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The University of Southern Mississippi

Tectonic

by

Rebecca Holifield

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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Abstract

Tectonic is a collection of original poems accompanied by a critical preface.

Keywords: poem, poetry, collection, gender, womanhood, identity

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Preface

I have always felt something like a didactic impulse—or possibly whatever the complementary impulse would be—and I used to keep whole notebooks full of aphorisms I had collected from my interactions with others. If one of my parents, a friend, one of my siblings, an actor on television, or a stranger at the gas station said something even mildly pithy, it went into the notebook. If I thought something clever and no one was around to tell it to, it went into the notebook. Mostly, this practice left me with page after page of contradictory, proverbial nonsense—things like: “Sometimes you have to run before you can walk,” “There’s always a bigger fish,” “Don’t ever give a man your money,” “Hope is something you give yourself,” “They fear the waves of your ocean,” and my personal favorite, “Everything in the universe is either a duck, or it’s not a duck.” The main thing I gleaned from this search was that everyone has an opinion on truth, on the right way to live and the right way to think. Many of these notebook aphorisms would later make their way into poems, handled with all the absurdity and ambivalence they deserved, but at that time I had no patience for ambivalence. I wanted the true truth. I wanted to know what was going on way down in the foundations.

In my quest for this elusive concept of truth, I spent some time as a Psychology major, a Sociology minor, and a Philosophy auditor. Plato, Kant, Marx, and Freud had lots of impressive ideas, and sometimes I even understood them, but it was always poetry that seemed to answer the questions I did not even know I was asking. Heraclitus told me everything was on fire, and I was confused; but Robert Frost told me that fire was the world-ending desire, and I felt like I had always known it. I think it was around the time that I gave up my need *to know for sure* and started believing that everything was probably a little bit true, that I started writing poetry in earnest.

Unbeknownst to me, Heraclitus and Frost's ideas about fire would eventually mate and reproduce into one of the driving concepts behind my poems: Everything is hungry. Everything *wants something*. In "Connor Thinks We Should Kiss and Find Out What There is to Find Out About Us," as well as in many of my poems, I try to illustrate this hunger:

no one loves trees
as much
as a flame
loves trees.

While Heraclitus meant that fire was the force of change and fluctuation in all things, and Robert Frost probably meant that it was passionate, romantic, and destructive, I mean that fire is fire, and fire wants the trees—just look how hungry it is for them. *Just looking* is what I really learned from and about poetry. I do not know any more great truths about the world than I did before I started writing poetry, but I have learned that the joy and the wonder in poetry (and in life) comes from the looking, from the listening.

It was during research for a certain poem, which I do not think I ever ended up writing, that I began reading about alchemy and stumbled upon Paracelsus. You will see a quotation from Paracelsus at the beginning of each section in this collection, but by far my favorite dictum from him is one that did not make it into the body of this collection: "No man becomes a master at home, nor finds his teacher behind the stove. For knowledge is not all locked up, but is distributed throughout the whole world. It must be sought for and captured wherever it is." I was already well into the writing of my thesis when I read this, but it illustrates well what I try to say through my poetry: Everything in the world is a lesson.

Everyone I have ever met has taught me something, whether they were trying to teach me or not, and that is why so many of my poems contain moments wherein someone “said/says, told/tells, taught/teaches” something. There are several examples of this in “Female (n.),” such as when “my 5th grade teacher said / no, honey, *king* is for boys / it’s *queen* for girls” or “like the explorer said / now he’s discovered a land / already occupied by millions.” In the first instance, a teacher’s desire to teach me about gender roles leads to my dissatisfaction with gendered words—a queen is often only the ultimate power in the land if there is no king, and at age 10 only “king” would do for me. In the second instance, I use Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World as a comparison to the way in which people have “discovered” me with the words and labels I have been defined by over the course of my life.

Gender and dissatisfaction with gender roles are significant topics in my poems. The focus on gender is especially prevalent in the first two sections of this collection, *The Wolves and Trees* and *The Petals and Teeth*. In a few poems, such as “Delilah” and “Female (n.),” I focus mainly on the learning of gender. I was inspired to write with this focus after reading Tiana Clarke’s *I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*. In two poems, “First Tree, at Church Camp” and “First Blood” she writes about “the blood” as it relates to women’s experiences with sex and menstrual cycles. The first lines of “Delilah,” “My mother explained / about the blood,” come almost directly from Tiana Clarke’s “I would soon be all woman. / I would soon know about the blood” (74). In “First Blood” Clarke shows a mother’s glee upon realizing that she has scared her daughter into being afraid to have sex:

I remember yelling

I will never have sex

I will never have sex

& she was so pleased
by my screams. (75)

Since the mother/daughter dynamic influences the learning of gender and I am interested in describing conflict with gender roles, Clarke's turbulent relationship with her mother helps me to formulate my own speaker:

Twelve years old and there was
a red stain on my lime green
shorts, and my mother
told me I wasn't
the hero anymore.

Periods mark the beginning of "womanhood," and therefore the beginning of the enforcement of 'womanhood.' Even if women are heroic, we call them *heroines*, not *heroes*, and for my purposes "heroine" can be taken a lesser version of "hero," just as "queen" can be taken as a lesser version of "king."

Attributing the enforcement of this distinction to the mother rather than to a father/male figure felt as important to me as the distinction itself. One of my peers in poetry workshop once remarked that what she got from reading my poems is that "men are shit," which is a generalization on par with women not being heroes. It has been a vital realization for me that men are just as shaped and controlled by the patriarchy as women are, and the thing to remember is that we are all people first and all struggling to figure out what maleness or femaleness means. Because so much of our early life experience is tied up in learning this and being taught how to act accordingly, the highly gender-focused poems in my thesis are placed towards the beginning of the collection. I wanted the subject to be one that we would get past. In "Lycanthropy in the

Drawing Room,” “Why Eve Ate It and You Would Have Too,” and various other poems, I try to introduce the idea of gender as something that does *not* define us, at the same time as I focus on the ways that it tries to:

Sigmund asks me if, as a woman,
I think of myself as an absence
to be filled. I’ll tell you all:
I think of myself as a mouth
decorated by a head and a body.
I’m a devouring. I think of myself
as a wolf in a woman’s skin.

