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DIGITAL PASTORAL

by

Rebecca Holifield

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Angela Ball, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Digital Pastoral is a collection of original poems and a creative nonfiction essay, accompanied by a critical introduction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A thing is the sum of its parts, but it is also something more that we can never quite put our fingers on, which makes writing an acknowledgements page a little tricky. I would like to begin by acknowledging my thesis committee members. Angela Ball, thanks for always believing in my poems, for being equal parts genuine and genius, and for reminding me that poetry is fun every time that I forget. Adam Clay, thanks for the amazing archival-themed poetry workshop during one of the most challenging semesters of my life and for letting me cry in your office that one time. Leah Parker, thanks for being an awesome literature professor and for introducing me to different ways of thinking about the body. Among other professors I would like to thank are Craig Carey, for all the ways of reading and writing the Weird, and Joshua Bernstein, for the creative nonfiction workshop. And of course thank you to all the rest of my peers, professors, and friends at USM over the years. It has been an amazing experience working with all of you, both in the ways that I can name and the ones that I cannot.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Timothy Morris of Jones College, formerly Jones County Junior College, for being the first teacher to believe in my poetry and for continuing to support my writing long after I stopped being your student. I believe we all get buoyed by the power of other people's enthusiasm and faith sometimes, and I definitely would not have made it here without yours.

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INTRODUCTION

Scientists baffled by unprecedented heat wave in Antarctica. Elephants' 500 kilometer trek across China baffles scientists. The moon is rusting, and scientists are baffled. In addition to being the titles of the three sections in this collection, these are real news headlines, and they demonstrate how strange the world around us can become, especially when we are trying to make rational sense of it. We have all heard the old adage about true events being stranger than fiction; to put it in John Ashbery's words, "It is what we think of as literature that is clean, definite, solid and meaningful" (qtd. in Lehman 37). Real life, on the other hand, is messy, indefinite, and often absurd. Science is that entire branch of thought and research dedicated to making the world make logical sense. Writers of fiction are often out to do the same thing, and they are all a little baffled by the effort sometimes. One aim of my poetry, absorbed through the influence of various New York School poets, is to resist the urge to make the world make sense. Life is absurd, and I highlight absurdity in my poems.

One way in which I highlight absurdity is through patchwriting. As defined by Rebecca Moore Howard, *patchwriting* is a way of composing texts in which writers take words and phrases from different source and patch them together (233). In composition classes, we call this plagiarism, but in poetry, we call it an art. Rebecca Morgan Frank does something like this in her poem "On the Symbolism of the Lamb." First referencing Alan Ginsberg and Blake, Greek mythology and biblical lore, she patches together Joseph Beuys's performance art exhibit with imagined dialogue: "*I Like America and America Likes Me*, the artist says. My father / once held the knife, Isaac says" (ll. 16-17). A

mixture of cultural influences, Frank's poem forges an intersection between disconnected ideas and creates something new and wild.

The opening poem of this collection, "The Moon is Not Electric," began as a similar experiment in patchwriting. With lines taken from news headlines, television shows, overheard conversations, books, and memes, this poem is a study of the cultural moment in which it was written. By placing out-of-context passages from different sources in conversation with one another, each of them, which is already a little absurd on its own, becomes supercharged with absurdity. What emerges from this exercise is a few spare moments of my own voice, of me in conversation with the world around: "She said I use the names part of my brain to store body envy. The moon rose and she said anger is fear aimed outward. *Fear aimed inward is how children realize the moon is not electric*" (ll. 6-8, emphasis added). The italicized portion is one of those brief sections in which I respond to the found material with my own words. But the writing of it felt different than my typical writing does. Because I was so steeped in the words of others, in the cultural moment, it almost was not me at all who wrote this. It was me at my most absurd, me at my most connected to the absurd world we live in.

When I set out to write this introduction, I considered and discarded several thematic through-lines in my work, and one of them was the idea of connection. The idea was threefold: 1) that we all desire and search for connection, 2) that there are many different systems in place (namely bodies, media, and pastoral writing) intended to provide a sense of connection, and 3) that these systems all ultimately fail to connect us either because 3a) connection is impossible or because 3b) connection is so intrinsic to existence that it cannot be captured intentionally. This idea was ultimately too heavy to

contend with for long, but I include it here as an example of the absurd things that happen when we attempt to make the world make logical sense. It is a study in contrasts and contradiction. Scientists are baffled. I discarded this idea because it began to feel too much like a witch hunt, as if I were looking for a magical answer to life, the universe, poetry, and everything, instead of just deciding to “sort of let things be what they are” as Ashbery would have it (qtd. in Lehman 103). However, I still like the “systems” of bodies, media, and pastoral writing, and they still recur in my poems. It was when I began attempting to separate poems into sections according to those three thematic schema that I was forced to reject the rigidity of the plan. Many poems dealt with two or more of those inciting themes at a time, or none of them at all, and there was no logical way to order them. One poem, “Long Distance,” is a kind of digital pastoral, pondering the connection/disconnection between a couple separated by geography but linked by the internet, and the writing of it led me to realize a new pattern in my work.

“Digital pastoral,” if we can accept that there is such a thing, is a good designation for many of the poems in this collection. Each section of the collection interacts with its titular news headline in some way, and many of the poems deal with found material, either through ekphrasis or patchwriting, and most of this material comes from digital articles and archives. Poems such as “Unidentified Apple Picker” and “Void of Space” are ekphrastic, written after images found through digital archives. Others, such as “Witchcraft” and “Long Distance,” are more traditional found poems, which take most of their language from a single digitally-found, written source, with a little creative shuffling and a few personal additions to alter meaning. Some poems, such as “Requiem for a Tuesday” and “Ghost Phenomena,” explicitly mention digital media and interpose it

with ideas of connection, longing, and absence. And all of these poems initially took root in digital spaces—or through contemplation of digital affect. The internet and all its accompanying parts make up the new bustling, impersonal “city,” which traditional pastoral poetry longs to escape from into a time of nature, simplicity, and romantic connection. But the internet is also the new pastoral landscape, where we can locate art, beauty, and connection, if we only input the correct search parameters.

Consider “Unidentified Apple Picker,” inspired by a photograph in the archive of the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The poem begins with found text about the found image:

Black-and-white 3/4 length re-
print of Grover Cleveland Alexander (left)
and an unidentified man (right), apple-
picking. (ll. 1-4)

This text is impersonal, uncolorful, and distant, like looking through a screen at pictures of people who have nothing to do with you. But the poem ends with connection to self and memory, and a celebration of the sensory:

Yesterday

may forget your name, Mr. Picker, but
because of you I remember the whole round

feeling of apple in hand, the steady reach
up, the snapping pull down. The sluice

from the bite. The sun in our eyes. (ll. 12-17)

From the vague and impersonal, we make our own connections and imbue things with our own meaning. From the search engine comes the search, from the search comes the image, and from the image comes the personal connection we form with it. This poem is an example of what I mean by digital pastoral. If the internet is the city in which we get lost, it is also the pasture in which we can find ourselves again.

My initial conceptions of the digital in this collection did not have room for that duality. Friedrich Kittler, German media theorist, wrote: “Media always already yield ghost phenomena” (22). And in my first digitally inspired poems, I considered this idea as the bad thing it sounded like. I wrote “Requiem for a Tuesday” at the height of COVID-19 isolation. This poem records a simulacrum conversation between the speaker and their geographically distant loved-one:

My mother is in California and wants me
to describe the humidity in the southeast. “It has been raining here
since yesterday.” “Raining a lot?” “A consistent drizzle.”

You must drizzle consistently. (ll. 1-4)

Full of banality and small-talking, requests for repetition and invisible facial expressions, phone conversations are an awkward ghost of in-person interaction. Says Kittler:

“Wherever phones are ringing, a ghost resides in the receiver” (75). Later in the poem, I turn to the strange mixing of the digital and pastoral: “There is a big snail making progress / up the columns of the porch, the newspaper, the cathedral; / they have all gone digital” (ll. 16-18). Dissonant and discomfiting, this is what it felt like to be living

isolated by COVID from everything except yard and internet. And I end with traditional pastoral rescuing: “Small lizard, / small leaf, small leaf-hopping lizard, can I come with you / where you are going” (ll. 20-22).

Later, following the two semesters of online existence due to COVID-19, I wrote “Ghost Phenomena,” titled after Kittler. And what I initially did in this poem was attempt to demonstrate the terrible erasure of self and sense of distance that media create between one person and another: “When the Wi-Fi goes out & you suddenly / stop existing. (Say: *Zoom rhymes with doom.*)” (ll. 15-16). Or the distance between people and the natural landscape: “when pictures of trees make more sense than trees / when the tree leaves when we all get deleted” (ll. 28-29). In parsing different iterations of ghost phenomena, this poem deals with many ideas of unsettling or universal absence, but in the fringes lurk moments of unsettling or universal presence. From “slots on forms / you fill out” (ll. 7-8), to “empty parking lots full / of empty parking spots” (ll. 11-12), absences engender presence, are a type of presence themselves. If we accept the absurd and contradictory nature of the world, we do not have to completely praise or completely condemn, completely connect or disconnect. The disavowal of such a choice often creates tension which lends new spirit to a work.

