

5-2018

Myriad Routes Out

Madison Etheridge

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Etheridge, Madison, "Myriad Routes Out" (2018). *Honors Theses*. 614.
https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/614

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

Myriad Routes Out

by

Madison L Etheridge

A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of The University of
Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English

May 2018

Approved by

Angela Ball, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor,
Professor of English

Luis Iglesias, Ph.D., Chair
Department of English

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

Myriad Routes Out is an original collection of poems exploring abandonment and loss, including both interpersonal and extrapersonal situations. The majority of the poems are written in free verse, but the collection also includes several formal poems. *Myriad Routes Out* is accompanied by a critical preface.

Acknowledgments

“We are so harmed we are beautiful:
the buildings abandoned by paint,
the now unfarmed fields, the always
broken plates of mountains.”

Rose McLarney

My deepest gratitude belongs to Dr. Angela Ball, for mentoring me in poetry and life for the last four years. I owe everything else to my incredible support group: Jeff & Julie, Caston, Laney, Erin, Christy, Hiba, Taylor, Lisa, Maisen, Logan, and Mallory. I would not have these poems or the confidence to share them without all of you.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Address Unknown.....	11
How does it feel.....	12
Father.....	13
I Carry the Sun.....	14
Ludlow.....	15
Vacancy.....	16
Savior of Shells.....	17
Hangover Cures.....	18
Infestation.....	19
Relations with the Late A.C. Clary.....	20
To Every Woman Who Has Never.....	21
M(other).....	22
“Seattle Blaze Claims 63”.....	23
Driveway Morning Glories.....	24
After Henry—.....	25
Dear Amy.....	26
En Absentia Parente.....	27
Courting Elektra.....	28
House Ghazal.....	29
Insistent Objects.....	30
References.....	31

Preface

Foundation

When I first began writing as a preteen in junior high, the act provided an escape. My poems (then sing-song and juvenile) were the way I dealt with my life without actually dealing with it—where I could write what I could not say or do something that (in reality) would terrify me. Writing gave me a tool to explore possible decisions and scenarios and my reactions to them. My dream back then was to become a songwriter—I loved telling stories and fashioning rhythms with my words. I liked writing because I was good at it, and because it gifted me a much-sought sense of control in that I could bend words to my will. Since I utilized writing to cope, it became a large and mostly hidden part of my life. I did not want to explore the intricacies of my writing because I was petrified of exposing the “ghost in the machine,” as it were. I was afraid that picking apart my writing would force me to confront complex situations and emotions from my past. In the last few years, I have become more comfortable with others reading and criticizing my poetry. However, this project has raised old haunts to life, so to speak. It has become more than just a collection of themed poems—it is now a demand for self-discovery. Even my chosen theme, abandonment, requires me to reflect on my past. I originally chose the theme because of someone close to me, but as I have pursued the project, I realized that I know more about the subject than I ever would have admitted before. These poems ask me to bare emotions and memories that I have buried strategically over the years; they pick at the healed wounds until fresh blood appears. I also run the risk of the people I love recognizing themselves in these poems. The nature

of confessionalism has served me in private, but how will the style hold up under the scrutiny of those who inspired the work? It is my fervent wish that those who read this collection perceive a patchwork collage concerning the duality and diversity of abandonment. Attached to that wish is the profound hope that as I sort through the alphabetical rubble of the last eight years in an attempt to “discover” my poet self, I (as well as my audience) will be pleased with what I find, and that together we can approach and appreciate the truths of abandonment.

Approach

Abandonment is a dominant expression in life and in literature. The most common abandonment trope in literature remains that of the abandoned child, but a person can abandon many things: children, family, lovers, property, and even one’s self. In this collection of poetry, I have chosen to examine both the people who leave (the abandoners) and the people and/or things they leave behind (the abandoned), exploring motives and repercussions. I intend for this collection to catalogue the many kinds of abandonment and sample the infinite reactions to that abandonment on both sides. Since abandonment has many psychological connections, I have researched and portrayed these reactions as accurately as possible while still maintaining my artistic integrity.