This is a moment wherein I look back on my experiences as a psychology major and attempt to explain why psychology and its related disciplines were unsatisfactory at explaining what I felt the world was really like. This poem is about being a woman and not being A Woman. “An absence to be filled” is passive, but “a mouth,” “a devouring,” is active—it is an absence that fills itself. The reason Eve ate the forbidden fruit is the same reason anyone would have: “You want what we all want / to be the one getting what / you want.” When I write about being a woman, I am writing about being a person through the lens of womanhood.

Another poet whose comments on womanhood have had an impact on my writing is Angela Ball. In “Springtime,” Dr. Ball intersperses the experiences of a particular woman with information on breathable gases and deep-sea diving:

The prisoner wanted to be the agile woman she heard of
who jumped from a window and fled across the roofs of
Madrid, leaving the WOULD-BE rapist lost

LISTEN: *the diver is increasingly impaired. Although divers can learn to cope with the effects, it is not possible to develop a tolerance. While narcosis affects all divers, predicting the depth at which narcosis will affect a diver is difficult.* (46)

In “Springtime,” the inclusion of both the experience of a singular woman and scientific research on a natural phenomenon, which may seem unrelated, has the benefit of tying the individual into a broader scope of experience as well as adding a more complex stylistic element. This technique had a direct influence on several of my poems. In “After *Daybreak*,” I use this same method of breaking up my own words with outside research:

My cousin was eaten
by a rosebush, came out the other side
now wakes up every morning

and has to remind herself that she is not
an ostrich. *The Ostrich is farmed around the world,*
particularly for its decorative feathers and also for its / meat.

By doing this, I attempt to accomplish one of the things that Dr. Ball accomplishes in her poem. My goal is to transform what happens to a certain woman into a broader concern. My cousin “has to remind herself that she is not / an ostrich,” but she is not the only person to experience what she has experienced: “*The Ostrich is farmed around the world.*” The world is deep, and narcosis affects all divers.

By the far the most important thing I have learned about writing poetry is that the self will only get you so far. The focus of lyric poetry is almost always the “I” and it took me a while to realize that the “I” was not always *me*, just as the woman is not always a woman. It was the combined effort of many teachers—Gregory Orr, Walt Whitman, Angela Ball, and Adam Clay, to name a few—that taught me to step outside of myself for a while when I sit down to write a poem. In *A Primer for Poets and Readers of Poetry*, Orr talks about “transcending the self to connect with others” (59). No one wants to read a poem they cannot relate to at all, so what could possibly make someone want to read a poem about *me*? The answer is not simply that many people have experienced what I have experienced. Although that very often is the case, it cannot be relied upon. Sometimes the answer is in the empathy. It is in the ability to *imagine* something that we have not experienced and still appreciate it as if we had. Empathy is what makes a good reader of poetry, and it is what makes a good poet. Walt Whitman wrote, “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (“Song of Myself,” section 33). All this is to say that I had to learn to become a lot of different things while working on this collection. In “My Mother is Teaching Me to Perform Photosynthesis So I Don’t Have to Eat,” I attempt to imagine the dynamics of an unhealthy relationship:

My best friend was
bulimic for three months. Yes, she hated
what was outside, but mostly I think wanted
to know that what was inside wasn’t as bad.

Plus, her boyfriend likes when he can count her
ribs and name each of the notches in her spine.

*Truly, this is a nightmare life, when we get
congratulated for lack of desire.*

I do not know why some people develop bulimia. I do not know why some boys prefer skinny girls. But in this poem, I try to know, and for the purposes of this poem, I do know. By imagining this situation I create it, and by creating it I become a part of it. I am the girl who wants to be thin, and I am the boy who wants a thin girl. The desires themselves are secondary. The point is always that we all *want something*. If you are lucky you can perform photosynthesis and feed yourself.

With the necessity of connecting with others in mind, I was forced to reevaluate many of the I-centric poems I had written in my first few semesters of poetry workshops. “Self Portrait With a Bag on My Head” was the result. While this poem, like most poems written in the throes of teenage angst, was originally about me and how different I feel from other people, it became that and the opposite: “This is me / disassociating. Want to / want to touch you.” This poem, as evinced by the title, is about trying to describe myself while not being able to see myself clearly. This section of the poem is about wanting to “disassociate” either from myself or from other people, and “want[ing] to touch” or at least “want[ing] to / want to touch” someone else—the point here being that one of the biggest things all people have in common is their imagined individuality or their struggle to establish their individuality while still connecting with others. This, I now realize, is true about people and about poetry.

Realizing that there is no absolute truth was difficult and necessary for me, and realizing that sometimes two opposing concepts can be true at the same time went along with that. Emily Dickinson has an excellent poem about this:

I felt a cleaving in my mind

As if my brain had split,
I tried to match it, seam by seam,
But could not make them fit. (35)

To some extent, things never do “fit.” The dichotomies of male v. female, love v. hate, and connection v. individuality are not sufficient to encapsulate what it really feels like to exist in either way; which is good, because if they were there would be no need to write poetry.