Tension is a word which often gets bandied about in poetry workshop. At its core, tension is about conflict, specifically “conflict created by interplay of the constituent elements of a work” (*OED*). It is about competing elements and themes—connection and disconnection, sense and nonsense. And one type of tension we often discuss in literature and workshop classes is interiority versus exteriority—the mind and the body, the self and the world. Poetry and poets have sometimes been divided into two categories: those

who deal with mind and self, and those who deal with body and world. As David Lehman addresses it, writers like Emily Dickinson and John Ashbery are interested in “the mirror of speculation”—interiority and imagination—while poets like Walt Whitman and James Schuyler are interested in “the window of perception”—exteriority and observation (266). A driving interest in my poetry has since been to find out if it is possible for me to do both. I have not had a lot of success definitively answering this question, but I have had a lot of fun trying.

Since Dickinson and Ashbery are two of my favorite poets, it was not difficult for me to determine that I have most often written through “the mirror of speculation.” When I set out to write through “the window of perception,” I therefore turned to less familiar avenues. Patricia Smith is one modern poet who is especially good at writing about bodies and the world they inhabit. In the poem “10-Year-Old Shot Three Times, but She’s Fine,” Smith writes about the body of the little girl using the second-person “you”:

Dumbfounded in hospital whites, you are picture-book
itty-bit, floundering in bleach and steel. Braids untwirl
and corkscrew, you squirm, the crater in your shoulder
spews a soft voltage. (ll. 1-4)

The description is active, accosting, beautiful, and direct. The “you” implicates and welcomes the reader. We are in the body of the girl and looking out at it, simultaneously. And the poem begins at a place of injury, the moment when the body becomes something new to remark upon. In my first poetic attempt to write about bodies, I begin in the same place. In “Circuit,” I use the second-person “you” to invite the reader to experience being in my body in the way that I experience it, and I start in a place of chronic pain:

How strange to be a body
with a bad hip and weak ankle
TMJ and overeager wisdom
teeth gone crooked (ll. 1-4)

I start with waking up to the sense that, yes, I have a body. It is strange to be talking about it in any detail in a poem. Here are the things that I feel in my body, that you might not know just by looking at me, that perhaps make my body different from yours. Then I give a reason for the details of my body:

How the roundness of the world
has gravity and gravity
has your bones in its jaws (ll. 5-7)

Now “you” are in the poem too. You are in my body with me. The reason for my chronic pain, “How...gravity / has your bones in its jaws,” is the same reason for any aches you feel in your own body—all bodies are vulnerable and prone to complications. But we are not only body, we are also “the intersection / of body and something that is not / body” (ll. 20-22). At this point in the poem, I attempt to reconcile speculation with perception. The body is what we can perceive, while the “not / body” of interiority is what we can only speculate about. And yet, it is there, too. And the intersection of the two is not a new idea. In disability theory, the *bodymind* is a term that conceptualizes the ways in which the two intertwine, in which the lived experience of the body shapes the development of the mind and sense of self, and vice versa (Price 269).

The bodymind is especially important when considering gender. I wrote in my undergraduate thesis that “When I write about being a woman, I am writing about being a

person through the lens of womanhood” (5). When I write about the bodymind, it is necessarily shaped, as I have been shaped, through gendered expectations. In “Circuit,” this occurs later in the poem, after the more general body has been established:

to be girl gone woman and grow
breasts and long hair so people
know what you are when they look
to have hips and blood and everything
How strange to be the intersection
of woman and something that is not
woman (ll. 26-32)

If interiority is the intersection of body and something that is not body, then the interiority of women is the intersection of woman and something that is not woman, no matter what the body says. But what the world says about the body still has influence.

In “A Sonnet is Breathing Down Our Necks,” I continue to parse the ideas of gendered expectations, and the absurdity thereof. In Barbara Hamby’s *Bird Odyssey*, she ends with a series of poems titled “The Odyssey in Six Sonnets,” which tells the story from the perspectives of the foremost female characters of *The Odyssey*. Since early Shakespearean sonnets, and Greek poems and plays, were often in the business of objectifying or vilifying women’s bodies, Hamby’s move in writing a series of sonnets from silenced female characters’ perspectives is a reclamation of female subjectivity. In “A Sonnet is Breathing Down Our Necks”—which is really more like a fourteen-line prose poem than anything else—I attempt to do something of the same. In this poem, I parse ideas about women’s bodies, domestic abuse, and the symbolism of flowers related

to death and gender: “Lily says, ‘Orange roses.’ The flower she / wants at her funeral to remember. Ladyslipper and leafcup. Lionsheart and lotus. / Her boyfriend buys her a bouquet for Valentine’s day and proposes” (ll. 3-6). By using the tradition of women’s names from names of flowers for the female characters in my poem, I highlight the traditional notion of women as beautiful and delicate. By interweaving the tradition of flowers at funerals, I introduce notions of death and decay, which are characteristic of both bodies and flowers—though quicker-acting in flowers. And by tying in the tradition of flowers as a romantic gesture from men to women, the gendered relationship dynamic is complete. The abuse comes later, with the “ranunculus-shaped bruise on her ribcage” (l. 8), but the rebellion, or the reclamation of female subjectivity, takes place throughout the poem, with the inclusion of a multitude of flower names. In the lines above, “Ladyslipper and leafcup” read as delicate and feminine, with pretty shoe imagery and soft “s” and “f” sounds, while “Lionsheart and lotus” read harsher, with animal imagery and hard “t” sounds. There are many different ways of being a woman. And the sheer number of flowers named in the poem is intended to unsettle the reader and any internalized conceptions of flower-related gendering that they may have.

The inside of a person is just an internalized, intensified version of the environment that created it. In an epigraph to “Stick Houses”—the nonfiction piece that comprises the middle, and heart, of this collection—are a few lines by Rilke: “the inner—what is it? / if not intensified sky” (ll. 4-5). That epigraph was added in later revisions to the original essay, but it summarizes nicely the way I felt when writing it. What is outside sometimes mirrors what is inside. It is hard to find the correct emotional words, in the endless bog of available abstractions, to explain what anything *feels* like. But concrete

things exist which can create affect, give a sense of sense when vocabulary flees. The essay “Stick Houses” deals with my early childhood, relating to the changes in environment and family structure that I experienced from around age five to age seventeen. Writing this essay was cathartic, in that it deals head-on with events I have been writing around in my poetry since I took my first workshop class as an undergraduate. But in putting the words down on a page, I found there was much I could not say. Emotions were too tangled and ambivalent to be recorded in anything resembling a reliable interiority of the narrator. And they were often too raw to touch. As psychologist D.W. Winnicott reportedly put it: “Artists are driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide.” In this essay, I am hiding. At first by accident, I eventually made the conscious choice to forgo personal reflections on feelings relating to the events I describe. Instead, I use descriptions of environment to create affect, along with including excerpts from one of those “baffling” scientific articles throughout the piece, to offer answers to questions about my family that I could not answer logically on my own.

“Stick Houses” is divided into sections according to the addresses of the houses my family lived in as the story progresses chronologically, and those sections are further subdivided into brief chunks (maybe stanzas) of narration that cut to and away from one another with abruptness and sometimes violence. Inspired by the structure of Lily Hoang’s *A Bestiary*, these sectional divides and abrupt shifts mirror the feeling of wrenching, of abrupt change and impermanence that comes from moving around from town to town and house to house very frequently as a child. Towards the end of each of the longer house sections, I include passages from an article on the inexplicable

movement across China of a certain group of elephants. The article offers possible reasons for the group's journey. One scientist proclaims, "It is almost certainly related to the need for resources" (Tewari), but no one knows for sure. While workshopping this piece, I encountered similar questions about the movement of my family from town to town and state to state within my essay. My peers wanted a reason *why* my family moved so often. I include excerpts from the elephant trek article to offer possible answers.

