, worry  
pouring from her shoes.

She didn't know she'd find his legs  
and abdomen filled with holes. Years later,

I ask about blue-green light beneath  
a burnt spoon as we sit on a park bench  
far from where we began. The same  
answer surfaces, *I'm sad*. He never adds,  
*I'm trying to outswim it*.

The empty spaces of my brother's wounds  
feel like air we share, like just enough.

*CRIME SCENE PALIMPSEST*

In mourning after a drive-by, I don't see bullets, but hear  
5 a.m. glittered chirping in new light, family flocking

street, a mother stooped over sidewalk where her son was  
shot and killed next to his cousin in front of what used to be

the city's largest music company, a 10-story low-rise  
with neo-gothic scrolls at its peak—a warning.

Now scrolls unroll to palimpsests, the building reformed  
to make a parking garage where pigeons fly

in and out of what once were windows. The music store's been out  
of business for years, police lights fade to day as I watch

family hold each other at the edge of loss, a space  
between written and living. This is not my family, but I see

the blurred body of my own brother, blood on broken  
glass—a familiar thing blown out, no longer concrete.

*ONE BILLBOARD OUTSIDE LIBERTY, MO*

A billboard on the way home tells me what I know: *Addiction can happen to anyone.* This morning, after years of being asleep, my brother applies to college on a Chromebook he received for free. He complains about not knowing—something about not finding the portal, the application door. He’s almost 22 and still young, but I think of the years burned up like yard waste on the side of the highway and the billboard over the flame like a mock birthday card, open and screaming. Somewhere there is singing. My brother and I watch *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. All I can think about afterward is its portrayal of Missouri is too rural, antiqued. Then I remember the bootheel, the rehab facility two hours east in a town called Boonville. Its old county jail and motorcar museum overlooking the river, tokens of what can and cannot be preserved. Focusing on the film’s depiction of place is an act of avoidance. Ebbing, Missouri isn’t real. The billboards, lifted over the lull of overgrown weeds, are hypothetical. Until they aren’t. Really, Ebbing could be any town in Missouri south of I-70. The point is Mildred’s daughter could be any teenage girl. My brother could be anyone’s son. It’s easiest to think of him in blue-trimmed Spider-Man underwear, bent over hot concrete, tipping glass shakers over rolled bodies and watching slugs blister—a quiet harm. After the movie my mother tells me about a friend whose son died in the position of a frog, his shrunken frame stiff, knees pinned against his chest. His own mother and sister tried to un-pry what was, the fossilized pain of his living. Heroin overdose. What I don’t say to my mother is what she already knows: the son could be hers. When my brother was stabbed, they went for the neck, abdomen, and back first, saving the legs for final injury. Afterward, they dumped his body in the oil-slick street and something amphibious washed up, withered from fires and failure. Some days I’m 11 and my brother 7, I open the front door to watch slugs roll off porch steps without understanding the need for those hurt to hurt. Other days I’m in a hospital, nursing symptoms of withdrawal, screaming for someone to jam an IV needle under my brother’s dehydrated skin. Once the line is started, I go back through the door, where a movie loops and we share popcorn. And again, I feel what it is to have him, despite knowing the scene can never survive the weight of salt.

*NEXT TO I35, PAINT OR BLOOD SPELLS LYRICS FROM EDWARD SHARPE & THE  
MAGNETIC ZEROS*

Underneath the overpass      water pools. Bottles,  
paper, stained pillows, and red      smear: *Home*

*is when I'm...* A man nods off      under bent      tree, is no longer  
longing. No more      Junk. No more      Boy. Whole

empires shift      to dust      beneath his moth-winged skin  
where the tip      of a 22 gauge      needle      has just left, has fallen

into grass. There, tents are      home.      Doors have shut,      no, no longer  
exist. Instead,      zippers pull      shifting clouds,      the man's sharp

knees, and evaporating      pupils.      He is swelling  
beyond damp      pavement, the Sinclair      parking lot      where he drifts

on gasoline. He is more      than the invisible mist      of brown sugar      from Ibis  
Bakery across the street.      More than two fists      he blankets

into air, lifetimes misplaced      at the snap      of a rubber band,      the impossibility  
of ever tying off      pain. The way      his body sways      but never falls

from curb to road      is not chance, but his last bite      of will      tethering  
him to tree. Dumpsters      and pigeon shit      fade to iridescent. Coats around

his failing      neck now smell      of royal lavender, are  
cloaks of armor. I have      stopped hoping      my brother will ever be

himself again, the same way I sent our father off in his own solitary  
boat, to the last sliver of land, where language loses

water, its memory of a son, brother, bed. I watch them float,  
arms plump and dripping, savoring bliss and sugarcoated blossoms.

They do not miss me, may not even remember my name. But a monarch  
has come to rest gold, glittering wings on the man's forearm,

in the shade of a single leaf. You see, the butterfly  
needles turn into exquisite creatures, gentle and light as autumn air.

*WHERE MY NEIGHBORS CRUSH ICE*

1.

I find the woman next to the elevator without teeth. Her right hand holds a mallet, left hand grips a tied grocery bag. Hair is matted into fine lines around her eyes, which flutter like fruit flies in gray fluorescents. My mother has given me a ride from the other side of town, so the woman and I wait for her to go up.

In the elevator, my mother turns to the woman, “How’s your night?” “Fine, fine, fine, fine,” she says, and something falls from her mouth. My mother picks it up. There’s a familiarity about the woman I will commit to memory, a softness to her burning.

“I didn’t catch what she said,” I say, unlocking my door. “She said she’s spoiled and likes crushed ice,” my mother tells me. “Oh.” We step inside. “She couldn’t do that in her own fucking kitchen?” I ask. My mother looks at me, angles her mouth downward, and lifts her shoulders slightly.