Phillip K. Dick famously said, “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” (4). When I first read this, I thought it sounded very smart, but that it only really worked for rocks and hills and solid things and did not answer the question of mental, human reality, which is something that shifts and changes daily. In “The Great Blue Heron of Dunbar Road,” Ada Limón asks, “What kind of woman am I? What kind of man?” but she never answers herself (90). Instead, she writes:

That’s the real truth. What we told each other
to help us through the day. The great blue heron
was there, even when the pond dried up,
or froze over; it was there because it had to be. (91)

Here, Limón refuses to limit herself by choosing one identity over the other. She chooses the reality that she invents for herself—the permanence of the imagined blue heron over the randomness of nature’s circumstance. Reality is that which you never can stop believing in, even when it goes away. In two poems, “Fear Tastes Better Than Pain” and “After Ben Said, ‘All Your Poems Are So Morbid,’” I attempt to address the dichotomy of reality v. imagination as Limon and Dick report it in their opposing ways. In “Fear Tastes Better Than Pain,” I look at the world with Dick’s rationality:

Older eyes believe
magic still exists

because of much inexplicableness in the ordering
of parades: *There's a leprechaun*
pissing over the edge

of a rainbow, and frogs turn into ogres when you
kiss them. But if I can't hold it in my hands
I can't hold it in my head:

like garlic salt makes mashed-up cows taste
like garlic, magic flavors
dead sentences.

Before I wrote this poem, I did not know whether or not I agreed with Dick's idea of a definite reality—a reality that did not require anyone's belief. I thought it sounded nice, and when I wrote this poem detailing what I thought was Dick's point—that the reality which did not go away when you stopped believing in it was the reality of physical, touchable things—I realized that this was not the only way in which Dick's saying could be interpreted. I realized that the “magic” of fantasy—which is something that most people do not really believe in anymore—is nevertheless still a part of the fabric of our reality. It is something we still think about, sometimes wish for, and often write about. Wanting to explore this idea further, the next poem I wrote was

“After Ben Said, ‘All Your Poem Are So Morbid.’” In that poem, I look at the world through the more subtle lens of imagination:

*outer space is blue,
it has to be . . .*

(That blue we’re seeing goes on forever, and it’s never nighttime
in space. Beyond what we can see
there’s just more of what we can see, but *forever*.)

In this poem, my speaker and the other characters, who are children, look up at the sky in daytime and decide that outer space must be blue because the blue of the sky seems so large and permanent. They believe that the dark starriness of the nighttime sky must be the temporary condition, and that outer space actually holds the permanent blueness of a clear day’s sky. In the same way that Ada Limón’s great blue heron “had to be” in the pond every morning because it would give her speaker hope, outer space “has to be” blue because my speaker wants the day to be more permanent than the night. Magic has to exist because we want it to exist, even if we do not believe in it. In this way, both Dick and Limón are right about reality. It nearly requires a cleaving of the mind to accept, but poetry has allowed me to believe that everything and its opposite can be true.

Dr. Ball once told me that the only answer when someone asks, “How long did it take you to write this poem?” is to give them your current age. Even if you are not a poet, you have been finding and creating yourself your entire life. You have been painting that landscape, sketching that building, sweeping that eyeliner across your lid. Identity, like reality, is a concept in constant flux. For me, poetry has become a way of investigating and inhabiting my identity as

well as my reality. Everything, including the self, looks frightfully different when you spend time thinking about how you would describe it in a poem, but this is a good thing.

In *City of Bones*, one of Cassandra Clare's werewolf characters says that being an artist means "to see the beauty and the horror in ordinary things" (24). I never thought this applied to me, but driving to school one day, I found myself wondering, "Why does the kudzu grow up the bridge legs? Does it love the bridge? Does it want to strangle it?" Obviously, science has its answers to any question about plant behavior, and they are all about sunlight and survival. But it seems dull, and a little unfair, to take the bridge out of the story altogether. In "Thoughts on My Father and Roadkill," I give my own answer: "The green things / love roads / for their taste." With this explanation of plant behavior, I try to give kudzu the simplest motivation possible, which is both simpler and more complex than the way science has of explaining the same phenomenon. As Shakespeare puts it:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends...
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poets pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5:1)

Gregory Orr cites this same moment in Shakespeare to demonstrate poetry's ability to lend order to disorder at the same time as it describes the disorder (37). To quote Phillip K. Dick again, "reality really is a mess, and yet it's exciting. The basic thing is, how frightened are you of chaos? And how happy are you with order?" (9). I often find myself delighted by chaos, and

probably that is why I write so many poems about fire and hunger and the kind of love that no one has daydreams about. The important thing about poetry, I have found, is not truth or beauty or finding out the precise definition of truth or beauty. The important thing is to keep looking, because the world is huge and hideous and wonderful. In the end, I think Paracelsus is right and Paracelsus is wrong. Knowledge *is* “distributed throughout the whole world,” and you should gobble up lessons like a plant hunting sunlight; but frankly, if you cannot find your teacher behind the stove, I doubt you will have much luck finding one anywhere else. The roaches have taught me as much as the stars, but that is the advantage of being a poet, and probably not a good philosophy for cosmologists.

The Wolves and Trees

“Those who were brought up in soft clothes and by women folk have little in common with we who were raised among the pine trees.”

-Paracelsus

Tectonic

My mother taught me how to braid
in French, she braided
 the stripes of a suit
into my hair

with her scarred hands:
when she was sixteen she carved
 a boy's initials on the back of her
knuckles in pen.

The silver scars still spark in some lightings,
used to turn my father's face
 strange colors—he shook my teeth loose
paying a toll for the tooth fairy—that's why

I say, “my father was an earthquake”
my mother was the earth, and I'm a
 plate, rattling
in the cabinet.