The bluntness of description in the piece, without a lot of personal reflection, mirrors the feeling, characteristic to childhood, of things happening to you, instead of happening of your own volition. If there are *whys*, you are not the one who gets to know them. The title of the piece, "Stick Houses," ties the larger sections together, and the short subsections (maybe stanzas), which I fancy do sometimes resemble sticks, are then the material of which each house is constructed in my memory. And by house, I suppose what I really mean is home, because often what I describe is not the house itself, but the flora and fauna of the yard or the important events leading up to my parents' eventual divorce, which shaped my sense of self and world in a significant way. The house is just a structure, and while some people have a singular "childhood home" in which all their foundation moments took place, I have a string of temporary houses, which add up to the feeling of home, of me. As the rest of the Rilke poem goes:

The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming. (ll. 4-7)

Home is a thing I am always coming to on the inside. It is populated by all manner of plants and animals: the mockingbirds and the pines, the roaches and dogs, lizards and oaks, toads, cats, magnolias and satsumas, grass and kudzu, snakes and parakeets. The wonderful and the sickening. This essay is a bildungsroman that leads into me as I was at age seventeen. Still building a notion of self, I now turn to the wide world opened up by media.

Less definite and concrete, media contemplated as a whole is less good than nature at creating affect—or at least, it is less clear, afterwards, what affect has been created. In that sense, the ending of “Stick Houses,” involves the idea of “something,” which can also be found in the rest of my creative material. The word “something” appears about twenty times in the poetic portion of this collection. I discovered this painful fact when running the poetry portion of my thesis through a word cloud generator in order to determine the central motifs in my work so I could write about them for this introduction. I had hopes that the principal word might “body” or “house,” “moon” or “tree,” “eat” or “mother.” While those words are all mentioned about five to nine times throughout this collection, the word “something” is superseded only by the word “know.” In my search for connective thematic tissue among my creative work, I spent the early stages bound up in this idea of *something* as something specific, as something I could know. I considered Robert Frost: “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down” (ll. 35-36). I thought of my *something* as something like that, the force unmaking fences between poems and offering a potential through-line in this collection. In a way it has been that. *Something* allowed me an entry point. It was not until I began

writing the linking series of lipograms, “10 Thousand Almosts,” that I stopped thinking of “something” as a link, and started to enjoy the separateness of things.

“10 Thousand Almosts” began as a single poem, exploring the experience of reading a novel. The poem picks up, as novels pick up, with:

interaction something

building

like a house

brick by

brick and slowly (ll. 3-7)

As part of a class-wide writing prompt I designed for my fellow poets in workshop, I wrote an example lipogram of this poem, omitting the letter “e.” In that new version, of course, “something” becomes impossible, and the new poem reads:

twist round this

growing thing

as in sapling

twig by

twig and gradual (ll. 3-7)

Excited by the freshness of this perspective, exploring the archetypal progression of a novel—or a relationship—through the lens of agricultural imagery, I wrote two more lipograms in this series. The first, omitting the letter “i,” takes its language mostly from relations to the moon, light, and the passage of time. The second, omitting the letter “a,” takes its language from the realms of the technological and electric—and online dating. What this exercise illuminated most of all is that “something” is not always the best

through-line to depend on, although it might be a good place to start. “Something,” in its vagueness, opens up a world of possible directions, and they are all worth exploring. Ultimately, that is why I chose to place the nonfiction essay, “Stick Houses,” in the middle of this collection—because the essay ends with the opening-up idea of *something*. The bildungsroman is not the beginning or the end. Something has been built. It is a completion, but it also a point of continual return, directing us simultaneously forward towards the future and backwards, towards the past.

The final through-line I considered in early notes on this project is the idea of circles. Many of the poems in this collection parse ideas of circularity and roundness, which occur in terms of the shape of planets and other astronomical bodies, the circular nature of time through the influence of memory, the repetitive nature of habit and routine life, the cycling of seasons and weather, and of course “the whole round / feeling of apple in hand.” The circle is the symbol of eternity and return, of the inescapable and permanent. This can be big things, like experiences that are too foundational to outgrow and the shape of the cosmos. But it can also be small things, like the experience of eating an apple. If, as John Donne suggests, each of us is “a little world made cunningly / Of elements” (ll. 1-2), then we are, as I respond in “Circuit,” responsible for “carrying the roundness of the world” (l. 36). Philosophers endlessly debate ideas of the objective reality versus perceived reality, and I guess poets do the same thing. Probably, we can never know for sure if each of us experiences sensory phenomena in the same way. And possibly, it does not matter. We are all carrying our little world inside of us. Look inward or look up. It is all you, all world, all worth recording. And the act of recording is absurd and baffling and fun. As I write in “Pantoum,” which is a very good form for parsing

ideas of circularity, “everyone needs to love something / pointless Because the world is round” (ll. 19-20).

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THE MOON IS RUSTING

The Moon is Not Electric

The moon is rusting, and scientists are baffled. She said there are so many insects and parasites that I can't sleep. He googled how to make a noose with an orange extension cord; how to reach the moon with an extension cord. He said maybe we're all hurtling towards our essential selves and choice has nothing to do with it. The announcer exclaimed Foley's Folly breaks smartly from the inside gate. He placed a thousand-dollar bet on the other horse. She said I use the names part of my brain to store body envy. The moon rose and she said anger is fear aimed outward. Fear aimed inward is how children realize the moon is not electric. The sheep say you don't have to turn hard to survive the wolves. He said. And the globe of the floor is so small that you can always see over the edge. The globe of the moon is dark on one side, but the sea is tranquil unless struck by lightning.

Long Distance

Media ponder the nature of ghosts,
complicate the nature of being, reach
hands into electronic elsewhere:
0.001 seconds to transmit a *Goodnight*
text to your absent love, 3-5 days by mail.
Cross-time and cross land and reach scattered
invisible audience, call above earth
to void of space through void
of eternity, and broadcast your teeth
for a smile tuned to full brightness, or save
energy with low-power mode, no back-
ground app refresh. Call and leave a message
for the morning to catch. Haunting
is a way to loosen the hips on *real* and *possible*,
discuss the not-quite-present
but the *almost* and the *someday*
mind-stretch of us through blue light,
connect with what is not immediate or
here: 2,228 miles or 32 hours driving,
the distance from Vacaville, California
to Stringer, Mississippi. No walking
directions available. Zombies,
vampires, cyborgs and monsters.
Technofeminist, other inhuman
cybernetic metaphors.
Untouchable utopia, we want
seamless mediation: material
with immaterial and you with me.
Impossible location, we want GPS
teleportation. Three months till the next
time my mother will see her husband.
Cross out ~~escapist, fantasy~~
Believe in channels and light and reaching.

Void of Space

after René Magritte

Aren't we melted, haven't we been visited
by gravity, forced down and rounded to sprout like
dangerous plants. At the edge of abysses, don't we
look for something blue and forbidden. Above
floating, don't we string moments and walk old trails,
aren't we quickened and living silver bright
as alarm bells don't we worship. Aren't we horses
chewing old breath. Like meat to fierce light spheres
don't we swear to uphold holding held like
iron necks of monuments. Beyond fields
of knowledge and greenest hedgerows,
doesn't your chest ache like you enveloped
a globe or three, cupped between ribs and poised
for oblivion

Retrograde

every head of gray-
haired man
wearing glasses
says *father*
to the sinkhole in
my stomach

every alcohol flower
smell of Bath
& Body girl
telegraphs hungover
lungfuls of my ex
best friend

every cratered
moment of me
reaches hungry
for the titles
of familiar
worlds on shelf

the characters of all
my favorite books
sing I want out
of this fucking
story

stop re-reading

my childhood
bedroom walls
green like
fingers

the Christmas light-
bordered window

letter he wrote

on my eleventh
birthday

*I'm sorry
I can't
be there
with you*

grocery bag
of clothes
she returned
when we
ended

that moon
ticking
counterclockwise

Pantoum

You fill yourself with more self
But can't make a living writing poetry
So think the world round and breathe dollars
Everyone needs to love something pointless

Everyone hungers to eat something empty
You fill yourself with more self
We begin and eat our broccoli
Draw the world round and breathe dollars

A processed tree is not a vegetable
Still everyone needs to eat something empty
We stumble over the edge and do not stop
We return and eat our broccoli

Paper has almost no calories
B/c a processed tree is not a vegetable
But the world is round We walk
over the edge and do not stumble

You can't make a living writing poetry
Because paper has almost no calories
Still everyone needs to love something
pointless Because the world is round

Ghost Phenomena

If we're thinking about absence we're thinking
about whitespace we're thinking about *Page Not Found*
Error 404 *about:blank*
read receipts turned off

so that you've always been delivered & never
get received. We're thinking about *Not Attending*
Not Applicable slots on forms
you fill out thinking about the spot in the woods

the tree-cutting men or the tornado cleared out
so we could see skeleton houses.
We're thinking of empty parking lots full
of empty parking spots & his car

not in the driveway of his house when you drive by
just to see. We're thinking of ghost phenomena.
When the Wi-Fi goes out & you suddenly
stop existing. (Say: *Zoom rhymes with doom.*)

Say: How do you know we're not sometimes
under the same roof dreaming the same
dream & I wake up to you
screaming from my nightmares?