2.

I visit my brother who tells me he wants to watch *Patch Adams* because he started it in rehab and wasn’t allowed to finish it there. “I want to know the ending,” he says. I tell him, “I’ve seen it. It’s okay, but we should watch it,” because it hurts me a little, his not knowing. So we turn it on, and he tells me that our father looks like Robin Williams.

“Yeah, a little,” I say, “but I’m sure he’s nicer or he was, was nicer.”

*Patch Adams* is worse than I remember, and I don’t think it’s as good as my brother remembers either. When I grab the pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Fudge Brownie from the freezer, I consider how we’ve changed when the movie hasn’t.

Robin Williams is frozen, suspended in front of us but gone, and my brother will always be caught on the edge of an unfinished movie, wanting to return to something that was never whole.

3.

For years my mother worked as a caretaker, looked after the elderly when they could no longer live on their own. She started caretaking when I was in high school and continued into my early twenties. Toward the end, she did it less and less out of necessity. It was like her to take care of people, the way she taught me to take care of my brother in the middle of addiction.

One night, while I drove my mother to work at a residential care facility off the highway, she told me she didn’t want to be alone. I went into the facility with her, took my backpack, and made it to the backroom, where I saw a man whose name I’ve forgotten. He couldn’t breathe on his own. The machine keeping him alive dwarfed his body, and the room’s single piece of furniture, a stained sofa, smelled like rotting wood and crusted

nutrition shake. We sat on it, the smell. After visiting hours, I was ushered out of the room by the facility's manager. I felt guilty leaving my mother there, the man's mouth gaping and lungs clouded with mud.

4.

I take out the trash when I get home. I've let the can flood over for a few days because feline-sized rats fill the alleyway where the dumpsters are. One way to the alleyway is through a room that houses exactly one half-working treadmill. Next to it, I find an open can of peaches with a plastic spoon tucked inside. Someone was eating here; maybe they'll come back for it. There's a sad practicality to canned fruit, of trying to keep something past its death.

The other way to the alleyway is from the street. Tonight is warm and clear, so is the alleyway. I walk through to the front of the building. Perched in the alcove between the door and elevator is a man squatting barefoot with a hammer across his toes. In front of him is a tied grocery bag.

I say, "Hi," and he says, "Hold the elevator," so I do, and he uncurls himself from the corner, grabs the hammer, and follows me. His cheeks are sunken, eyes black and expansive. I've seen the look before—my brother once punched through a car window in one blow. Glass shattered around our driveway. His whole body went up into the air, shadowed his fist as he plummeted back down toward the ground with speed he didn't

know he possessed. That has to be ice in the man's bag, and how much damage he could do with a hammer.

"Have a good night," he says, staring at the ceiling of the elevator.

5.

The distance between anger and rage is the same distance between sadness and grief, the interspace starved enough to eat anything.

6.

Strawberries were the first fruit to ripen in spring. My grandmother had a large patch of them in the corner of her yard, watermelon too. I spent most of my childhood with her, watching her cook and smoke and laugh with her lips pressed together. She hated the way her teeth looked. When my grandmother laughed too hard, she'd move her long, painted nails in front of her mouth to hide her teeth. Sometimes, we couldn't wait for the strawberries to turn from green, so we'd roll the hard fruit in sugar from a crystal bowl. Lid removed, I stuck wet fingers in the white.

At the end of spring, my grandmother made strawberry preserves, boiled berries in sugar, then jarred them. Later we ate them on Wonder Bread. The fruit was good that way but different than eating straight from the ground.

At home, my brother ate Cosmic Brownies and Cheetos, the orange powder the color of his hair. I'd find brownie wrappers everywhere, in the bathroom we shared and under couch cushions. He consumed at least one box of plastic-wrapped, pre-cut brownies a week. He'd sometimes leave half on a wrapper at the edge of the bathroom sink as something waiting for him.

7.

The first time I drove my brother to rehab he had just turned 18 and told me he wanted to die. That attempt at rehabilitation came in the form of a psychiatric unit, where he was stripped and put in the drug wing of the facility, a sort of suspension. I sat in the waiting room replaying the ways our father made us feel our own bodies while my mother went to buy three cartons of Marlboro Reds so that my brother wouldn't run out.

Another mother at the front desk brought a stuffed dinosaur to her son, "It's his favorite. He'll be missing it." The worker, without specifying, told the mother it would be a risk.

Years later, after nearly dying from an overdose, my brother found Fred. When we were children, my brothers were gifted matching teddy bears for Christmas because they're twins, and back then, everything had to be the same between them. The other bear is Ted, with one less letter and more wear.

My mother called a few weeks ago to say my brother, who is 22 now, found Fred and Ted in the top corner of his closet and placed Fred's worn paw neatly over Ted's. "He didn't tell me he found them," she said. "When I asked him about it, he said they should be together."

8.

My mother never got used to it, the dying. It always got to her.

9.

A man wobbles up the street with a case of Natural Ice. In the background, kids are dropped off by a school bus. The man drops his case on the sidewalk and leans against someone's fence. A second man runs from across the street with a golf putter, more of a symbol than an actual threat. None of the kids look. The second man starts swinging. A car pulls over. A boy emerges, shoves a gun in the front of his jeans, and takes the side of the man with the putter. Together, they remove the man but not the ice, which spills across the pavement. A schoolgirl puddles through the slush, kicks a loose can into the grass.