In order to address the dual nature of abandonment, I have situated some of my poems as letters, at least in a sense, from the perspectives of both abandoners and abandonees, whether they are people, places, or things. Others are standalone. The poems are not organized thematically or chronologically; instead, I have organized each based on the order in which I decided to confront each character or situation. Each set of

“letters” features different characters, so as to illustrate the massive scope of and diversity in the term “abandonment.” The inspiration for the letter format came from my perusal of (and affection for) Emily Dickinson’s beautiful and meaningful letters. In a missive to her cousins from 1881, Dickinson writes, “An earnest letter is or should be a life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because ‘unloaded’ but that touched ‘goes off?’” (245). I believe arranging several of the poems as letters engenders context and creates a smoother and more vibrant narrative, as well as imbuing the poems with a certain intimacy. For instance, the first and second poems in the collection, “Address Unknown” and “How does it feel,” are opposite and intensely personal perspectives of the same abandonment. In another nod to the style of Dickinson, I attempt to convey a certain level of emotion with my unusual punctuation. Her poem “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” reads

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun...
Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die— (“My Life had stood”)

This poem not only forces the reader to stop at each em dash and emphasize each phrase, it also enforces the emotion behind the pauses. My poem “How does it feel” features almost no punctuation, although it has naturally end-stopped lines, to mimic the breathless mania of the speaker upon leaving her entire life behind. “After Henry—” utilizes the em dash to signify separate sensate reactions to loss. In my poem “Courting

Elektra,” I employ unique punctuation to intensify a metaphor aligning improvised explosive devices with emotional and physical abuse. The lines in question read:

A father can leave
improvised explosive devices
tucked in his children’s ears—
container: pressure cooker vocal chords—power
source: irregular brain waves—switch:
scream—detonator: bone—explosive:
smokeless propulsion...

My intent was to create a direct association between the ingredients for an IED and the components of abuse. In addition to exploring my past in my poetry, I have discovered that I also revert back to my juvenile style in some poems. “M(other)” possesses an almost sing-song quality; a mixture of alliteration, repetition, and the lyrics to an actual playground refrain—step on a crack, break your mother’s back. In this poem and others, I have embraced my younger self and merged her with my current self, truly enjoying the result.

I first learned about form and meter in the context of my own poetry two years ago. At first I loathed the imprisoning feel of regulation, but I have grown to value the balance that form and meter give my poetry. Free verse, which the Poetry Foundation defines as “non-metrical, non-rhyming lines that closely follow the rhythms of natural speech” (“Free verse”) is still my preferred medium, but I have noticed that even in my free verse now, I sometimes unconsciously write in a certain metric rhythm. Poet Denise Levertov terms this phenomenon the “organic form which takes shape in a free verse

poem as it grows” (Drury 99). The majority of poems in this collection are free verse, but several are in form to illustrate both my range as a poet and the various forms’ abilities to emanate the emotion of abandonment. “Seattle Blaze Claims 63” is a sestina, and one of the most difficult poems I have ever written. Sestinas, invented by troubadours, are comprised of six stanzas with six lines each and feature the same end-words in a “fixed, evolving pattern” (Drury 119), followed by a three-line envoi (“send-off”) containing all six end-words. My sestina details the aftermath of an enormous fire and how a couple copes with losing a child in the flames. “Hangover Cures,” a tercet, features a woman sitting on a bathroom floor, contemplating the ambiguous events of the previous night. Tercets possess stanzas of three lines each, which can seem “odd, immediately attracting our attention visually...a peculiarity [that] can definitely be used to the poet’s advantage” (Baer 128). Utilizing the tercet form strengthens my unsettling narrative, as does my unusual rhyme scheme, which follows the pattern *aab, ccb, dde, ffe*, etc. My interest in the French rondeau stemmed from my attachment to Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s powerful articulation of the form in “We Wear the Mask.” A modern rondeau features fifteen lines, “arranged in three stanzas, with the last two stanzas concluding with a short refrain line that repeats the beginning of the poem’s first line” (Baer 150). Rhyme schemes vary, but the power and precision of the refrain are crucial. My rondeau “I Carry the Sun” portrays a speaker struggling to push through her past while still maintaining her inner light, hyperbolized here in the image of the sun.