Female (n.)

a female person, animal, or plant.

king: that's a word

a word like *boy*

I said I died

and made myself king and

my 5th grade teacher said

no, honey, *king* is for boys

it's *queen* for girls

but *king*: that's a word like *girl*

quiet: that's a word

like any other word

people use like they've discovered you

like the explorer said

now he's discovered a land

already occupied by millions

quiet: that's a word like *violence*

mother: that's a word

a word like *quiet*

my brother, at the bar, said quietly

that's a mother he'd like to fuck

well *mother*: that's a word like *fuck*

violence: that's a word like *birth*

when you're born they start

making you with words *fill in the*

blank: length, weight, name name *name*

violence: that's the word

Delilah

My mother explained
 about the blood
but she didn't explain about
desire, which did and always
accompanies the blood. Ask
What comes creeping
out of my bones
 when I'm in my bed
alone? Hunger you've
never met, but you know
like you know what you want
 with the force of a need.
Or you only know you need
something no one told you
how to get.
I never got over the grasping
reflex. My mother tells me I must be
a Delilah who thinks she's
a Samson. The femme fatale
 who thinks she's the hero.
I'm the one holding
the scissors. *Have you heard the one*
about the barbarian who thought
he was a barber? We all become
 the last thing we ever
wanted to be. Probably
because no one fears a thing
that isn't in them. Twelve years
old and I was the one
 holding the scissors.

Snip, snip and there were blond
ringlets on the floor.

Twelve years old and there was
a red stain on my lime green
shorts, and my mother
told me I wasn't
the hero anymore.

Silver Bullets

Skin cell girl living on a knife blade says her stomach has not contained butterflies in quite some time; it's full of degenerate caterpillars and moths who hate the light. Paws on my hips, she licked my chin, she told me *No one knows what I am and that includes me*. Wolf girl barking up the wrong tree. Call her misplaced oak chaser, lost eucalyptus sniffer. *You don't have the bullets for this war*. There's a cow in distress somewhere in the neighborhood. If you listen you can hear its gentle dissent, its baleful lowing. I feel like the cow sounds: Spirit Calling Down a Thunder Cloud. *I thought I'd be queen of something by now*. I think we all did. If you listen, you can hear the wolf's howl: a lonesome looking for her pack, or a hunt. She routs the cow around the corner of the barn in my mind's eye, claws lightning from the dirt. We all know something we can't explain, like the red moon glaring at me from a window in my dreams. Maybe the lesson is that I'll be the wolf.

Connor Thinks We Should Kiss and Find Out What There is to Find Out About Us

The problem is our willow
is not weeping. We have these giggling sycamores,
these lame maples.

I am trying to explain to my therapist why I believe
love is the one thing

that is best when
unromantic. The problem is the wind in California

bends the sky so the heat sways, plummets,
smacks

the ground,
disdains the grass that the clouds
gave no water. Outside San Francisco

my stepdad pulls his car over
to put out a burgeoning wildfire
at the edge of the road.

Says no one loves trees
as much
as a flame
loves trees. Look how it swallows
the green and keeps going,
aggressively
unsatisfied.

Violent Women

Hula dancers have been
in a shoebox. My sister's lips
in a thimble. I've been
poured through a keyhole
like molasses and bitter

herbs. I have never
been in a closet. What
closet? This is aggressive

magic. Me telling you I am
not a chameleon. Rapunzel is not
a woman. She's not an aircraft

or seafaring vessel. She's a
battle robot; automaton with
built-in cup holders and Bluetooth

capabilities. I mean this illiterately.
Painfully, I mean this blue, green,
and pink. I'm hanging streamers
on your grave. Do you like
them? They want to kill you.

Phonics

Love is a vicious word. It seems to me
always hungry. I thought I was talking
because my lips were moving
but everyone is cupping their hands
to their ears saying *Say it again*. I did.
I have been saying the same thing
since I learned how to speak: *I* before *E-*
veryone except after *C* or when sounds like
A as in *Neighbor* and *Weigh your options*
carefully but never make a decision.
This is where the quicksand and the
eardrums come in. You have to be
louder all the time or no one listens.
I never learned how to spell *Receive*
but the hands, the lobes,
and the words are starving
to be said.

Asylum

Here is a list of animals I have
had nightmares about: alligator,
hippopotamus, velociraptor, snake,
tyrannosaurus, werewolf, and woman

at the grocery store who was not
my grandmother. I once dreamt I grew
wings that didn't flap. I once read
my parents' marriage counseling
journals. My dad wrote *Kill
the wolves*. He wrote *Fight*

the thing with teeth in your life.
My mother wrote *I think he wants me
dead*. I am pantomiming depth
while panning for gold
in puddles. Really

the problem is that there are lizards
living in my hair. *No, really*
the problem is that I have a crush
on my therapist. She's a pine tree

tall and she never writes anything
on her clipboard. Told me to say
my worries because they will probably
sound silly. I said I am afraid that

when I wake in the morning

there will be sharks in the water
all around my bed. I am afraid of
outgrowing my pillow.

Lycanthropy in the Drawing Room

Sigmund asks me if, as a woman,
I think of myself as an absence
to be filled. I'll tell you all:
I think of myself as a mouth
decorated by a head and a body.
I'm a devouring. I think of myself
as a wolf in a woman's skin.
Say, *What big teeth you have!*
I think of myself as something old
and ravenous. This is something
true for all of us. Your whole life
you've just been learning how to act
like a person. Your stomach remembers
its animal days, still snarls,
but now you'll smile and beg
pardon for it. *Yes, I have eaten
your grandmother.* Tell me
I am a picnic basket prodigy,
born for the sweet bland nothings:
 little pink lighter, half-buried
 in the rocks of the flowerbed,
 dog throwing up
 lollipops,
 wasp nests falling from the
 porch ceiling;
 the sound of the AC unit chugging
 echoes in the trees;
 where do butterflies go
 in the winter?
I'm feeling

this beast in my body
never wants out.
Scratches on my knees
when I wake up in my head.
I have been running
through the woods in my sleep.

The Petals and Teeth

“Great are the virtues of Nature. Who is so thirsty as to work out all her virtues?”