How easy it is for her to look the other way while I watch from my car. The same way it was easier to pretend I didn't see a machete sticking out of a woman's cargo pocket on the elevator one night, her face bruised and a plastic cup of whiskey crooked in her arm. I stepped onto the spilled alcohol without looking down, which was also the way I looked

the other direction when my father ran to the toilet to throw up everything in his stomach, then crawled to the fridge for another beer, vomit caked to his shirt.

Sometimes, when he was a happy drunk, his smile did look a little like Robin Williams.

10.

Some summers my mother worked at an out-of-school program that supplied lunches for students: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, oranges, milk cartons, carrot sticks. When there was hot food, she drove pans of leftovers to a camp tucked in a wooded patch beneath the highway. She talked to a man there: Dan, a name I remember. She gave him hand sanitizer and chicken nuggets until he got sick. Then she took Seagram's 7, figured it would help numb whatever it was that needed quieting. I went with her once to take the liquor. Dan shook my hand with both of his, as if we knew one another, as if he were glad to see me. The last time my mother went, he was gone. The others in the camp said Dan had died. Maybe he froze to death.

11.

Last year, my brother passed out in the shower. My father found him covered in his own shit, called an ambulance, and left. When I arrived at the hospital, my brother was alone with a nurse who said she couldn't do anything for him, to take him to a different hospital, somewhere equipped for handling withdrawal. What she meant to say, as we stood in the back of the ER where my brother sprawled naked on a cot in a room the size

of a closet, was that his type of illness wasn't going to be treated at a hospital right outside the suburbs.

When my mother and I transported him, my brother's body convulsed in the back of the car. Every few miles, my mother would stop to wipe his legs and back, to make sure he was still breathing—the way she had done before.

12.

I didn't remember the opening scene of *Patch Adams*, when Patch is in a psychiatric hospital wearing slippers because shoelaces and stuffed animals are hazards. I guess that's why the film was played in rehab—an attempt at holding up some sort of mirror. But my brother wasn't allowed to finish it, and he wanted to know how it would all pan out. So did I. That created its own kind of yearning, and now I'm left with the image of Patch in a hospital gleaming an ingenuine grin as though it were all a ploy, as if our father believed that leaving my brother for paramedics was like turning off a movie.

13.

When I see the ice lady coming in from outside, I hold the elevator for her. She has teeth in her mouth and is wearing eyelashes, a wig, and a tight dress. Her lipstick matches the tattoo of a berry-red kiss high on her neck. The perched man enters with her, arms full of groceries and toiletries. I can't tell if this is an exchange, but the woman looks at me and smiles. Maybe it is sweet, I think, the way they could be taking care of one another.

Where my neighbors crush ice, next to the elevator or nestled inside their car, is where the smell of cat piss and nail polish remover lingers. Sometimes, it's where the distance between the door and elevator stretches wide, fills with half bodies and peaches.

This time, the man and woman don't have tied bags or hammers. It's strange how we try to piece together endings and imagine people as they aren't, until we can't. I think we understand each other, my brother and I. When he says Patch reminds him of our father, what my brother means to say is that he wanted our father to be there. And when I slide past the woman on my way out of the elevator, I think I might not have recognized her if it weren't for her coal-wide eyes.

III.

DRAWN, THEN  
CAUTERIZED:  
An Un-Naming

*TO BE DEBBIE*

I drop my mother off at a care facility beneath the highway where the man she's been nursing through loss waits, mouth gaping toward a neck-high window above his bed. Rain has cleared the sky of birds, pushed them out of time and space to nest in dark rooms of the man's brain, where water on the windowpane leaks from the bathroom ceiling of his first apartment. Somewhere, he is twenty-two, and his wife is still alive. Some days, the man calls my mother Debbie. She doesn't mind being Debbie or a shadow of her. Debbie was an engineer. *Debbie was too beautiful for her own good.* My mother lets him kiss her hand and insists that having her own teeth replaced after being run over by a car makes her appear younger. As if, she could only and never be Debbie now. Other days, the man and my mother watch television in a communal space as he rewrites the script, reduces men in the facility to seductive neighbors, half-grins of Debbie's coworkers who linger in the office after the lights have gone out. When my mother talks to other residents, jealousy drifts to the surface of the man's memory, and my mother, with her gray hair and mouth full of Debbie's teeth, beams into the space beneath his loss. She squeezes his hand back, three times to say, *I love you.* And she means it, at least until morning when she leaves, and Debbie is at work or with another man but never dead as my mother drives her beauty into mist and sunrise—a woman inside a woman.

*WHEN I DREW DEATH, I NAMED HIM HENRY*

My college roommate worked nightshifts in hospice. Afterward, the dead visited her. One weekend before Halloween, we wandered into a tarot reading where card XIII was drawn. When we talked about it later, she said she'd grown used to it. "Death has a certain smell," she said, "you know when it's coming." Like an overturned card, I thought and lived with the truth of that when we took in a stray cat.

A German professor and her wife found the stray. When my roommate and I went to their house to get the cat, we sat on the patio and made small talk. I watched the wife sneak popcorn from a shared bowl to the cat's mouth. The professor saw her too and let her get away with it. I was near the end of a relationship with a man I called by nicknames—a subconscious attempt at distance.

I named the cat Henry, after Henry's Hard Soda, because he was an orange tabby, and I wanted him to have a name. We didn't know I was sick when my roommate and I took him in, but soon our apartment smelled of his tumors. "His fur looks like a patched sweater," my boyfriend joked, and he wouldn't pet Henry. My roommate took him to the vet, paid for expensive medications with her money from the nightshifts. When Henry stopped walking, we took him back to the vet, decided it was time. My roommate cried too, said, "I'm only crying because you're crying." I was shocked by how I had grown used to Henry, the way he'd use his paw to guide string cheese from my hand to his mouth, the way he was almost human.