By and large, however, my favorite form is the eighth-century Middle Eastern ghazal. Introduced to me by a graduate teaching assistant in my first poetry workshop, the ghazal drew me with its concision, subtle repetition, and vivid snapshots; if reading

poetry is like staring out a window or into a mirror, reading a ghazal is like twisting a kaleidoscope or assembling a mosaic. Ghazals typically consist of couplets rhymed on the same sound that present disconnected images or observations, “placing insights or images side by side without explaining their connection...gaps [that] can be a great source of power and mystery” (Drury 103). “Savior of Shells,” my first ghazal, is more modern in that it lacks the repeated word/sound at the end of the couplets, but the poem stresses oceanic imagery, discussing a “shell”: someone who has left mentally or emotionally without physically leaving. My poem “Vacancy” also addresses this situation, albeit in free verse. “House Ghazal” portrays an abandoned house, deconstructed (or never actually constructed), and contrasts wood and concrete—how they grow and remain, with or without humans, both forms maintaining meaning in isolation.

Influences

The plethora of authors and poets who inspire me should be apparent from the works I’ve chosen to reference in this collection, but they represent only a small sample of my literary muses. I could never affirm my belonging to one particular literary group or movement, because I have admired and emulated pieces from several of them. One of my main obstacles in assessing my own writing is my penchant for versatility. I would, however, say my strongest influence is confessionalism. Confessional poetry came to the literary forefront in the late fifties and early sixties and stressed personal, or “I” poetry. Subjects included “private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression, and relationships” (“A Brief Guide”) and confessional poets dealt with them in a more

straightforward manner than previous poets. In addition to the distinct autobiographical element, confessional poets tended to stress “careful craft and construction” (“A Brief Guide”). Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell were among the first confessional poets, and Charles Bukowski participated in the movement as well. Bukowski was the first poet I ever read for fun (I was thirteen when I purchased *The Pleasures of the Damned*) and the transparency with which he wrote about his life (while still maintaining a distinct style—his brute, choppy free verse) has stayed with me to this day. I greatly value artists who take their own lives and transform them into art. That transformation served as one of my original goals (however subconscious) when I first began writing.

As aforementioned, I take bits and pieces from other movements as well. The witty conceits and “subjects defined and compared through nature, philosophy, and love” (“Poetry communities”) of the 18th century Metaphysical poets not only informed American transcendentalism and Romanticism, they also make appearances in my poetry. I was introduced to this movement through the poetry of John Donne, especially “I am a little world made cunningly,” one of his Holy Sonnets. The Poetry Foundation’s website touts, “Poems so vividly individuated invite attention to the circumstances that shaped them” (“John Donne”), also inviting a connection to the Confessionalism movement. American Transcendentalism (1836-1860), helmed by poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, “aimed to create a [creative] community [working towards] heart-centered, personal expression” (“Poetry communities”). Transcendentalist authors such as Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau inspired me to search for metaphor and meaning in the natural world, and the movement as a whole taught me the value of rebelling against conventional concepts and ideas. The Beat movement (1948-1963),

fueled by the cultural disillusionment that followed two World Wars, sought freedom of expression (and in the case of several poets such as William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg, freedom from form and/or meter) and looked for “greater spiritual meaning in visceral experience” (“Poetry communities”). The Beats became so influential that they shaped a great deal of the popular culture of the sixties and seventies. Drawing from my regard for these movements and poets, I attempt to transform my experiences into poetry, taking care with craftsmanship, and stressing details and connections to the natural world. The contradiction between my appreciation for formalism and my dedication to insurrection remains one of the greatest challenges in my writing career.

Charles Bukowski remained my favorite poet through high school, but when I began taking poetry workshops in college I discovered Philip Larkin. He reminded me of a more formal Bukowski, clean-cut and mature while still discussing sex, aging, and gambling with a blunt honesty that evoked my awe. Larkin also has a talent for combining philosophical abstractions with stabilizing details without being overly sentimental, one of my highest goals in poetry. In his poem “How Distant,” Larkin writes

On tiny decks past fraying cliffs of water
Or late at night
Sweet under the differently-swung stars,
When the chance sight
Of a girl doing her laundry in the steerage
Ramifies endlessly.
This is being young...