-Paracelsus

Why Eve Ate It and You Would Have Too

You want to tell a mountain to jump
and watch it tumble
cartwheels into the ocean

You want to reach up and pull down
a sprig of lightning
to pick your teeth with

You want the wind in your pocket

You want to swallow a hurricane
and regurgitate a tsunami
to drop on the kids who bullied you in grade school

You want to bite a boulder
and come out with a mouthful of
diamonds you want the trees to bend down
put a gold crown on your head

You want to kill your sadness
toss it headfirst into a volcano

You want to bite the head off a snake
pop the rubies out of its eyes
pop them in your mouth

candy spit into the dirt
to grow a tree
made of wood
covered in gilt

a tree

made of guilt

covered in wood

planks We're all covered in

dirt and microscopic pathogenic protozoans

You want what we all want

to be the one getting what

you want for once but it's no good
We're all in the dirt
wishing we were in the stars or
wishing we *were* stars or wishing we were
God or anything
that could get off of this earth
or change it

My Mother is Teaching Me to Perform Photosynthesis So I Don't Have to Eat

I know you're hungry for something
your stomach doesn't want. I wonder
if I'm a pathogen or a symptom of that
feeling, or if I'm out of the question

altogether: a parenthetical statement, separated
from the sentence by inverse parallels—a smile
and a smile turned inside-out. You asked me,
If rain falls on the bottom of the earth,

aren't the droplets falling upward? Your heart
has a stomach. Mine doesn't. That's what
I'm trying to say. The woman at the holistic
health food store told me that every

investigation into the human condition boils
down, like tea leaves, to this question of
what's inside? and when it gets out if gets out
and how. This fascination with intestines, souls,

with poetry and paint. My best friend was
bulimic for three months. Yes, she hated
what was outside, but mostly I think wanted
to know that what was inside wasn't as bad.

Plus, her boyfriend likes when he can count her
ribs and name each of the notches in her spine.
*Truly, this is a nightmare life, when we get
congratulated for lack of desire.*

Biblical Animals Ad Absurdum

Frogs know all your secrets

They don't want to kiss you

God is on the intercom saying

send in the frogs

and the Egyptians start

quaking in their wellies

My sister told me if a toad pees in your hand

you will sprout warts

and transform into a witch

King James said *thou shalt not suffer*

a witch to live

but he loved

the sheep

David was a shepherd

David said the Lord was

his shepherd

If you feel like a shepherd you might be

a bellwether The bellwether

is the sheep who

leads the sheep

A leviathan is a whale that is

more than a whale

gobbled Jonah

and confounded Ahab

Jezebel applied makeup

and dressed in finery

before she was thrown over her balcony

and eaten by dogs

Jezebel was the wife of Ahab

David slew Bathsheba's husband

and the lion that Daniel
cuddled with
Isaiah's lion ate straw like an ox
Balaam's donkey was an ass
but Balaam was worse
All donkeys speak with the voice of angels
Camels cannot get to heaven
All pigs are possessed by the devil
Noah found doves more trustworthy than ravens
while Elijah ate from the beak of a raven
like a baby bird

Honeysuckle

Springtime smells more yellow
than green. The honeysuckles and dandelions
permeate, or it's the love bugs
shitting on everything. The devil
is leaning one hand on the atmosphere
above your head, and the plebeians
are religiously cleaning
the tops of their bookshelves.

Like my mother said, *The walls of Jericho
fell down because no one was
washing the baseboards.*

Like my father walked around, blowing
a trumpet he didn't want anyone to know about
saying, *I built this house, I built it.*

Well, break the top off a flower, put the pistil
in your mouth, suck it, it's sweet, you'll see.

Bone China

My grandmother tells us the rule
about roses, how they have to be trimmed
back before February 14
every year or they won't grow right.

Still you never do this. I suspect
 you like to watch
 your flowers die.

Ankle-deep in mulch, I say
Tell me about your first wedding again,
about your sweetheart neckline & the oceans
under your eyelids & what you learned
about marriage:

 how it hurts
 to be the one star-gazing
while your lover makes phone calls.
I don't say that I can never quite relate
to the "you" in these stories, or how often
I feel more like another of your cold
gods than your daughter,

 so you tell me again about
 your telescope
pointed up at the Greeks & the house
I was born in with the old roof,
how it leaked, how every other stair
creaked like your joints do now,
but looking out the kitchen window

 you imagined the yard
 a different garden every month
& learned to worship the ceramic
floral machine-painted plates.

Self Portrait with a Bag on My Head

Envious of delicacy
and grace
because I've got neither.
I'm basically
a sledgehammer
with breasts;
head is filled with
gravel so it rattles
when I walk.
Call it Another Girl
Crying on the Staircase.
That's been me
but I've figured out
by now how
to keep the saline
out of my eyes.
I tell him he's my
luck, and he sings
hearts, stars,
and horseshoes,
clovers and blue
moons. This is me
disassociating. Want to
want to touch you
but the hourglass
is in my eyes.

After *Daybreak*

Girl on the TV said *Sex*
is all about traction. Having something to push
and something to push against. A cockroach's heart

has thirteen chambers. (A human's only
has four.) The world in sign language
is just a circle.

Nothing is complicated; everything is
uncomplicated. That's a chiasmus. Antithetic
parallelism. Not the same thing as

saying the same thing
twice. Woman on the TV said *Sunflowers*
are polymorphous: beautiful and able to absorb

soil radiation. My cousin was eaten
by a rosebush, came out the other side
now wakes up every morning

and has to remind herself that she is not
an ostrich. *The Ostrich is farmed around the world,*
particularly for its decorative feathers and also for its

meat. When threatened, ostriches run
although their powerful, long legs can be formidable
weapons, capable of killing a human or potential lion

with a forward kick.

After Tiana Clark

Some people want to dig you up,
put you in a flower pot.

Your gynecologist wants you
in the chair with your legs
spread. Some people want you
under their fingernails or
on the prow of their ship.
So does your boyfriend but that's
different.