On the last drive home from the vet, my roommate kept asking, "Are you sure

you're okay?" I said, "Yes. We only had him a few months. I don't know why I'm so emotional." We stopped at her sister's house to bury Henry in the backyard because it was cheaper than having the vet dispose of his body. Plus, it seemed more intimate that way. But we couldn't dig a hole deep enough. Her sister's yard was filled with shallow tree roots and stumps. We tried to bury Henry in a ditch at the edge of the yard near the fence. He wouldn't fit. His head flopped out onto the grass, and my roommate said, "You don't want to look at this." Then his tongue fell out of his mouth and onto the ground. I examined the tiny face of loss as my roommate rolled its tongue back in and said, "He'll just wash up with the rain." We put Henry back into her car to bury him later at her parent's house.

My roommate's car smelled like death for weeks after driving Henry's body around in the trunk, and she left hospice after her last patient died. Each time we got in the car after Henry was gone, I couldn't remember if the Death card was reversed or not—resistance to or transformation because of an end.

One afternoon before Henry died, he crawled behind a bookshelf and curled into my roommate's sewing box. I was sure he had gone there to die. I went to shower because I heard some animals prefer to die alone, away from others. I left him with the needles and spools, resisted my clingy tendencies. When I got out of the shower, he was rolling around the living room floor with a toy mouse.

I spent the weeks before Henry's death shifting between my own doctor appointments and classes, waiting on lab results, and holding him when he'd let me. It wasn't long after the sewing box that Henry could barely walk. After the woman my ex

slept with messaged me on Facebook to tell me she was sorry about my cancer diagnosis, I was surprised when my ex left me for someone who wasn't her. I didn't message back. I wondered if she hurt too, both of us having lost something.

When my ex came to collect the last of his things, he had no sympathy for the smell, couldn't reason why my roommate and I ever brought a dying stray into our small apartment in the first place. The only thing I could think to tell him was that you get used to it. I couldn't say then that Henry needed me, that I believed I needed him.

*GHAZAL FOR HAVING YOUR CERVIX CUT OUT*

Reconstruct the orchid, the way it opens, its stillness on a nightstand. Count relics  
in that space: credit card, Marlboros, keys, pink condom. All lining the bedside,  
  
ready for placement on another alter, near a different bed—to be an offering, a prayer  
for love. Reinsert the IV needle. Count backward to the surgery and me in bed as I  
  
name children I might never have, mouth full of dry leaves, anesthesia, and the taste  
of desecrated meanings. In recovery, I wake to 20 strangers. All of us in our own beds, I  
  
try to un-pool blood at the tops of my legs. Reconstruct split skin. Reassemble a cervix.  
Imagine the parts burned out. I told a friend you gave me the orchid on my bedside  
  
table as a gift, knowing I bought it for myself, knowing you don't know if I like  
orchids. Afterward, I found a receipt for two tickets to a movie I didn't see. Benign,  
  
is what you told me. Even in absence, I feel the pulse of burning cells, hear you say  
my name. Reconstruct me—blossoms the color of fire flashing along my bedside.

## *SNAPCHAT BOYFRIEND*

He referred to me in two ways: “Snapchat girlfriend” or by my full name, which unsettled me. It was as if he knew me, but I didn’t know how. We matched on Tinder but never met, communicated through unsaved words and flashes of highly-filtered selfies for a year. Then he told me he’d moved to DC, one of the final nails in our impermanence. One weekend he came back to see me. I told him I was busy. Really, I was scared. In elementary school, Barrett ran into my forehead on the playground. He told everyone we kissed. He too used my full name. I shouldn’t be frightened by my own name. But I am also weary of the nicknames called out by strangers: *Sweetiehoneymbabygirl*. Even my Snapchat username is a nickname mean girls gave to me in high school. Not long ago, I heard knocks at my door around 2 a.m., followed by a juddering of the handle. The next day I sent Snapchat boyfriend a picture of a latte with a foam heart running through the center, and he said, “I can’t talk to you anymore. I’m married.” Maybe part of me liked that Snapchat boyfriend could never leave me, never mind that I never knew he wasn’t real or was or married. The quick way his last Snapchat stung and then I let go is the same way the body doesn’t suffer less from familiar pain but does become less shocked by it, like dipping toe first into a pool or the rattling before a plane takes off. Sometimes I think Snapchat boyfriend could have been another man I knew but never met—the man who texted me every day for months, and when I stopped answering, turned to calling in the middle of the night. If I had ever agreed to meet Snapchat boyfriend, maybe a different man from my past would have been sitting at the bar. He’d have turned around gritting an orange peel, an old fashioned in one hand. Maybe he’d carry a pocketknife. Maybe a hammer under his car seat. But Snapchat boyfriend drinks Jim Beam in the park according to his pictures, and after his final message, the knocking ceased. When I replied to Snapchat boyfriend about his marriage, he said nothing. I expected that. I’ve been ghosted by men, and men I have ghosted sometimes call after I’ve asked them to stop. After I blocked the man who called in the middle of the night, he began calling with Google Voice so I couldn’t recognize his phone number. He’s one who haunts me, like those who call out, and I come running back, each time my own name more and more unfamiliar.

## *VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS*

After we order both entrees, I ask about Nora's pregnancy. What I don't say is that the inquiry is really one into our own relationship. Nora and her fiancé, Toby, are an interracial couple too and, in more ways, are like a mirror. That is to say, G and I went to Roanoke two weeks ago to visit Nora and Toby, and it was comfortable, mostly, the four of us in a house together.