My upbringing in the rural South has also influenced me exponentially, and had a marked effect on my taste in literature. Poets who write about the family ties of the countryside, the sweat that waters gardens, and the roads that are more and more inevitably left behind generally have my full attention and appreciation. In her anthology, *The Always Broken Plates of Mountains*, Rose McLarney relates both the ritual and the ruin of life in the South. McLarney writes in a lyrical narrative interspersed with savory details—in “Builder and Keeper,” “golden saxifrages, / the smallest flowers whose name means / *splitter of stone*” (11). My poem “Ludlow” was not only inspired by the real events of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre but also by McLarney’s treatment of glass in two of her poems. In “The Dance,” “One moves a sheet of plate glass alone... / Seen from a distance, he dances / emptyhanded” (16) and in “Simply Put,” when a cattle trailer shatters a truck window,

...we drive away, pieces
of glass falling behind.
The look like common jewels,
or I say that as the wind beats us,
so we don’t have to speak
of what the lovely
leaves incomplete. (22)

Conclusion

I have assembled here an amalgamation of twenty-two years’ worth of memory, ten years’ worth of passion, and four years’ worth of formal training in poetry. This, my

first collection, has come to represent a bridge constructed from my past and arching toward my future. The subject of abandonment has been difficult to confront and contend with at times, but it has aided my growth as a writer and a human being, which is all I could ask for and more.

Address Unknown

I.

First memory:

Perched on mother's hip, small
heart-shaped sunglasses slipping
down her nose. Her laugh crashed
down the porch steps, her feet bare
ly touched the sidewalk. The post
man swelled in her green eyes,
until he could see
our chipped china smiles.
"En-ve-lobes" she coached me,
I clasped them, two white, one blue.
Inside, I sat in the sink, watched
her butter-knife the en-ve-lobes.
She clapped my hands
for me, I remember.

II.

Our porch swing hums harmony
to cicada song, while my tongue
traverses blue, white, red rocket.
My honey braid hanging
to my knees, I watch the strands
glint sparks in plank-slat sunshine.
I hear his bag thump his thigh before
I see him, postman blue through
the fence. Popsicle still sticky
in my fist, I run to him. He lets
me look into his bag: dark, crowded,
no mother. I take two envelopes
with her name in loud red letters,
clutch them to my chest. He tugs
my braid and I slide two nickels
into his bag. "For shipping and
handling," I say. He nods.

III.

Envelopes collision a mountain
range on the kitchen counter. I shove
them onto the floor to make room
for the toaster, ignoring the words
"FINAL NOTICE" and
"URGENT." I see my
mother's name, imperfectly
disappeared with permanent marker.
Knowing they came bearing only
numbers and warnings, I laugh
at the thought of clapping
and heart-shaped sun
glasses.
Last memory:
Five years old. She let me sign a letter
"Love, Emily." I crayoned a blue sun
by my name.
She let me lick
the envelope, and waved
from the porch as I opened
the mailbox on tiptoe. I stuck my tongue
out in my quest to raise the flag. When,
proud of my reach, I looked for her,
she was gone.

How does it feel
to leave?

I'll tell you:
bungee jump deep breath
headlights in the rearview heart rate
international airport water fountain tear ducts
sticky phantom toddler fingers around bare knees
neon speedometer shake shake like shoulders
rigor mortis white fist grip on wheel and mouth
dirty water drip coffee from spectral service station taste buds
stars that sailed ships home are cell wall pinpricks
hair out the window
broken wing
strip search
star splattered scar
lone migration

Father

They won't sit in his recliner,
the faded green fabric like his
weed-eaten irises. No one moves
his boots from the back door,
though they smell of still-born
calves and gasoline.

He knows this, pictures it,
the blurred highway lines
a film reel.

His pack of cigarettes
rests on the back porch,
in a flower pot grave. His
coffee cup sits upside down
on the counter, waiting for
the next sunrise sip.

Hands at twelve and five,
he smells the sun
strike the asphalt.

His tire tracks indent
the front yard forget-me-
nots, his jacket hangs
heavy by the front door.

I Carry the Sun

I carry the sun in my grandfather's shirt,
up mountains, through church pews, in dirt
that crusts my golden-hair calves.
I left a single ray on several paths,
bent light flares, no one comes.