There are good and bad

ways to be wanted.
How did your father want you?

How did he want you?

How did—*he*

didn't.

I used to pretend. Say it:

My father touched me.

No. I wish he

would have. I used to wish
he would look at me the way he looked
at my friends in their swim suits.

Wish he would open

his mouth, swallow me whole like Kronos
swallowed his children. Quicker than this
type of dying, closer than this
type of love.

How often
do you feel forgiven?

The Big Crunch Hypothesis

The universe is circles within circles

poised like a bullseye

it's aiming straight for you

The universe with its spiraling light show

its Pink Floyd laser show

The universe with its expanding latex

water balloon mouth

The universe moving outward at a speed

faster than the universe

The universe a golfer on the backswing

club soaring outward

before it comes firing in

The universe a pregnant horse

running at about 44.7 miles

per second per megaparsec

The universe a pregnant horse

giving birth to its own demise

The universe with its necklaces

of silicates and hydrogen atoms

The universe with its dark matter neck

and biodegradable costume jewelry

its anklets of combustible planets

The universe with its ecstatic death

rushing lemming-style over a metaphysical cliff

The universe an underpaid executioner

The universe with its unionizing supernovas

and striking black holes

The universe killing itself for you

The Dragons and Bees

“Alchemy is like unto death, which separates the eternal from the mortal, so that it should properly be known as the death of all things.”

-Paracelsus

This Poem Is Not About Sex

I spent the night in his dorm room
and woke up sweat-stuck
to the plastic mattress with no sheets.

*How did your head get stuck to the ceiling
this time?*

It's like some
rhapsody, every time, it's like some
emergency.

I say, *I want to get you
out of your clothes; I want to get you
out of your skin.*

Then wake up sweat-stuck to the plastic mattress
and he's trapped in his castle again.

It's like some
alchemy, every time, it's like some
villainy.

I say, *you be the princess, this time,
I'll be the dragon—
burn down the kingdom to set you free.*

But he's trapped in his castle, on fire,
and I'm pulling his rib cage apart to get in.

It's like some

quandary, every time, it's like some
galaxy.

I say, *let's be astronauts on the verge of
discovery, eat stars for breakfast,
loosen our bones with anti-gravity.*

I pull his rib cage apart and nestle
myself in his empty chest.

After Bo Bartlett's Burning Broom

This is about:blank This is about:wind
I said when I can I like to work
the word:flame into every
poem This is about Manifest+Destiny

which my junior high PE teacher explained
means Obvious+Future which fits
like an upturned broom fits
in the place of a flat

character Because my grandmother swept
with the same straw broom
for 20 years Now she buys a new plastic
broom at the dollar store

every spring while the old one hangs
on the wall of the spare room
with the shag carpet and the vintage
boardgames She said: Providence

has a shape like the wind
you can't see but you feel
when it hits you in the face
And if brooms could talk

they'd probably all say
burn me

On Finding a Dead Bee in my Bed

A metaphor is when a flower opens
petals-upside-down. Holding an umbrella
like trying to cross the Euphrates
in a soup can, I tell you: *The weather's
bad this side of the Milky Way.*

The bees have started
 packing their suitcases
 quadruple knotting their shoelaces
 stomping over shards of broken vases
 in their haste to escape this house.

*We're all going down
in the hurricane, this time.*

A metaphor is when your therapist
throws a clock out the window
or the scientists start grafting
wings on pigs. *Have you seen that movie
where the plants commit genocide?*

Or how did Venus fly traps get to earth
 it must be some interplanetary conspiracy
 the end of the known world
 or they meant Venus the love goddess
 which explains why it's carnivorous.

*Someone needs to grab that girl's arms
and pin them to her sides, say:*

Stop peeling the polka dots off your
dress, ladybug, the weather's fine.

After Holly Black's The Folk of the Air Series

There's no question: I am
unquestionably the villain.
I've pulled the wings off

fairies just to watch them walk
the earth like men. Sister says she
wants to make love

to monsters. I told her *that's easy*.
Walk out on the street and throw
a stone; you'll probably hit one.

She disagrees because his eyes lie since
his mouth can't, and his tail
curls around her thigh when they're

kissing on the couch. I stitched his lips
shut when I stole his crown. Sister
stitched a horse out of dandelion fluff.

Leftovers

The lizards in my yard are evolving. I saw one
crawling up the wall with a tortoise shell
on his back. I asked him where
he got it; he said *the secret is to never tell;*

the secret is to never crack.

Yes, because the branches are falling
out of the trees like the people did
10 thousand years ago. Who gets crushed

when the car tires roll over the road?
It's me and the rabbits and the possums
and the toads, armadillos and a bag of
kittens, beer cans and the Styrofoam container

of restaurant leftovers someone
tossed out the window. What I mean is
that Mama Earth doesn't care
if she's on fire. She's been burning

from within for a millennium; when
we're done she can just take our ashes
and carbon fibers—build
a better species. Cities slide

into the ocean; oceans dry up, crack
down the middle. Mama Roach says
Look at that horizon, kids. There used to be
these things called skyscrapers before the sky

scraped them off of the horizon.

What I mean is that the world is changing again. We'll finally get our extinction event:

Black tie optional and bring a friend.

Internalized Vulcanus

he always smells like Marlboro Blacks
when I press my nose to his neck
he makes promises about burning
down the woods for me

some midnight

I told him *my father did that*
after my brothers and I spent hours
raking the leaves into piles

daddy struck a match

said *breath smoke, kids*
breath smoke like the corpses
of those bright green growing

things breathed fire when they died

breath smoke like cannons
in the fireplace or a winter sky
breath smoke like women at the bar

taking shots of kerosene

I told him *my brothers*
and I have been eating
our father's ashes
since his empire burned

that midnight

Liberosis

Crack open my chest; my veins
all drip champagne, and I'm hanging
like a raindrop

from the rim of the sky.