Tonight G and I are celebrating my new job as a part-time art teacher at a local elementary school. And though it's just an attempt at supporting myself through graduate school, the hiring process involved an interview, and so we decide there's something to celebrate. Here, at one of my favorite restaurants on the corner of 19th and Main, small plates are shared under buttery light and iron décor, which should be romantic, but we sit outside and argue over the crab & chorizo fried rice or the grilled ribeye. We get both, and I make a point not to look at G's plate.

Nora is a part-time music teacher, and Toby puts forth his best effort recording songs for Sunday services. When we were alone in the kitchen, Nora told me she bought Toby's car and their house. G makes more money than I do; he's a software engineer. Sometimes I think that will be the reason we don't work.

In Virginia, Nora offered to make meals, so I bought groceries. G insisted on goat curry from a Jamaican food truck most nights, and though I didn't say anything about it two weeks ago, I still think it was rude. Everything he does tonight bothers me. He asks if I want a bottle of Zinfandel, which is on special, then complains loudly about the half

price. He angles his chair away from me and orders three cocktails which total more than the bottle of wine. But those aren't the things that truly bother me, not really. I mean, I suppose small things add up, but it's more that he is secretive when truth matters. G cuts into the ribeye as I make a joke about having listened to Nora and Toby record Christian music for hours on end. During the 8 days we spent in Roanoke, I heard "Shout to the Lord" more times than I had in my entire life, but the mountains and wildlife were surreal, and so I looked beyond the recording setup to the scenery behind the sliding glass doors. Then Nora and Toby announced their pregnancy, and I felt odd not knowing them and being part of the news.

It's been more than a year of seeing G, and a few months ago I felt like saying *love* or something close to it. Then I swallowed it. Before G, I met a man on Tinder who turned out to be my neighbor. His kink was to hear me say, "I love you," which I suppose isn't that unusual. One night, he came over to tell me about his ex who is pregnant. I can't help but think his desire for affirmation wasn't a kink but a cry. The sounds are different, but they mean the same—I begged G in different ways. "Please say it, you don't have to mean it. I just need to hear it," my neighbor said. Not long ago G told me he was ready to have kids, and that made me happy, despite my certainty that I don't want them right now.

G makes me put the tab in full on my card. That isn't the point here. We went on vacation together, flew through the air together. We were the first people to hear about Nora's baby. When we get to the car after dinner, I cry. I hate myself for it, but I finished the cocktails G couldn't and so it's easy to not care about how he sees me. He says, "Is

this about the check? You know I'm not going to make you pay for all of that." Then he pinches cash into my palm. I cry harder.

What I liked about my arrangement with my neighbor was its simplicity. We weren't attracted to each other enough to desire commitment, but we both needed the assurance of words and touch, which we both knew, despite not knowing each other, could never really be enough.

When we were in Roanoke, I went to the beauty supply store with Nora. I picked up razor bump cream for my bikini area. As we walked to the car afterward, she asked, "Does it work?" I told her, "Yes," and looked out past the empty parking lot toward the mountains. While driving away, she said, "G has never introduced us to anyone he's dated before. I hope it lasts."

Then she added, "Did you hear what G said about not wanting to tell his parents he's dating a white woman?" I ignored her question, I didn't blame G, not at all for that. But it came back to me, upset me when he cut into the ribeye, let meat juice drip from his chin onto his pants, when I thought of other things against us.

Two weeks after the dinner, G calls at midnight to break up. At the end of the call, he says, "I felt like I was married to you." I remind him that Virginia was his idea, and he says, "I'm sorry about that. It was a mistake." I think of the airport in Roanoke, the t-shirts and tumblers that read: Virginia is for Lovers. Maybe it's true. We were happy there, I think.

When Nora and Toby recorded music in their basement, they asked G to sing with them. He's good at it. Great, really. But he wouldn't, couldn't even open his mouth to

motion the words. I sat with my eyes shut, tapping my foot against the beat and concrete floor.

*WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC AND*

where I planted tomatoes, my window has bloomed. Outside  
a man hexes his own reflection, gurgles a call to his mother  
before spitting onto pavement. No one has stopped  
a goose egg from forming on his head or stuck a lullaby  
to the sore, hair pushed off the dome—the size of a baseball.

There is no summer but a surgical mask  
hangs from his neck. His right palm clutches  
what looks like an old-fashioned doctor's bag, but isn't.

He glistens in three coats as he looks through the closed cellphone  
storefront at his mother who will never call back. Where I

planted tomatoes, the buds have miscarried and fell to bloom.

## *AROUND BUDD PARK*

“Your sister adores chasing squirrels,” my mother says from the park’s cement steps as I cross St. John Avenue in the half-light of evening. Squinted eyes indicate a grin beneath her mask. One hand gently tugs a polka-dotted leash, the other rests on her hip. Calling her dog my sister has offered a small amusement.

For more than 20 years, my mother has walked the same park, rounding its just-short-of-a-mile loop. Now, she lets Addy chase squirrels and roam a fraction of needled grass. In good weather and different circumstances, a man shoves a cart of pork rinds and paletas through Budd Park, and the swimming pool on the other side, opposite from where we’re standing, overfills with children.

Because it’s October and my mother isn’t off work until evening, we don’t have much light left to watch squirrels, which Addy is never sneaky enough to catch between her teeth. I tell my mother, “You should be careful when it’s dark. You don’t need to be here alone at night.” She tells me about people she’s met on walks—men, usually, with dogs of their own—and describes the strangers as friendly, kind even. I’m envious of her ability to look at someone unburdened by weight of the past.