If we're thinking of absence we're thinking of evenings
when your father leaves. Never comes back.
It only happened once but the mind
hits *replay*. The truth gets deleted.

Say:

If we're thinking of absence we're thinking
of digital environments
when pictures of trees make more sense than trees
when the tree leaves when we all get deleted

Online Dating Profile:

won't hog covers or
kick your shins in my sleep

never squint so it looks like I'm smiling
behind my mask when I'm not

didn't text my junior high boyfriend
I love you after our first
skating date, didn't break up with him
in the cafeteria the next day

have it all together, have more than one
good picture of my face,
never dropped my phone
in a Porta Potty tank or got kicked out
of a music festival

never shoplifted skin-care products

never dream of eating, being
eaten, or plummeting from
brink of RSA Battle House Tower
in Mobile, Alabama

always leave the house with
brushed hair and look both ways
before crossing

am unfamiliar with the terms *Todestrieb*, penis
envy, and Oedipal complex, won't accuse you
of homosexual panic if you refuse to admit
that your brother is handsome

am tall, have good thoughts

Kilonova

*As stars shine, they fuse—
that's why galaxies
and nebulas, celestial*

bodies and neutron
stars are rushing outward
from the center—resulting in curved-rib,

*foliage-leaf, stellar net, and asymmetry—
fuse hydrogen into heavier elements like carbon
and oxygen, the elements of life.*

That's why polar identical magnets
fight so hard to stay apart, and if
you go far enough south

you're in the north. That's why when intimacy
threatens, we shut down like traffic lights
when lightning strikes

the intersection. *In their dying years,
stars create the common metals
and blast them out*

*into space in different types
of supernova explosions—intricate
arch design satisfying the impulse*

for innovation. All clocks in the world
are probably off by a minute
or two. Enormity does not

work perfectly, collapses in
and then out. *Many stars in the universe
are in binary systems—two stars bound*

*by gravity and orbiting around each other
for hundreds of millions of years.*

Everything wants to collide.

10 Thousand Almosts

(1)
Person meets person
meets situation
interaction something
building
like a house
brick by
brick and slowly
all of us climbing
hand over hand down
words on a page together
hoping for
something ending
resolution
all of us turning
pages adjusting position
lighting angle perspective
then the sense like something
turning and bad
happening at edges
and worry all of us wishing
to go back
to beginning so it won't
end or that we had
never started so we
won't end
wishing
we had paid better attention
to some small detail
now so it would
make more
sense as we flip the last
chapter and feel
that feeling of
almost and
almost over

(2)

You talk to *I*
in this orchard of now
twist round this
growing thing
as in sapling
twig by
twig and gradual
all moving upward
branch by branch as in spiral
flora flat and bound as one
promising
this bloom to
rotting (as in always)
all shaking
buds and fronds tilting
with sun tilt turning up down
and know this
changing in roots
this gray from trunk wish
for sprout again
as in starting again so it won't
grow past us and fall or uproot
roots so *us*
won't outgrow us
wish
for uniform crisp rosy
panorama of instants
now so it would
add up to good
now as this turns to
turning bad and drink
that closing knowing of
almost and
almost always

(3)

Crescent touches halfmoon
on sky verge

shape rounded
waxes
as flowers bloom
petal by
petal and steady
as metronome hour
hand tocks hour by hour over
press palms to chest
long for
all fullness
true
as pendulum sway:
beats flurry core
globe reflects sun
before moment of
turn and shadow
wane at edge
and slow as ache of hope
to go back
to full so glow does not
fade or that we had
never looked up so we
would not see
hope
to breathe more
accumulated breaths
soon and add
up to one long
moonful as we exhale
the last scale of spark and feel
that moment of
almost close and
almost close enough

(4)
Content wired to medium
combine in microchip
connection lighting
forged

like hunger
surge by
surge and rumbling
people strolling
thumb under thumb through
sequencer windows
hoping for
something joining
linking
people pondering
similes lighting perspective
teeth white like emptiness
then the moment
shifting
ghostlike behindscreen
with worry people wishing
to undo progress
correspond with skin so it won't
smooth to finish or
lose flesh-give in the never
level of pixel
wishing
we could retry reconnecting
with whispers and fingertips
now so it would
feel more
open like eyes as we look
through world on windows know
that receding of
everything or only
most things

Bodymind

There are worlds being born down here in the dirt of earth. There are engines in the wind. *I feel infinite*, said the boy in the truckbed, standing buffeted by slipstream. You are bigger than infinite. You are finite and mightier than universal truths. The universe knows nothing about you. You're a flea on the Milky Way's back. You are heart and spleen and fibula and sternum. We words on paper yellow with age and wear and crack to dust. We autumn leaves brown and crumble and fertilize the soil. The tree grows new leaves but they are not the same leaves though fed, perhaps, by some of their corpses. Every snowflake-rare snowflake melts and evaporates and gets cloud-carried again to fall again. You are not snowflake. The macrocosm and the microcosm do not mirror you. You are body and word and temporary as gust. You are limited by boundary of skin. You cannot put your hand through the wall of the atmosphere. You cannot touch the other side, though you'd like to. Laugh, fuck, paint, cry, and then try again.

Why I'd Like to Live on Prairie Hill

The answer might be: birds.
My uncle pointing with fingers that don't quite extend
from that old spinal injury, and the sun
on the hill, pulse electric
and quick
as he inches his wheelchair upward over grass
greener than spring, I follow
the line of his hand
to the bird silhouette, swooping low
over pines at the edge
of our land, and he says: eagles.
The answer might be: arrowheads
 which my brothers and I dug from the dirt
 on our knees in the grass on Prairie Hill
 which my cousins and I dug from
 our knees on the hill under prairie grass
The answer might be the sound
of insects. I've heard
someone say no one
likes the sound of insects, and I could tell
they weren't from here because
we were born with cicadas in the damp bushes in our blood
after a light rain on a warm winter evening,
and we do.

Circuit

How strange to be a body
with a bad hip and weak ankle
TMJ and overeager wisdom
teeth gone crooked

How the roundness of the world
has gravity and gravity
has your bones in its jaws
strange to be a body
with asthma and dust
pet dander and pollen

How the gravity of the world
has atmosphere and atmosphere
has your lungs in a vise

How strange to be a body
with a lump of electric
gray matter in its skull

How the atmosphere of the world
has all bodies cradled in its arms
and you there somewhere
to be the intersection
of body and something that is not
body strange to be in the world
and the world round dangling
by invisible thread from the cusp
of something or something that is not

to be girl gone woman and grow
breasts and long hair so people
know what you are when they look
to have hips and blood and everything

How strange to be the intersection
of woman and something that is not
woman

to be a mass of gray matter
in a skull on a pair
of shoulders

to be carrying the roundness of the world

Part Etymology

close the moment of bloom that stumbler
breathes oxygen from tree sap
connected through root
nexus the moment that propagates
broadband structure of cold
language looped between necks of
people and look roads and neural pathways
fresh graveled plothole fresh broken axle tumble
love-headed through undergrowth of honeysuckle and thorn
on border of awareness the minute
ruptured green and yellow and sudden lungful
growth scaffolds death
a type of embrace coupled
page by page of blank and burn
processor frozen hot and keyboard melted
know how moment and speech got lost by
processor and language melted
a woman and the house burning at her feet

ELEPHANTS TREK 500 KM ACROSS CHINA

By Word and Bone

I was reading John Donne *I am
a little world made cunningly of elements*
But my eyes tripped and I said
*I am a little world made cunningly
of elephants* Which might be true
as anything

My brother found
our family name *Holifield*
from the Scottish clan *Olifant*
which means *elephant* or something
like it

And we might be made of leather
and tusk, ivory and hunted, plaid and battle
cry We might be made of anything
of history and everything or only stitched
by word and bone

dust or something

Stick Houses

The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.
-Rilke

*1815 Wansley Road
Laurel, Mississippi 39443*

I'm interested in houses. Myths of houses. Legends and fairy tales. The way people carry their childhood homes around with them all their lives. The architecture of memory. The intensified sky of interiority contained in four walls and hurled through with the notion of *home*.

I do not remember the house I was born in. My sister and I drove by it a few years ago, the sun beating down on its tired face, faded gray. The swing set and the grass in the small yard shone yellow-green as my sister pointed it out to me. "Don't you remember at all?" she asked with a laugh. It's funny, the things we forget.

What I remember best about growing up is the way my mother used to carry an empty laundry basket along to the public library, for my siblings and I to fill with books. Reading fairy tales, I was always terrified of the Wolf. Now I think of the Second Little Pig, who built a house too sturdy to fall at the first assault, just not sturdy enough to last forever.

I am interested in migration. In where we go when *here* is no longer viable.

Interlude: It's not unusual for elephants to move small distances.