My disease is wanting to make
myself into an airplane.

My little brother said
riding in a car with me is like
being on a roller coaster

without rails.

My disease is I always want
to go faster.

I'm a noodle on your
spaghetti plate, skidding a little
and curling over the side

to reach for the floor which I want
like the door frame hates
the door.

My disease is that
I want something I can't
explain, and

I'm imagining
different ways to become

a cure.

Fear Tastes Better Than Pain

I'd rather always walk than drink
the sidewalk soaked in rain.

When I was a giant

I tripped over rivers, now I wash away
in rivulets. Older eyes believe
magic still exists

because of much inexplicableness in the ordering
of parades: *There's a leprechaun
pissing over the edge*

*of a rainbow, and frogs turn into ogres when you
kiss them.* But if I can't hold it in my hands
I can't hold it in my head:

like garlic salt makes mashed-up cows taste
like garlic, magic flavors
dead sentences.

*Jack Frost will make you a snow cone
if you show him what's under your shirt.*

After Ben Said, "All Your Poems Are So Morbid"

What summer-warmed grass have you got growing in your head?

Where are the cloudless sulphur butterflies—flitting over the field
you forgot about until you smelled it
in your car with the window rolled down?

Remember how your sister ran through the clover
and a bee stung the bottom of her foot?

What about when you all lay in the field
looking for the ones with four leaves,
remember
how you all ducked down,
pressed your faces in the clover. Remember

you could smell the *greenness*,
but, no, you were face-up:
you could see all the blueness,
and *outer space is blue*,
it has to be.

*One time I had a dream about stabbing
our dad in the neck with a kitchen knife.*

(That blue we're seeing goes on forever, and it's never nighttime
in space. Beyond what we can see
there's just more of what we can see, but *forever.*)

You stayed frozen there until the car passed, then you
jumped up and started running.

The Fires and Wings

“Besides the stars which are established, there is yet another—Imagination—that begets a new star and a new heaven.”

-Paracelsus

The Hubble Inconstant

This isn't horseshoes or hand
grenades: Close doesn't count.

Where's it all going? How's it all

going to end? Standard candles and exploding
stars, ordinary matter: the stuff that rocks
and trees, frogs and human beings are made of.

The cosmic microwave. We are wired
for intuition, but this is often wildly
unsuccessful. *Most of the universe is made*

out of stuff that's completely different
than us. Edwin Hubble found
a Cepheid variable star in

the Andromeda nebula, revealing
that she is not a cloud
in our galaxy, but a separate

galaxy, a vast swirl of stars
at tremendous distance. Later
Hubble and Milton revealed light

from distant galaxies
to be red-shifted, meaning
moving-away-from-us. But not

flying through space away
from us. It's space itself that's

expanding like stretched taffy.

The orthodox view of cosmology
was that expansion was slowing
but it's actually

accelerating. The Hubble Constant is not
constant. And everyone disagrees about it.
No one's wrong. Something else is going on

in the universe. It's conceivable
that astronomers haven't factored in cosmic dust
or there could have been something called

Early Dark Energy that acted
in the first moments of the universe
then disappeared.

Thoughts on My Father and Turkey Vultures

The road-killed bodies
of raccoons, stomachs open,
squirrels with heads flattened, rabbits

rent in half by days of tire tracks
loom like mile markers:
You're 2 dead

*deer and an armadillo
from your destination.*

That's what I love

about the roads
that don't love anything.
The way they're all

connected, divided into
paved and unpaved, lined
and unlined. They can go anywhere

from anywhere they are.

The green things
love roads

for their taste. Kudzu grows up
the bridge legs.

Bushwhackers

bushwhack along crowded scenic
byways the woods always try

to swallow. The roads don't love

anything. When I was 10, my brother and I stood
at the end of our driveway, watched
our dog get run over by a Chevrolet and die

with her legs still kicking. That year
our school bus driver ran over a Labrador
with an incredible wet *thump*,

and his smile in the rearview mirror
reminded me of yours.

Pica

Nothing grows in your stomach.

That was a lie our parents told
to keep us from swallowing
watermelon seeds.

The reason I went around

eating marbles and leaves

and triple-A batteries

for eleven years—eating the core
of every apple and the pit of every peach.

The reason I gulped down

handfuls of sand at the beach,

ate a ladybug and a butterfly wing.

The reason I was never hungry

come dinnertime and liked to munch the ends
of extension cords—swallowed

pink and yellow beads. I wanted to grow

a necklace or a lightning bolt or a tree—

a butterfly or a game board or a beach.

Wanted to grow something

beautiful inside me.

The Dryads Don't Wake Anymore

When I was eleven
I fell in love
with a tree,
perched
on its branches,
pressed my mouth
to its bark.
My siblings
would tease me
about the scratches
I refused
to explain. Love is
kissing a tree
to exquisite
toothache.
I wanted
the trees
to kiss back.
They never.
Don't pity me,
trees. Don't
scorn. Sometimes
the leaves
tickled my cheeks.
This felt like
Something.

Serenade for a Grape

Last year I saw
a painting called *Desire*
for Grapes, and in that painting:
red and black splotched
nonsense in the shape of a face,
and purple circles held
in the face's stretched hand.
It is already there
in the name: grapes
come plural. A cluster
of grapes. This makes
most poems I have written
a waste. I could have just said:
I have a mouth
in my face. I am desiring all
and forever of grapes.

When it Gets Hard to Breathe

In the heat of the summer
you can hear the house gathering
its skirts and settling
into its foundations. Like we all do.
I often wish we didn't
have to cut the grass. Sure
it's nice to do the mowing, watch
the wild go flat and mulch
stand sentry in the yard in perfect
rows. But if you've ever had your
lawnmower stolen, you know
the beauty in watching the flat
go wild again: weedy purple,
white, and yellow flowers grow
in tufts—tall as your knees—
till the whole thing teems with
crickets, hoppers, dragons and
bees. My mother taught me not to
feel this way. She said, *Love is not
a feeling, love is a choice.*
For a while I nodded
my head, did one better: love
is a word. Yet today I'm thinking
over things I used to know,
letting my flat go wild, and I find
if love were a thing at all it'd be
a girl with asthma, loving the grass.