Tonight, the park has new additions: a brick-red freight container and a man outside of it, coiled in his lawn chair. He nods as my mother and I approach. When we ask about the storage container, he stands up, “It’s art. I’m working on some traveling exhibitions. This is the first I’m testing out.” He’s a local sculptor who owns a gallery in the Crossroads, a section of the city with high-priced bistros, former factory buildings

made into lofts, and artisan chocolate shops. The Crossroads are filled by artsy, seemingly-stable adults in their thirties with high-quality tattoos and affinities for craft beer. That is to say, it's different from where we are now.

Between North and South Indian Mound, Budd Park is crouched in one of the most violent pockets of Kansas City. The south side of the park glittered with bullet casings when I was young. Then there seemed to be some years of peace. Maybe that's the way my own memory projects itself. Maybe those were years I lived elsewhere. This year, there have been more reported homicides in the city than ever. Here, around Budd Park, there have been a high number of COVID-19 cases. I don't imagine those two things are unrelated.

When we talk about the area, the artist admits, "I've started to camp out from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. I haven't even been in the park two weeks, and there have already been four attempted break-ins." I'm not surprised. I tell him, "I don't think people expect it to be art." He looks away, "Do you want to go in?"

I walk up a low-slung ramp and into the storage container, which functions as a miniature museum of family photographs and artifacts from the US-Mexico border: dust-covered packages of dry food and crushed water bottles, backpacks that appear to have been run through a paper shredder. In the back, a projector loops footage from the border, its audio ricochets off ribbed metal. A man's whistle spirals out into dusk at the opposite end, and it becomes difficult to separate noises inside from outside.

Cut strips of camouflage cloth lined with steel wool and fleece hang along the right wall, the materials also dust-covered and torn. I look at them in rows. It takes a few minutes to understand I'm looking at shoes.

I wonder about how they were lost.

I step out of the container and stand next to the artist while my mother enters. I grip Addy's leash, feel my wet palm against nylon. "How'd you collect the artifacts?" I ask. "I hiked the border and took what I could. The photographs are borrowed from local families."

I point toward the right side of the container, "Are those...?" "Yes, shoes," the artist answers, "They're made for crossing. Border patrol drags tires through the desert every some odd hours so new footprints can be easily discovered. When footprints are found, border patrol knows about how recently they were made."

In the distance, my mother lowers her mask to wipe her face. As we walk away, a yellow lab gallops toward us. "It's Tequila, Addy's friend," my mother says, grinning again. The dogs play in what's left of the sun, on a hill in the northeast corner of Budd Park. Tequila's owner is a graying man with a walking stick and a bow strung across his back. He walks the cracked trail and his dog follows off leash. The man does not look at the storage container.

At the school across St. John, Jazmin waits for it to be 6 p.m. She works the after-school program and studies social work at a local university. "How was the park?" she asks. I tell her about the artist, the shoes. She says, "My mother made the journey."

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I started teaching elementary and middle school art next to Budd Park in August 2020. Really, the position isn't new to me. I've worked on and off in the area since I was 17, when I lied about my age on a job application so I could work at a summer school before I turned 18.

When I did that, I didn't know I'd be walking into a makeshift school, originally a tiny church hall with limited plumbing and no air conditioning. Students frequently had heat-induced nosebleeds. The basement, with its small kitchen, had enough space for a few cafeteria tables. Nails and plywood lined the second and third floors, which functioned as classrooms.

That summer, I carried a kindergartener on my back, her right leg bound in a bright pink cast that shot up to her hip. I watched the full cycle of lice take form on another girl's head. While listening to her read, one adult louse fell onto my forearm and shimmied through short hairs to my elbow. I had never seen one so large. The next day she came to school with a crooked haircut, as close to the scalp as one could get with scissors.

Being an art teacher is different. I work in a finished building now and am both encouraged and defeated by the self-inflicted responsibility of making art seem urgent. I want to believe art can help parse through pain and make it, if not more manageable, then at least visible, like the headlights of an oncoming freight train before it crushes you.

My students are bright and kind despite the cruelty around them. Many are first-generation immigrants. Some have seen family members taken away. Recently, one

of my eighth graders watched ICE arrest his older brother. I don't know that kind of loss. I hear of it, I watch it, it keeps me up at night. I know it by name, but it's not my own.

During the summer of 2016, four years after I began working at the summer school, I saw preschoolers use collapsible cardboard bricks to build "the wall." It wasn't unusual; children often act out fears and anxieties in role play activities, in art too. Burgundy blocks became heavy with the fears of their parents and siblings. That memory edges to the surface when I see artwork by a child brimming with blood and knives and broken bodies. I am reminded of a feeling I do know, the permanence of fear—the way fear becomes a room in the body, the door locks, and the room becomes home.

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My brother was born an artist, an observer. Or at least, it seemed that way when he was sober. He could turn a brick of clay into anything with his hands.

Once, in middle school, he came home with a ghostly figure painted in muted blues. I asked him, "Who is it supposed to be?" I don't remember if it was a self-portrait or a portrait of our father. Maybe it was someone else entirely. I think that's why I get mad at him. I trace back our paths too often and can't shake the certainty that he had talent to get out, that art could have saved him. Still, it's easy to measure someone else's failures and difficult to reconcile your own trappings.

Sometimes, I feel like blaming my brother for his addiction, as if it's an amusement park ride he chooses to get on over and over again, despite a faulty track and broken seatbelts. I know, while some days might be exhilarating, most days are

choiceless and painful and far from self-inflicted. And though I live with it, I don't really know my brother's kind of loss either.

Unlike him, I was not born an artist. Most of my artistic pursuits are futile or overworked. I don't come by them naturally, but I have learned to appreciate the means art offers to process feelings we inflict and those inflicted upon us.