*1151 Highway 15 South
Laurel, Mississippi 39443*

What I remember second best about growing up is the trees. Our second house had a sycamore tree. The first tree I ever climbed. First I ever loved. My siblings and I made a hierarchy of its branches. You couldn't climb to a certain height until you had reached a certain age, and you couldn't touch "the brain" until you were five years old at least.

The brain, as we called it, was a gnarly knot rippling from the trunk at the intersection of three branches, the highest point in the sycamore that we could reach. My older brother, the oldest of the four of us, used to sit there, the king of the brain, and he would teach us things.

One day my older brother said, in the sycamore tree, "How do we know that we even woke up this morning? How do we know that this isn't a dream?"

The day the pregnant woman knocked on our door, I didn't know who she was. She was wearing a loose black dress with little white polka dots on it. All I saw when my mother opened the door was the dress, made large and billowy by the bulge of the stomach underneath. I really liked the dress. The hem blew in the wind while my sister and I watched through the dining room window as the woman talked to our mother, the two of them facing each other across the small desert of the sidewalk. The grass was so green around them. Mama's back was to us, but my sister said it looked like she was crying.

That yard was full of ant beds, and the carport was full of cats. We had adopted a gray tabby and named her Lily for no reason at all. The first time Lily gave birth it was on a flattened cardboard box in the garage, and my siblings, our mother, and I crouched around the box in a quietly reverent circle, watching Lily's body open up and the most disgusting red, slimy things slither out. They would grow up to be many cats.

My older brother named all of my sister's baby dolls "John" and used to pull their heads off to see what was inside.

There was nothing in the world I liked better than the view from the sycamore tree. Especially in the fall. The sky was wide and white and you could see across the front yard and across the road how all of the trees' branches were bare, carving skeletal patterns against the cold light. It made my chest hurt, and I didn't know why. That's how I knew I was awake.

On the day we moved, my mother got a phone call from her father. He was yelling, so I heard even from a distance when he said, “If you go with him, I’m writing you out of my will. That man won’t get another *cent* of my money!”

The thing about houses is the thing about fertility. The domestic space. We all get mothered and we all get fathered and we all get housed one way or another. That’s biology. You’re in your body for your whole life, and your biological parents are yours. Even if you never know them, you can never carve them out.

Mama’s eyeliner was thick and perfect back then. She used to call it her “warpaint.” She only wore it when she was going out in public, like to church or to the store. Because you never knew where you might run into an enemy.

On the day we moved, my little brother climbed the sycamore and touched the brain. He was only four, and he kept this a secret from us for years.

Some animals, you know, carry their houses around on their backs. Turtles and snails and children from unstable families. Home is what is coming one day and is already past.

Interlude: This herd has been lumbering its way across China for more than a year now. The elephants have now strayed almost 500km (310 miles), a mammoth trek from their original habitat.

*3251 North Holly Street
Loxley, Alabama 36551*

Our third house was old and crumbly, but it looked huge to our childish eyes, with its two impressive stories and its impressively gabled roof. Ancient white paint, faded yellow, chipped daily off the weathered façade in big chunks. One of the dull green shutters on the windows hung by its teeth.

The second story of that house had a strange, hard plastic floor that had been stapled down over the regular floorboards, but it had come loose over the decades and when you walked across it the whole room bucked and roiled around the edges like an ocean of dust. When we pulled it up, we found roaches.

That yard was full of satsuma bushes. We gorged ourselves on satsumas in the summer and the dogs' fur was shiny and thick from eating so much fruit. We gave our relatives Walmart bags full of satsumas for Christmas.

There were two magnolia trees, a small one in the front yard and one in that back that was big enough for climbing. The smaller magnolia tree had thin, warped branches that bent outward and stretched down to the ground, more like a bush than a tree. You could walk inside it, though, and then you were in the magnolia cavern, with its ceiling of movement and shadow and its floor of waxy green leaves and stiff brown leaves on their way to brittleness.

Just off the back porch grew a fig tree, and when the figs were in season they looked like purple hot air balloons hanging upside-down by their baskets. We used to make jars and jars of strawberry fig jam with our mother.

At the far edge of the backyard was a blackberry bush, and you could trade a few drops of blood for a bowlful of berries. Mama made cobbler and we picked at scabs on our hands.

There were pecan trees on the border between our yard and our neighbor's, and we used to gather up pecans in five-gallon buckets and spend hours cracking and shelling them, putting sealed Ziploc bags full of pecans in the freezer.

A big oak rotted in the front yard, and the City eventually came and cut it down because of the limbs it used to drop on the road in bad weather. It was the biggest tree I had ever seen, and I loved it.

When they cut down the oak, we found a baby raccoon in the wreckage. We kept it as a pet, and it used to follow our chihuahua around the house like a shadow. It once took a grape gently out of my hand with its own little clawed paw. Our landlords made us get rid of it because its pee was stinking up the house.

There were so many toads in that yard that at night it looked like the grass was hopping. When our cousins came for a visit, we spent an entire evening collecting frogs, and at the end we had two heaving sandcastle buckets full of very irritated toads.

When our parents screamed at each other, they put us out in the yard so we wouldn't hear.

My older brother taught us the word "divorce" one night. The "d-word" he called it, and my little brother cried, thinking he meant "death."

The thing about yards is the thing about liminality. It's the house and it's not the house. It's a new environment and it's the old one. A different state, maybe, but a yard in the south is still a yard in the south, and the trees and the rodents are the same.

When our cat disappeared, Mama said it must have run away, but one of the dogs dug its body up in the back yard, so I guess she had buried it.

The roaches stayed exclusively on the second floor of that house, where my sister and I shared the room across the landing from our brothers. These were like no roaches I had seen before. They were so big you could see the light shine through the dark brown translucence of their tucked wings, and in the illumination of my bedside lamp, they seemed to glow red.

I got a parakeet for my birthday, dainty and completely yellow, and we put her in the cage with my older brother's and sister's parakeets, who were every shade of green and every shade of blue, respectively. Those parakeets had a sturdier look to them, with their aggressively hooked beaks and wings dappled with brown and black. The next morning, my parakeet was dead on the bottom of the cage with her eyes pecked out.

On the day we moved, my little brother and I carved our names into the magnolia tree. Not our official names, but the names we gave ourselves. We wrote *We Were Here* underneath them.

On the day we moved, I went back into the house to see what it looked like empty. It looked gutted and alien, bereft of the couch and the TV, the dining room table and the

bucket of toys and the dollhouse in the spare room. I whispered, "I'll come back," to the rough wood floors.

I haven't come back yet. But then, sometimes I think I never left. The places we live live in us, and they can't drive away in U-Hauls.

Interlude: They began moving north and in the last few months, the elephants have popped up in a number of villages, towns and cities. It is thought they have started to move south again. It's unclear whether they are headed back, or why they even embarked on this journey in the first place—the farthest known movement by elephants in the country. Or what might come next.

*400 McFarland Road
Heidelberg, Mississippi 39439*

Our new house was one narrow hallway with three bedrooms and only one bathroom for the six of us. It was uninsulated and made of cinder blocks. The walls always wept and the moisture turned to mildew. Our mother set us to scrubbing the walls with rags and buckets of water and bleach. There were bars on the windows.

The front yard was all grass surrounded by long lines of pine trees on both sides, the road just visible at the end of the long gravel driveway. The back yard had two sheds, which used to be a barn and a chicken coop, but they were rotting and filled to the brim with colorful old glass bottles and empty cigar boxes our great grandmother had collected. The kudzu covered the back woods all the way up to the top of the slope where the house was built.

That yard was full of king snakes. Bright red snakes with white stripes outlined in black. We found some snake eggs once, spongy and soft, and we thought we should break them, but our uncle said to leave them alone because king snakes ate the poisonous snakes. After he left, we squished them anyway. There was pinkish brown slime inside.

That yard was full of grasshoppers. Strange grasshoppers, not lithe and green and quick the way I was used to, but slow and perfectly black except for the thin yellow stripe that ran down the center of each of their backs and the thin yellowish outlines around the joints of their faces. There were so many of them that they clung to the outside walls of the house, hopped in tired packs across the porch, and populated the grass like they had grown from it.

One time, my little brother and I were out at the end of the driveway, checking the mail, the dogs with us, when we became enthralled by our proximity to the open road. We danced out onto the pavement in bare feet, letting out excited whoops and feeling invincible.

When a car came by, I skittered off the blacktop, into the safe zone of the lawn. I shouted at my brother to get out of the road, and he ran over to me. Our big golden labs chased the car, our chihuahua followed, and the car horn blared into the distance. When the car was gone, our chihuahua was on the pavement, twisting and wiggling her legs like she was scratching her back. My little brother approached, to scoop her up and carry her back to the house with us. Then he froze.

“She’s *DEAD!*” he screeched—a screech like stone on metal.