Something I Still Do

When I was nine, the ladybugs
infested our bathroom, one
mass of black and red,
 a crawling ceiling.

My family stopped
going in there. Built off
of the laundry room, it was
an old addition, uninsulated, ill-lit

and easily forgotten.

I used to pull a sleeping bag
 in there at night,
pillow under the window.

Sleep with the moon,
the tree-shadows
and sophisticated
insects for company.

In the End We All Get Named by the People Who Are Going to Love Us

A planet runs in time to my grandfather's
pace-maker. Powered by propane
and the machines going *beep, beep*

at Anderson Regional Medical Center.
It lives within the glass of my grandmother's
prosthetic eye. Her name is Caldonia

after the jump blues song, recorded in 1945
by Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five
or because she was born

on Schiehallion, the fairy hill
of the Caledonians. Because
when the crickets chirp at night

that's what it sounds like
to my grandfather: *Caldonia, Caldonia.*
I'll always love you baby 'cause Caldonia

is your name. Same as the noise of the machines
at Anderson Regional, because this planet
is a circle of numbers on the surface

of a pocket watch, going around, around
again. Let the Good Times Roll,
or just let the time roll over.

Nearly Savage

Me, planted seedless on the skeleton
of a southern grove of evergreens,
cut up to make room for the
many green Monopoly houses.
Several summers passed before
the spark-bugs shone through that dark.
Elsewhere down here, the sharp slopes
enclose an army man and army woman's
spare room-for-rent. The curve
of that nearly savage scene
holds shadows only dreamt of
by me. Me, knees-to-lumber on the floor
that echoes moonbeams, stars' glaze,
and flames. The lonesomeness and solace
from the loud empty ruckus of bugs
and planets that never sleep. Me,
born from me or from the dew soaked
earth, newly turned.

Notes

The title poem of this collection, “Tectonic,” was written after reading *Slow Lightning* by Eduardo Corral.

“Delilah” was heavily influenced by “On the Symbolism of the Lamb” by Rebecca Morgan Frank.

“Silver Bullets” was inspired by the first novel in the Crescent City series, *House of Earth and Blood*, by Sarah J. Maas.

“Violent Women” was written after reading “What Happens to Women” by Angela Ball.

“Lycanthropy in the Drawing Room” was inspired not only by my experience of studying Sigmund Freud, but also by the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the 2011 movie adaptation *Red Riding Hood* directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

The ending of “Why Eve Ate It and You Would Have Too” was derived from an Oscar Wilde quotation: “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking up at the stars,” which comes from his play, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

“Biblical Animals Ad Absurdum” indirectly cites several different moments in the Bible. The verses in which the actual story behind each instance can be found are as follows:

Exodus 8:2-6, God sends forth the plague of frogs in Egypt; Exodus 22:18 *KJV*, “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live;” 1 Samuel 17:34, David introduces himself as a shepherd and mentions killing a lion; Psalm 23:1, David calls the Lord his shepherd; Jonah 1:17, Jonah is swallowed by the whale; 2 Kings 9:30-37, Jezebel’s death is detailed (additional note: the exact wording of Jezebel’s death as found in this poem comes from the Biography.com article on Jezebel); 2 Samuel 11:14-17, David causes the death of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah; Daniel 6:16-23, Daniel sleeps unharmed in the lion’s den; Isaiah 65:25, Isaiah prophesies that “the lion will eat straw like and ox;” Numbers 22:21-23, Balaam’s donkey speaks because Balaam is being an ass; Matthew 19:24, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God;” Mark 11:13; a lot of pigs are possessed by demons; Genesis 8:6-9, Noah, on the Ark, sends out a raven which does not return and a dove which does; 1 Kings 17:6, Elijah is fed by ravens.

In “Self Portrait With a Bag on My Head,” the song “hearts, stars, and horseshoes, clovers and blue moons” comes from the theme song of Lucky Charms cereal, and the rest of the poem was inspired by the artwork of Frida Kahlo and the photography of Sebastian Schramm.

The italicized portion on ostriches in “After Daybreak” is paraphrased from the BeautyofBirds.com article, “Ostriches, Struthio camelus.”

“The Big Crunch Hypothesis” is titled after the real, though mostly disproven, hypothesis that the expansion of the universe will eventually slow, stop, and then reverse until the universe

collapses in on itself, possibly to be followed by another Big Bang. I first read about this on the Wikipedia page, “Big Crunch.”

In “On Finding a Dead Bee in My Bed,” the question, “Have you seen that movie where the plants commit genocide?” is a reference to the 2008 thriller/sci-fi film *The Happening*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan.

The title of “Internalized Vulcanus” comes from “Paracelsus and the Light of Nature” by Matthew Wood and is another of Paracelsus’s ideas about the nature of living things.

“Liberosis” owes much to “Self-Portrait With Tumbling and Lasso” by Eduardo Corral.

“The Hubble Inconstant” is a found poem that takes its lines from the 2019 *Washington Post* article, “Scientists are baffled: What’s up with the universe?” by Joel Achenbach.

The painting mentioned in “Serenade for a Grape” is a real painting, *Desire for Grapes* by Pawel Kleszczewski, and can be found on the Kids of Dada website.

“In the End We All Get Named by the People Who Are Going to Love Us” mentions two Louis Jordan songs, “Caldonia” and “Let the Good Times Roll,” which can both be found on YouTube.

“Nearly Savage” is a lipogram of “Almost Wilderness” by Claire Brenia.

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