The trees beg rest, birds' eyes avert—
swallows swallow cries, perceive my hurt,
hushed warblers an uncomfortable audience.

I carry the sun.

Night refuses fall, but the clouds invert,
my trees become cacti, phantom desert.
I feel the sand shift between my toes.
Before I knew a child's scream, a two-dose
lie, a kitchen fire, a ripped miniskirt...

I carry the sun.

Ludlow

defines emptiness:
the field grows
half-dead homes
in whole-dead grass.
The clouds tongue-
kiss the horizon, both
ten feet and ten thousand
miles away.
Wooden walls rot, brick
foundations crumble—
doorways stand, generic
landscape photo frames.
Former kitchen window
glass bakes the sun,
holding enough heat
to burn the feet of ghosts
headed home.

Vacancy

Stroke the spine
of the still
house ghost,
point her towards
the one-way
window
to stand—
hand at her
midnight throat—
before
a glittering city
of eyes admiring
her architecture:
“Art Deco, how
daring in this day
and age.”
See how she brushes
her translucent thumb
across the light switch
and drags her bare
big toe between
floorboards.
Place your hand
over and through hers
to light on
the salt-stubborn, sweet
stuck switch
and light up
her irises,
those faint flowers
vining empty rooms.
Walk into the foyer,
step around words
haphazard like the faces
scotch-taped to un-
finished wood-frame walls,
and look back at her,
through her,
admire as you leave
how she haunts
herself.

Savior of Shells

How many years have I spent shoving air into your lungs?
My back bowed above your limp limbs, my hands sunk between your ribs.

Sand scatters through my room in the fan's breeze.
Those ruined castles in my bed once meant something.

My grandfather wrote a love letter sixty years ago.
"Your sea glass eyes deserve far more than these ceaseless tides."

Hearts can become shells. Currents crash through chambers
and salt mines form in veins: the ocean's elegy on emptiness.

I've been to thirty-eight lighthouses in my life, but I never
learned to be that lifeline, that beacon to the buoys barely floating.

Hangover Cures

Money is money is magic, he said,
gripped my jaw, forced back my head.
The rain, against the frosted window, pelts.

Silver glints between my teeth,
metallic scrape, coin on cheek,
tongue stamped with Roosevelt.

My knees are bathroom tile snakeskin,
a violent lipstick smear stains porcelain,
and last night is sticky on the floor.

Toes clinging to the faded periwinkle rug,
I bite on the dime, conjure a coffee mug—
black with Jack, sliding under the door.

I count lighthouses on the papered walls,
lose my place at eighty-six, he calls
through the door, I flinch in pain.

My throat closes and the dime flies
straight into the tub, I watch it capsize.
And I sink with it, hips circling the drain.

Infestation

Ants have invaded my bathroom:
the sink is toothpaste, saliva-
spattered, mingled with crumbs
that will feed them for days

and nothing fills me.
Soon, they'll breach the toilet.
Clorox and beer bottle vomit
remind me of him:
on dark lazy mornings, sidestepping,
showing mercy to the tiny beads of life.

I

come in from work
they scatter

I

smash them singly with a fingertip.
Bend, release, bend, release—
until insect fragments line the tiles.
They have a home somewhere
in the walls of mine

I

begrudge them
their numbers,
for no matter how many lives

I

claim

I

am still
alone.

Relations with the Late A.C. Clary

A brief lighter exchange
at the Ice House downtown,
introductions shouted over
last call: 4 months ago.

A brief hallway collision, bumping
bass shaking walls—closed-mouth
smiles: 6 weeks ago.

A brief double-wide trailer
coupling, secret, silence striking
the pines: 1 week ago.

A brief bullet entering
a waiting temple
on front porch steps, valid
excuse for a missed date:
yesterday.

An hour ago: a brief break
on the lake-side trail, an upturned
admonition, “You could have stayed.”

A brief space between one word
and the next. Five minutes later: kneeling
with asphalt-studded palms.