“Very funny,” I said, crossing my arms. Stubborn, because nothing had ever died right in front of me before. But my brother looked at me, and when he looked at me, his face was pinched and red, tears streaming.

“Her head is *flat!*” he wailed. I backed up a step, then another, and I looked. And her head was flat. A red flat puddle where her head had been. I felt a sob, or something like it, wrench from my chest, and then I was running. We ran all the way back through the yard, to the house, sobbing and screaming for our mother. The labs ran with us, bounding around like we were all playing a fun game.

We cried as our mother buried the broken dog body in the front yard. We cried all day, and our mother let us drink Coca Cola, which was usually only for when we were sick.

When our oldest lab, Daisy, gave birth, she did it in a dug out little hollow beneath the roots of an oak tree, doubly sheltered from sight by the presence of a nearby azalea bush. After the puppies were born, my older brother and sister took turns crawling under the tree to collect them, one or two squirming puppies at a time. Gray dirt on their knees and elbows, they carried the puppies back to the house, and my younger brother and I eyed the little cavern beneath the tree with interest. There was a possible game here, and we wanted to know what it was.

My brother crouched before the entrance, shuffling forward on his hands, about to take an experimental trip into the indentation. Then we saw it. A spectacularly large beetle, placed directly at the maw of the little cave, like it was guarding the gate. Its exoskeleton was shiny and black and looked hard as our mother’s sturdiest Tupperware bowls. Its pincers were so large you could almost count the teethlike ridges on them as they opened and close, horizontally. Its front legs raised and bent in a slow-motion threat. My brother scuffled hastily backwards, almost tumbling over himself. He grabbed a good-sized tree limb and crawled back to the hole like he would slay the beetle where it stood. When he leaned close again, to better calibrate his swing, the beetle hissed. One simmering, slithering sound that was so surprising that my brother dropped the branch.

We found a grove of bamboo growing about a mile into the woods on the right-hand side of the yard. When our cousins came for New Years, we all traipsed into the woods with flashlights to see it because they didn’t believe us. When midnight struck, we were surrounded by towering green stalks, lit by the blue glow of moonlight mixed with flashlights.

One day, Mama’s brothers and sister all came to the house together. They didn’t bring our cousins with them. The adults talked on the porch, and through the window my sister said it looked like our mother was crying.

They came inside, and the wrought iron door that matched the bars on the windows clanged shut behind them. The eight of us crammed into the small living room, and my mother sat down on the couch across from me. She was crying. She looked around at all of us. She said, “Your daddy and I are getting a divorce.”

My aunt sat next to me on the loveseat, her arm heavy around my shoulder. I think I was supposed to cry. I think I did.

Everyone was crying. One of my uncles held my sister. My mother held my little brother, who was sobbing. And my other uncle, from his wheelchair, placed his hand gingerly on my older brother’s shoulder.

Mama said to us, “You all know what sex is don’t you?” I think I nodded, because my older brother and sister did, but my little brother said he didn’t, so my mother said, “It’s when a man’s penis goes inside a woman’s vagina.”

And then, “Your father cheated on me.”

And then, “This is not the first time.”

I was at the edge of the tree line once, looking at an empty cicada shell stuck in the sap of a tree, when I suddenly knew a thing. It was a thing like: *there is something here to be afraid of*. And I looked up, across the empty stretch of grass to the woods on the other side of the yard, and there was a panther, standing halfway out of the trees, watching me.

My mother stuffed all of my father’s clothes into garbage bags and loaded them into her van. She drove away.

The four of us went to stay with our aunt. We rode four-wheelers with our cousins and stayed up late watching *NCIS* and eating microwavable hamburgers. We didn’t see our mother.

We went to stay with our uncle. We played board games and PlayStation and ate balanced meals, with piles of giblet corn and turnip greens on the side. On Sunday, we were going to church and I told my aunt I didn’t want to go. She said I had to. To find me a pair of shoes to wear to church my aunt took me up to the attic to look through black Hefty bags full of her daughters’ old clothes.

“When is Mama coming back?” I asked her.

She said she didn’t know, that my mother needed some time to herself and she would be back when she could.

On the way out of church, the heel of my shoe broke off, and my cousin and my sister laughed. I limped back to the car.

Our mother came to get us.

She told us about the pregnant woman who had come to the house so many houses ago. She had been pregnant with our father's children—twins. She told us how one of them had died—playing in the road. He was five years old when he died, one year younger than I had been when he was born.

My brother dead. My brother I never met. It reminded me of the time my mother had a miscarriage, how we had all cried for the sibling we would never get to meet now. How my sister and I had wanted to name them Reilly.

You can lose things, I know, and not even know what it is you've lost.

I searched for my half-brothers' mother once, on Facebook, and I found her. She was not as pretty without the polka dot dress. Her hair was bottle blonde, more fake looking than my mother's salon highlights, I thought. Her eyes were lined thickly with black, and they looked wide and haunted. It did not look like warpaint on her, but like some ritual costume of mourning. She had a picture of her son's grave on her profile.

My sister asked our mother if that was the same woman our father had cheated with this time. Our mother said no, he had broken it off with that woman and moved us all to another state. He didn't pay child support or anything.

I don't know where my father's other children lived, but in my head it always looked the same as my invented image of the first house my family had lived in. The one I didn't remember.

That's the thing about memory, especially false memory. There's room enough for everyone inside its house.

When our father came to see us a few weeks later, he cried and apologized and told us it had nothing to do with us and that he loved us more than anything. His blue eyes were rimmed red and his tan face was flushed pink.

I remembered then the nightmares I used to have concerning my father when I was younger. He was always just at the edge of the woods, being chased by a werewolf that looked like the one from *Prisoner of Azkaban*. The wolf would get him, I knew. It would turn him into something monstrous.

A week later, Mama said we were going to visit our father, in the house where he was staying with his cousin. I told her I didn't want to go. She said I had to. At my father's

cousin's house, we watched the movie *Misery*, from the Stephen King novel, and I tried to squeeze my eyes shut when the woman broke the man's legs with a sledgehammer. But I couldn't look away.

When my father said, "I love you," to me, as were saying goodbye, I nodded my head. His faced got pinched and angry and he said, "I know you love me. Say it back."

I said, "I love you too."

I read where Charles Bukowski wrote

when my soul has to puke

it will puke of its own

volition

I didn't agree.

The letters in *volition* near those in *violation*.

The cinder block house with the bars on the window and the snakes and grasshoppers in the yard belonged to my mother's father, and on the day we knew we had to move, he called her. He was yelling, so I heard him when he said, "If you stay with him, I want you all out of my damn house. That man won't get another *thing* from me!"

My mother did stay with him, my father. She explained when we were older that she felt the importance of children having a father, and that's why, she said, she always took him back. Her own father disowned her for it. Stupidity, he called it, not strength.

You know what the Big Bad Wolf does, of course. He huffs, and he puffs, and he blows your house down. Fathers can be like that, always blowing your house down.

Interlude: The movement might have something to do with the social dynamics of the group. Elephants are matriarchal with the oldest and wisest female leading the group. After puberty, males break off and travel alone or link up in groups with other males for a short time. They only congregate with females temporarily to mate before leaving again.

*411 Reid Road
Laurel, Mississippi 39442*

Our next house was nice. It had four bedrooms, so my sister and I didn't have to share, for the first time ever. And there was a swimming pool. And a patch of clear land in the back yard where we planned to plant a garden but never did. There was a pear tree and lots of oaks.

This is the house where my father shouted at me that I was a "crazy bitch."

This is the house where I snuggled next to my father on the couch and his big, rough hand rubbed my arm.

This is the house where our oldest lab got shot in the gut by our neighbor when she tipped over his trashcans one too many times.

The house where I stood out in the rain for hours and sang every song I could think of.

The house where I got shocked by the electric fence when I tried to pet our neighbor's horses.

The house where my little brother and I buried a time capsule in the woods:

- 1 drawing of a horse
 - 3 pretty rocks
 - 1 dried sprig of alfalfa
 - 2 shiny new Mississippi quarters
 - and a note
- sealed up in one of our mother's canning jars.

On the day we moved, I turned thirteen. That's a different thing, being a teenager with parents who are always on the run from their own shadows, as compared to being a child who thinks moving to a new house every few years is like embarking on a fairy tale adventure.

In fairy tales, houses have a magical significance, as all things do. You come to a house in the woods and it is made of candy, or seven dwarves live inside it, or a witch. Something wants to nurture you or something wants to hurt you, and you'll know for sure, by the end, which is which.

In real life, the things that nurture you and the things that hurt you are frequently the same.

Interlude: The truth is, no-one knows. It is almost certainly related to the need for resources—food, water, shelter—and this would make sense given the fact that, in most locations where elephants live in the wild, there is an increase in human disturbances leading to habitat fragmentation, loss and resource reduction.