I put forth effort teaching art, toward teaching something worthwhile or generating a worthy distraction, even if the distraction is only my own. Sometimes, the outside world leaks in. During sketch time recently, I watched a student move to the front of the classroom, pick up a wooden block, place against his ear, and use it as a police walkie-talkie to report his friends at the front table. Another boy was attacked on his way home from school. Other days stand still, seem quieter in the wake of chaos.

\\

In September, after another relapse, my mother and I took my brother to a halfway house up the street from Budd Park. It's been an uphill trek, keeping him alive. We knew peace in his sobriety. He did not.

He was back in school for a month when he called about finishing an outline assigned in his first-year speech class. "I'm so fucking stupid," he repeated, voice snapping before the end of the sentence. I told him to meet me, "You're panicking. Relax. I'll help."

It was nearly 80 degrees outside when my brother appeared in a sock hat and tracksuit, beads of sweat strung below pinched pupils. "Pull out your computer. Let me see what you have," I was short with him. When the computer lit up, words in the open

document appeared wind-swept by his own unnerved panting. I scrolled through. The same paragraph began on four consecutive pages, evidence of the way his thoughts looped. I asked questions, but he couldn't stop twitching or look at me long enough to answer.

"I'll make notes for you. Go home and finish it. Have a cup of coffee. Then record yourself giving the speech." I didn't say anything about his being high. I couldn't. Despite having seen him unconscious and naked in the middle of the worst withdrawals, I couldn't bring myself to look at him and say, "Why are we doing this again?"

I let him leave but called before he made it home, told him I could spot the difference. After years of watching him shiver at the edge of gone, I knew the difference between his being sober and curled away in some far corner of his own mind.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Yeah. Me too," I told him. "It was just oxy and hydrocodone this time. I thought I had it under control," he mumbled.

In the weeks that followed, my brother spiraled into full relapse, more withdrawal, and another attempt at sober living. I believed him when he said, "Things will be better this time around."

We clench the shattered shells of hope, knowing they're likely to wound us.

\\

After my first semester at college, I brought home a series of charcoal sketches completed in an introductory drawing course. My mother beamed at them, arranged them across shag carpet in our living room and left them, so when we didn't have furniture, we had art. It made the absence of couches seem intentional.

When girls I knew from high school decided it was my turn to host movie night, my mother made them participate in an art walk around our living room so they wouldn't question our lack of chairs. Having spent nights at their large and functioning homes, I was grateful for my mother and that even then art seemed to offer a means of survival.



On the morning after visiting the artist in Budd Park, the church between his storage container and school has its glass front blown out. It's not the fracture of a rock or bullet. Glass has been completely removed from door frames, like someone ran their arm against the edges. It's a clean cut.

School bells chime behind smashed glass, and Ms. Anika paces through the parking lot, where I stand next to Ms. Luisa, plucking kids from minivans and sedans. Ms. Anika has curled the ends of her hair and put makeup on her eyes. She's wearing black slacks and a leather coat. Ms. Luisa questions why she's dressed up, and without stopping, Ms. Anika says, "I have to go to a funeral in the afternoon. My nephew died."

"When did it happen?" Ms. Luisa asks. "A few days ago," Ms. Anika has passed us, almost made it to the cafeteria door. "How old was he?" Ms. Luisa continues probing. After hearing "38," she grinds her palm into her forehead and asks the question I've been listening for, "How did it happen?" Ms. Anika turns to her, "He was shot and killed at a gas station." Ms. Luisa begins to translate the conversation, but I tell her I understand.

There are words for what we know and then there are feelings. So often the language of death is unutterable, caught in a single look or shattering of speech. Often, we draw toward us the familiarity of certain pains.

In the evening, my mother calls to ask if I can drive my brother's half-working car to the halfway house. He has started working construction in West Bottoms, a place said to have been used for trade between Indigenous People and French trappers until railroads came and the area crowded with bars and restaurants. Most things in the Bottoms were washed away with a flood in 1903 and resurrected during WWII. Then in 1951, another flood. After that, the area deteriorated.

Though there have been attempts to revive the Bottoms—overpriced apartment complexes, antique shops, food trucks—it's still a shadow of what it was. Most buildings there are skeletons of busted windows and graffiti. Some have been turned to haunted houses; red brick, round-arch spandrels, and a ghost signs venerated on Halloween. And much like the feeling of terror, the past wanes but doesn't dissolve completely.

Work in the Bottoms is hard on the body, and getting there by bus from St. John takes too long, according to my brother who calls again to say his sneakers are falling apart. He adds, "Jo," the halfway house mom, "promised to buy work boots for Christmas, but I keep stepping on nails."

My mother and I take groceries, shoes, and new jeans to a nearby 7-Eleven and hope these things will carry my brother. We do what we can, and Jo says my brother is lucky to have people who care for him like my mother and I do. Sometimes, I agree with Jo. Other times, *unlucky* seems to be a more suitable word, but Jo is a glass-half-full kind of woman.

\\

At the end of the week, Jazmin stacks cardboard boxes full of government-rationed food in the school driveway. She tells me to take one. Inside are liquid eggs, processed cheese, potatoes, a few onions, and oranges. All of the labels are in Spanish, their expiration dates near. Even the pandemic hasn't changed much about the way we operate. We wear face masks and attempt to distance despite overcrowded classrooms. We do what we can afford to do, but things don't really change here.

After loading the food into my car, I walk through Budd Park. Sometimes, I feel like it's a hole, this place I come back to. Sometimes, I feel stuck when I think about the years piled upon years like crusted leaves, and then a breeze whistles and scatters them. "There are worse things happening around us," I told my brother to comfort him the last time we spoke. "People are dying." Here, at the end of a year, I stand in the middle of the park wondering how I've managed to loop circles around my own existence, falling back home with gravitational force.