To Every Woman Who Has Never

seen a seven-week old fetus swaddled
in blood swim across the faded blue
porcelain of a bathtub
through falling water—tap
and tears—
or
heard a seventy-year old man
with a forty-year old degree
in gynecology whisper the phrase
“weak uterus” after gripping forceps
with Methusaleh hands:
he then turns to the freshly licensed
assistant (“tissues like these are unable or
unwilling to sustain life”) her pupils
widen, colored eyebrows raise
or
felt the hunger pangs
of a first trimester, acid-wash
esophagus and trip-wire
intestines;
seventeen pounds lost in seven weeks,
still preferable to half an ounce
in an hour in the shower.

To every woman who has not,
I will apologize for my fury
only once.

M(other)
for *Winslow*

I have been searching for daughters
to hold in shaky arms. Each red-hued
curl and bomb-blue eye sends fissures
through my skull—like sidewalk cracks,
break a mother's back
one vertebra
at a time:
spine curved metal
playground slide, magnifying
sun.

I have been searching for laughter
to erupt
in smoke-filled lungs. Peals like
petals descending post mortem
into my ears—street corner stare,
pied-piper's trance
one pedestrian-crossing
after another, chasing
the over-shoulder
gap-tooth grin.

I have
been searching
for a tether
come unfastened.
A glowing cord trailing
a child, careless crushing
blades of grass. A neon
sign, cursive "Lost and
Found,"
buzzing in pre-dark.

“Seattle Blaze Claims 63”

I wake from bitter dreams of Lost Things,
canvas recreations creased from wear,
lining bleak caverns—a worthless mine.
Gold-plated titles under each piece:
“Photo Albums,” “Cradle,” “City Burns
Through the Night, Gone by Morning.”

Measured time constraints for mourning
shouldn't exist when things
like ash and sparks singe my throat. Wear
black long enough, you won't mind.
The strong arms of clocks carry peace,
they say, scars soon eclipse the burns.

Bottles emptied of the medicine that burns
litter the motel carpet in the morning,
my friends ask how I'm handling things.
Some survivors stumbled back to where
the smoke still hangs gutter bleak, to mine
the wreckage for any possible peace.

My husband curls up, clutching the only piece
of her he could find, a peach blanket. Burns
imprison his freckle-flecked skin and mourning
has melted his bones into the mattress. Some things
brand us so darkly we wear
them: permanent gray matter in our minds.

“Horrendous Oriental Curtains”—I didn't mind
surrendering those to the flames, or “Recliner
Bought At Yard Sale.” The canvas that burns
without succumbing, flames bright in morning
light, displays the one thing
I can't bear to see, the guilt I can't un-wear:

“Best Piece of Me,” with green eyes that mimicked mine,
she would wear blue ribbons and question everything. Then
morning watched the fire take her from me. It burns.

Driveway Morning Glories

My grandmother spills water, curses age,
answers the phone, forgets her name.
Driveway morning glories claim
her smile—she dotes on every rain gauge.
A sun hat droops blue, helps her disengage
from numbers and letters that look the same.
Under her nails, dark dirt seems a child's game
she plays, a sunflower pressed to a page.

I watch her through the sink window, elbows
deep in coffee stains and tea rings. On her knees,
she pulls leaves and trims weeds. She sews
back misplaced petals and brakes for bees.
At night, we light dim lamps to fight shadows,
myself and my future: Paula Louise.

After Henry—

—my astrological wrist tattoo burns
and I shed the skin that knew
him, trail it out the window to catch
on loose gravel.

—hospital Zen gardens smell
like his neon vomit, when
he gave up
on us both.

—expensive tequila plays Marco
Polo with my brain in my blood
stream, the lime chaser his gum
the first time he kissed me.

—I dead-leg male strangers over
6'10 on public transportation
or trip them in the park: I
hope he feels it.

—pet names arbitrary,
he still chose to leave
this Earth with mine on his
ankle; I don't hear the word
"kitten" without flinching.

Dear Amy,
(1974-2017)

I was under the cold iron of a cupola
when I heard you left,
a six-year-old son, two Boston terriers,
and an inexplicably conservative
significant other in your wake,
all rocking with the ferocity
of your waves. I thought back
to our last night, drunk delirium
at The Grizzly Rose, when you
bowed up at a bouncer for me. Brash
neon signs and streetlights
our runway exit,
Manuel the cab driver
our only witness.
We ended where we started,
under the Colorado dark
on your patio—
I called
three people who didn't love
me, and cried. Too
drunk to stand, you raised your
wine glass and said,
"Fuck all of them."
These were not your last words,
but they meant something to me.