*356 County Road 19
Stringer, Mississippi 39481*

Our next house was the biggest yet, with plenty of room for us all to retreat to separate corners of the house and pretend not to be the family we spent the rest of our time pretending to be. But the yard was smaller, just one long slope downhill all the way from the road to the back drive that circled the house. It was surrounded by neighboring houses you could always just almost see through the trees.

That yard was all pine and lizards. Tall skinny pines even the squirrels couldn't climb, and more lizards in one square acre than you've seen in your life. Freaky lizards, too. They had small horn crowns like a triceratops, and some of them had spiky ridges down their backs. They were every shade of gray and brown and every size of *big*.

When my sister and I lay by the pool, the silhouettes of carrion birds circled overhead, and we held our breath, hoping if we were still enough they would land and pick our bodies clean.

When the pool turned green, the dragonflies swarmed like vultures over the stagnant water and the sun was hot and I imagined that the world was a swamp.

When it got cold in the winter, we didn't run the heat because the house was too big and it cost too much. My father tossed logs in the fireplace and slept on the couch in the living room where it was warmest.

When it got warm outside, he still slept on the couch.

When my parents argued one day, pausing the TV to have some fight about sweet tea and who did or didn't make the tea when they were supposed to, my father stormed to the kitchen, and we listened to sound of the sink running, a container filling up.

I looked at my brother in confusion: *Is he making the tea now?*

But a moment later he came back into the room, a gallon sized pitcher of water in one hand. My mother was standing in front of the empty fireplace, heating herself on invisible flames, and she didn't move. And when my father stomped over to her, water sloshing heavily over the edge of the pitcher and darkening the carpet, she didn't move.

I didn't move, sitting on the couch, and my siblings didn't either.

Our father stomped over to the fireplace and tossed the pitcher of water directly in our mother's face, and the water soaked her hair and her clothes and dripped onto the bricks, and her mascara ran and her skin glittered. And no one expected this, but no one

was surprised either. And no one said anything. No one said anything when our mother left the room or when her bedroom door closed, quiet as a slam.

Our father pressed *play* on the TV.

When it got hot outside, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, leaning against a pine tree down the hill in the backyard, and I looked up into the branches, trying to see one. White streak of wings against gray and green.

Then I sat on the back porch and imagined what it would be like to burn the house down.

When it got cold outside, I rearranged the furniture in my bedroom so my bed was pressed right up against the window. There was a perpetual draft under that window because it didn't close all the way, and I put my bed there because I was fifteen and wanted to be miserable. I leaned my forehead against the cold glass and a ring of condensation formed around it, and I looked at the pine trees glowing lonely and blue outside, and I shivered and thought

too cold outside for angels

because those were Ed Sheeran lyrics.

Around that time, the insects began to come into my room. It started gradually: a brown-red centipede clinging to the edge of my mattress one day, a honey bee buzzing around my ceiling fan a few weeks later, a couple little crawly things in my bedding. And more and more, they came. The spiders and the moths. The silverfish and the wasps and the beetles of every shape and size and all the strange little hapless insects whose names nobody knows. They crawled under my pillows, and I found dried exoskeletons between my sheets, and something wove cobwebs in the corners of the room, and a stick bug walked across the mirror above my dresser. They tapped against my window that never really closed all the way, and they squirmed between the sill and the pane. They crawled and buzzed and burrowed and fluttered and bit.

One night a firefly got in. I heard it bumbling around in the dark, and I twisted restlessly in bed, wondering what malevolent little beast was in my room tonight. And then it glowed, briefly, and faded out again. Glowed again and faded. Glowed and faded. Glowed.

It was hard to be miserable then.

Her senior year of high school, my sister got a job as the receptionist at the tire store my father managed. When he left on his lunch break one day, she followed him. He went to meet a woman in the Kroger parking lot and they drove away together.

It turned out my sister dreamed of burning the house down, too. Unlike me, my sister is very determined about going after the things she wants.

It took her three weeks, I think, in total. A week or so of cutting class to follow my father around town, taking photos and videos on her cellphone of our father with this new woman. A week or so of conversations with our mother about what she had discovered. My younger brother and I noted the two of them with their heads bent together in the sunroom, whispering. Plotting. A week or so of this and then our mother came to us and said, "Do you think your father would ever cheat on me again?"

We both said yes. She talked to our older brother on the phone, and he said yes too.

"What do you think about the two of us getting a divorce?" she asked us.

In the end we all said: "Do it."

I found a lizard in the windowsill once, its ribcage so defined under its stretched gray skin that it looked uncomfortably human. It was starving, so I fed it a piece of cantaloupe from the kitchen, and it tipped its head back as it ate. I couldn't tell, from my angle, if it was swallowing the piece whole or savoring it.

A year or two and a legal battle and name-change later, my mother burned my father's yearbooks and their wedding photos and his Civil War documentary VHS tapes in the firepit outside. This was lawful after a divorced person's possessions went unclaimed for a certain amount of time, but it felt downright anarchic.

My mother videoed it on her phone. Her eyeliner was smudged all over her face, and she said, somewhat hectically, "I should have done this years ago."

Still I like the story of the Second Little Pig, who built a house too sturdy to fall at the first assault, just not sturdy enough to last forever. So you can remember the shape of the thing you've lost.

When our house foreclosed because my mother couldn't afford it on her own, her father bought it at auction and gave her the deed. Fathers can be like that sometimes.

When it got warm outside and the sunlight was yellow and the air was green and I could hear birds singing from anywhere in the house, my chest ached and I didn't know why. I pressed my fist to my chest to restrain it because there was something in there that wanted *out*.

That's the thing about houses. Body houses or memory houses, fairy tale houses or real-life houses, straw houses or stone houses. Sooner or later, there is something inside that wants out.

Elephants are closer in behavior to humans than other mammals, experiencing a range of emotions like joy in birth, grief in death and anxiety in unfamiliar territory.

Rebekah

In Hebrew, my name means *to tie*
or *to unite*, which looks like *to untie*.
I have tried it both ways, but there is
one that I like better. I go through
the stalls of my heart unlatching
latches and letting horses loose.

UNPRECEDENTED HEAT WAVE IN ANTARTICA

Interglacial

An ice age is made of two parts: glacial and interglacial, or small cycles of freezings and thawings within an existing ice age. Right now we are in a long interglacial period of the current ice age, which is why we have ice caps at all. Earth has been warm before. For instance, it was much warmer during the dinosaur age.

Hypothesis: Melting is not so bad. All things are temporary anyway.

Glacials and interglacials are controlled by three factors relating to the earth's orbit around the sun: its tilt, its wobble, and its eccentricity. Together, these factors make ice ages fairly predictable, but the expected glacial period is late.

Hypothesis: Earth is pregnant with its own demise.

Because of the rising levels of carbon dioxide, things are heating up when they should be cooling down. In the past, longer ice ages may have been caused by drastic drops in carbon dioxide. One example is when plate tectonics caused mountains to rise, pushed rock into the ocean. These rocks provided critical components that marine organisms used to build their shells. Over time, both the rocks and shells took carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

Hypothesis: Salvation will come from hermit crabs.

Requiem for a Tuesday

My mother is in California and wants me
to describe the humidity in the southeast. "It has been raining here
since yesterday." "Raining a lot?" "A consistent drizzle."
You must drizzle consistently. I do this only for you. You know
I hate to talk about the weather. Tell me about the mountains;
I will tell you of the soggy green question marks dangling
at the end of the world here, at the end
of those stick-straight sentences, those consistent pines.
You must pine consistently. Make a Claymation video.
Spend hours to buy seconds
of film for your camera, spends thousands
on film when the wolf has gone digital. Big and bad
as ever? Tuesday is a portrait of every Tuesday
before. You stand at the garden gate
and wish for an assault rifle. The raccoon has eaten your grapes
again? There is a big snail making progress
up the columns of the porch, the newspaper, the cathedral;
they have all gone digital. The pollution is not so bad this morning
and my mother is getting drunk on a raft in the Pacific.
There are lizards here, too. Small lizard, small leaf,
small leaf-hopping lizard, can I come with you
where you are going.

Question Mark Tree

I didn't plant the tree I just found it like this with
punctuation dangling by its laces and the bird's nest

on the ground eggs broken broken un-
broken but the mother won't come back for this

one like the bear who eats her own cub to survive

my dog tries to nurse her stillborn still
born pup while my brother gets the shovel

under the magnolia next to Rusty Daisy and Skip
and under the question marks

are the periods under the question marks are the dead
pets the question marks

wave in the wind and the winds says hush
when my brother cries with the cold stain

on his hands after the question mark
is the answer and the answer

is always to say I didn't kill this

A Sonnet is Breathing Down Our Necks

“Watch,” the women say. Our skeletons are always shattering-ready to decompose and sprout foxglove. Honeysuckle. Goldenrod and hydrangea. At the graveside, tall bunches of perfumed plastic chrysanthemums impose. Lily says, “Orange roses.” The flower she wants her funeral to remember. Ladyslipper and leafcup. Lionsheart and lotus. Her boyfriend buys her a bouquet for Valentine’s day and proposes.