I walk across St. John toward school to clean the art room. In the back, chairs are untucked from their tables and scraps of construction paper litter tiles. There are seashells strewn about from line drawing sketches—an attempt to capture the essence of a tangible thing. I collect the shells and place them back on their shelf after wiping it. In the corner, above the cabinets, I find a rolled index card.

When I pick it up, white powder falls from one end into my open hand. I shift the dust around in my palm and raise it to my nose. The smell of peppermint slides into my face, and what I thought was and would be is not. There, in my grip, is nothing but a crushed Lifesaver.

*MISS SCARLET OUTSIDE ROYAL LIQUOR WITH A GLASS ROSE*

*How'd you do it again?* Both brothers ask  
as I win another round  
of Clue. In the basement,

I am always Miss Scarlet  
in her sore-red dress—  
grown, never grown.

What they don't know  
is the game is rigged  
against them. I know

\\

the cards, choose candlestick.  
Revolver and dagger are  
familiar. This is how we spend

half-flashing nights: I attempt to control  
aftermaths, and they forget  
I want to be elsewhere,

\\

someone other than myself. Now, I am  
a girl again, locked into winter, sharp  
scales and shells. Once, I stroked

a brother's head. In a Savers  
parking lot, he was pistol  
whipped, brow split and blood

\\

scattered like seeds in a violent wind, memory

flew from his ears. This is  
what no one admits

about near-losses: they erase the past  
tense of grief, un-name the living, eat

all but the wilting scent of roses,

whose cut necks  
are made for funeral songs  
and the terrier we got

\\

one Christmas. She seized,  
then drowned in a pond, speckled  
body bloated like Pearlscale

and a father who unbecomes, talks  
to ghosts, holds  
grudges, glints knives.

\\

I have learned to not look  
them in the face, to muffle the growl  
of man as it reverberates

night after night, after  
seeing someone overdose  
in the street and spotting

\\

eyes wet and black as lilies  
against pavement. I still toss  
texts into shallow-water graves

like glistening pennies  
into a phonebooth that  
takes quarters, and know

there's no such thing  
as a payphone anymore. Brother, there was  
a year in between, where we had

\\

you—where I call at midnight

from a sleezy bar because I  
am too far to walk

home. You leave AA, find me  
drunk, damp-faced. I say, *I have*  
*to pee*, and you hit

\\

every curb, run each red light  
to get to Royal Liquor  
in time. Under the retro sign

of a lit up crown, you say, *I used to use*  
*here*, remind me you're  
on probation. It's all risky.

\\

Sometimes, you find yourself  
in another world. I do too—sometimes,  
this is all I hope for.

## NOTES

“Memory of a Crushed Daisy” is based on the real and tragic events surrounding the deaths of Daisy and Melissa Coleman.

“Next to I35, Paint or Blood Sings the Lyrics of Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros” contains lyrics in the song “Home” by Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros. The lyrics were found painted on an overpass in Kansas City.

“When I Read About Portland” alludes to the Black Lives Matter Protests that happened across the United States during the summer of 2020, in which excessive police and military force were often used on protestors.

“Crime Scene Palimpsest” refers to a double homicide that happened during the summer of 2019 directly outside of my apartment building. The victims were 28-year-old Austin Michael Quijas and 22-year-old Leo Moreno Jr.

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## VITA

Mary Henn was born June 30, 1994, in Kansas City, Missouri. She attended St. Pius X High School in Kansas City, Missouri and graduated in the top five percent of her class in 2012. After graduation, Henn moved to Springfield, Missouri to attend Missouri State University (MSU), where she received the Provost Scholarship to complete a Bachelor of Arts in English with minors in Spanish and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Henn graduated summa cum laude in the Honors College from MSU in 2016 and received a nomination for Missouri State's Woman Student of Distinction Award.

Henn remained in Springfield from 2016 to 2018, during which time she completed her Master of Arts degree in English at MSU. She was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship to teach first-year composition and introductory poetry classes. During her time as a graduate student at MSU, Henn served as an Assistant Poetry Editor to *Moon City Review* and an intern at Moon City Press.

After completing her master's degree, Henn moved back to Kansas City to begin an MFA program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). There, she was awarded a second graduate teaching assistantship and received the Sosland Teaching Award for her success in teaching writing and speech courses at UMKC.

As an MFA candidate, Henn was awarded the Barbara Storck Award for Poetry and Fiction, the Jo Anna Dale Creative Writing Scholarship, and the Crystal Field Scholarship in Poetry. In 2019, she received the Martha Jane Starr Library Research

Award from Miller Nichols Library for her archival research regarding a 1920s American Scrapbook. The project was awarded an Inclusive Excellence Grant for Graduate Research, and Henn presented her research findings at the 2019 Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference at James Madison University. In 2020, she was selected as a winner for an AWP Intro Journals Award in creative nonfiction.

During her time at UMKC, Henn served as Vice President of the English Graduate Student Association, completed internships with *New Letters* and *Fiction/Non/Fiction*, worked as Assistant Editor and Editor of *The Sosland Journal*, and received grants for researchers and artists from UMKC Women's Council and the Charlotte Street Foundation in Kansas City. In the third year of her MFA program, she began teaching elementary and middle school art in Kansas City's urban core.

Henn's work in writing, production, and research has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, the *Fiction/Non/Fiction* and *MFA Writers* podcasts, and *University News*. Upon graduating, Henn hopes to find work in a creative space while compiling her first collection of poems and essays.