En Absentia Parente

Victims of childhood
neglect wish for an infinite
number of things, but chain
themselves to the ground,
dogs,
with realistic expectations.
Wishbones crushed, not cracked,
sinking stars
followed with a steady gaze.
Me: I wished for a book
before bed, refrigerator
art gallery, and presence.
My brother was too young
for a bike but wheels
were necessary for leaving.
He couldn't understand
the incessant leaving,
but he never un-learned
being alone.
I hid him, under couches,
in cabinets and closets,
my extra two years enough
to anticipate the anger
that accompanied return.
Once, the ear of a stuffed
rabbit caught in the liminal space
between his hiding place
and my arena. The light came
through the consequent crack,
and he looked.
Too young for a bike, but
he ran to me, in front of me,
last act before leaving.
The rabbit hung half-out
the cabinet, bead eyes gleaming
for both of us.

Courting Elektra

A friend, laughing, shows me
a think piece: "How to Date a Girl
With Daddy Issues"
Did you write this, she asks, with
ink or your bitter blood?
I tell her a father can leave
with good reason;
for example,
fighting his country's war.
A father can leave
expectations:
cartoon pianos
hanging over his children,
receptacles of dirt.
A father can leave
his body, which will grow two
feet and throw the dog out the window,
or break the toaster with the mother's face.
A father can leave
marks: handprints, drywall holes,
bruises that burst before sinking beneath
the skin, lurking,
subtle and sure hippopotamuses.
A father can leave
improvised explosive devices
tucked in his children's ears—
container: pressure cooker vocal chords—power
source: irregular brain waves—switch:
scream—detonator:bone—explosive:
smokeless propulsion
of shrapnel skin and last shred of please no dent,
the hysteric of a war
in the desert
a father can leave.

House Ghazal

In a tree-ringed clearing on Eleanor Drive
a half-poured concrete foundation houses

wooden beams, mostly upright. The rains of
last July birthed rot, hollowed out bird houses.

Blurred blueprints litter the ground, floor-to-ceiling
windows, cathedral-high ceilings, open-concept house.

Weeds will tangle and kudzu will strangle, au naturale
décor for the once glorious, now glorified tree house.

This empty frame will continue to stand—concrete
refuses to decompose, only briefly, lovingly, houses

sacrificial bacteria. Metabolizing to keep the concrete
complete before becoming limestone bone-houses.

Insistent Objects

Once a house was inside me,
once I carried love in my limbs.

My flesh fell but returned to me,
reattached at industrial angles.
I absorbed nails and chipped
robin's egg blue paint,
I stood straight
with support joists piercing my core.
When the children came, I understood.
I echoed laughter and insulated
secrets, held BB guns
and naked Barbies,
later stored Playboy magazines
and diaries: treasures
in their own right,
and I was a temple again.
Now sunbeams swing-step with dust
motes inside my walls
and I miss the reverberations
of footsteps and star-spun singing.

I wait through this ruin for the next
generation.

References

- Baer, William. *Writing Metrical Poetry*. Evansville, Indiana: Measure Press, 2015. Print.
- “A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry.” *Academy of American Poets*, 21 Feb. 2014,
www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-confessional-poetry. Accessed May 4,
2018.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Mabel Loomis Todd. New
York: Dover Publications, 2003. Print.
- Dickinson, Emily. “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun.” *Poetry Foundation*,
www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52737/my-life-had-stood-a-loaded-gun-764.
Accessed May 4, 2018.
- Drury, John. *Creating Poetry*. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1991. Print.
- “Free verse.” *Poetry Foundation*, [www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/free-
verse](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/free-verse). Accessed May 4, 2018.
- “John Donne.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne.
Accessed May 4, 2018.
- Larkin, Philip. *High Windows*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974. Print.
- McLarney, Rose. *The Always Broken Plates of Mountains*. New York: Four Way Books,
2012. Print.
- “Poetry communities & movements.” *WebExhibits*,
www.webexhibits.org/poetry/home_movements.html. Accessed May 4, 2018.