When she leaves him a year later, she shows up on my doorstep with baby Periwinkle on one hip and a bottle of white wine in the diaper bag, black Cherokee hair in a messy bun and a ranunculus-shaped bruise on her ribcage. Wild dahlias and spider lilies. Chickweed and white clover. She wonders if her mother were alive, what she would think. “Watch,” the flowers say. There’s a feeling inside, clawing to get out.

That’s what the feeling is, not what the feeling is doing. Flowers say leave and never stop leaving. *Here* is a good place to depart from. That’s what smart women know. Magnolia, heather, camellia. Azalea, begonia, marigold, and petunia. Jasmine, rose, iris, violet, and peony. Flowers like girls, pressed close between pages. Women with names for perishing.

Witchcraft

I alone fathom my sister, know the lesser lash
bigger and the bigger, less. When the snake steals
into the house, she stands at the stove with

plantain lamb's cress
crabapple fennel
old soup beating eggs
& herbs w/ wooden spoon.

She sings the charm o'er each herb and the charm
into the man's mouth. Chamomile boils o'er in sea ridges
and vile adder to end a lifetime comes stealing
into the house. It stings the dog, a fast attack

nine fliers of reeking venom
red venom venom in blue
green venom venom in purplish
troll-blister on the dog's ears.

Sister flying [in here now] w/ wooden spoon & anger
to end a lifetime, knocks adder

into nine pieces into seven worlds,
strikes vicious against fiendish creature,
her wooden spoon broken
into nine glory-twigs.

Let all plants now spring up from their roots

mugwort cock's-spur
nettle and grass.

Apply salve to both ears; bathe
with beaten egg. Make a paste from water and ashes
& all men fathom my sister has might.

Common Loon

It's against the rules to fly now but you can
in secret. My cousin knows how.
She told me my fault is when I want to
know how I never ask
a bird I ask
a pilot. And legally the pilot must say:
 If you want to fly
 you must crack your chest
 and pour yourself into the wind
She scoffs: What do men know
of a sport birds invented?
and when she wants to fly
 she climbs the hill behind her house
 closes her eyes
That's it. The wind does the work
of wings if you let it.
Or you must crack your chest
and pour yourself into a bird.

The Ask

All surgery is god with scalpel in your chest reminding you that you should look deep, the subject said, and the surgeon: this ground we're stepping on here is wall to wall minefields. I feel like I'm just looking for the name of the disease that makes me make sense, adds the lab tech, the fieldhand. The farmer says I guess some things can't be explained. Only forgiven or not, the spouse. When we gaze up at the immensities of the stars we understand them because there are immensities within us, said the snail and snail-eater laughs, people forget about creatures that live in shells. Everyone else can move on. I can't. Or let it be bigger than your comprehension. Let it spool in and ravel outward. Don't you know spirals grow infinitely smaller the farther you follow them inward, but infinitely larger the farther you follow them out. And follow it out said the subject, the farmer, the doctor. Follow you out of you and look up. I'm looking for the face I had before the world was made, said the priestess. There's the ask and the answer, the disease and knowledge that you don't have to be cured. Follow it out, follow out, let it be bigger than your comprehension.

Unidentified Apple Picker

(1)

Black-and-white 3/4 length re-
print of Grover Cleveland Alexander (left)
and an unidentified man (right), apple-
picking. Both wear three-piece suits, overcoats,
[canes] and [top] hats. Posing for the camera,

each reaches up to grab an apple
gloved in a branch. Down
to bite an apple. Back to throw
an apple like a baseball. Forward
to shake hands.

(2)

Grover Cleveland Alexander and unidentified
man here called Apple Picker. Yesterday

may forget your name, Mr. Picker, but
because of you I remember the whole round

feeling of apple in hand, the steady reach
up, the snapping pull down. The sluice

from the bite. The sun in our eyes.

Epilogue

We aren't all made of iron and steel
when we're born but we get forged. The idea is
that you don't know how strong
you are until you have to be, then strain
and fuse and don't break. Find reasons
for breathing: on the highway,
the lure of a fishing pole spinning
windblown like a pinwheel
in the back of a pickup.

The oak leaf descending
slowly to the ground via spiderweb
attached to bow of pine branch
like a *deus ex machina* here to resolve
your plot.

The hawk perched on power-
line alongside interstate, waiting
for a mouse/rat or rabbit to dart
across the pavement, a voluntary snack.
Everything works out in the end:
we collide and we fuse and we bend.
The road cuts through the woods
and the cars churn death into the sky
and the fish get fished by men (yes,
we turned their own name into a verb
poised against them), the hawks swoop
and gobble rodents, the crows peck
roadkill coyotes. The leaves fall
and then grow back. This is almost
prologue. Something will happen next.

Between Hunter and Hunted

Yes, I have seen a doe eat greenery from corner
of porch gold at sundown
known deer only live long as their fear

Yes, I have held sky by apex of clouds
asked for countdown

known the difference between going and being: hungry
the similarity between running to and running from: here

Yes, I have sprouted horns trigger on the finger
held my breath
looking in the mirror

the similarity between heart and panic: attack
the exhale from the barrel
the blade between hide and muscle

the difference between alchemy and chemistry:
gold and point of reference

Survival Horror

how silly we realize everything to care about
becomes when the graves get un-dug
when the dead get born again
the saints have scars
backwards and starved for us
how gory
our knuckles and boots
frying pans and sporting equipment
the melee weapons of apocalypse
video games
 look up said one tyrannosaurus
 to another the sky is raining
 Red Hots and I know
the archeologists will marvel
at the smallness of our minds
how much we spent
to smell nice when the world reeks
like a dumpster fire

Why I'd Love You If the Sun Were a Husk

Because I've no objection
the moon is a streetlamp and I've
followed my shadow up the road
Because I want to know what happens
in the ever-after
the books sit shelves, pressed-lipped
like keeping a secret
Because hope is not the thing with feathers
anymore
it's the thing with wheels
Because here we are standing heel-heavy
in yesterday's tomorrow
did we get everything we wanted?
Because if you were stranded in your head
I'd be your getaway driver
Because I know your jagged edges, how you feel
a little strange and terrible
slip serrated blade smile into
thigh sheath and
analyze me
Because we're us and this is home
a good enough reason for anything
Because my heart is not what a heart meant
when I first learned to think of hearts
Because I like settings and systems and bones
that link us, one to another
a chain of chests and elbows

To Talk About My Body

I might say, sometimes the ankle I sprained
the summer after graduating high school
still aches (I might say high school still
aches) and I force posture to hide
my limp. Something is broken inside,
I know, but it was numb when it broke.

Sometimes scratching the itch in my perpetually
eczematic elbow crease feels good as sex, better.

I have these thighs, I might say.
I have thighs and they don't fit into most jeans.
The non-stretch and strain and rupture of denim.
The American Dream of me in blue jeans has been
postponed due to inclement weather. What do we

hush for? When the storm is on inside with the tumult
of hail-sounding rain drops heavy on roof, the pitter-
patter like blood. There's a difference, a man
told me, a difference between *spatter* and *splatter*.
The splatter is the liquid, release, the act of movement.
The spatter the portrait of blood on the wall.

I might talk about the sharp pain in my rib cage
on the right side when I lift my arm above my head.
Or the scar above my chin where
my father dropped me when I was three
and my teeth went through my lip.

I am more spatter than splatter. I sit still to be captured.
I would make a terrible rabbit. A deer. Squirrel. Boar.
Any running beast, any fire-hot muscle burn of lactic acid.
Here in view I become statuesque in the worst way. Freeze. Frame.
Freeze vocabulary. I am digesting invisibly

all the words I have swallowed.
I am writing my obituary.
I will give you anything.

NOTES

“The Moon is Not Electric” is a patchwritten poem. For the respect of other creators, and the satisfaction of the curious, the sources from which these lines take their content are as follows:

“The moon is rusting, and scientists are baffled” is adapted from several news headlines on the subject; “there are so many insects and parasites that I can’t sleep” is a bit of overhead dialogue; the lines ranging from, “he googled how to make a noose with an orange extension cord,” to “Foley’s Folly breaks smartly from the inside gate” come from the television show *Imposters*; “I use the names part of my brain to store body envy” is from the television show *iZombie*; “anger is fear aimed outward” comes from the YA novel *Gone* by Michael Grant; “you don’t have to turn hard to survive the wolves” is from a meme about how especially woolly sheep become impervious to predators; “the globe of the floor is so small that you can always see over the edge” comes from C.S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*.

“Long Distance” started as a found poem from Eva Zekany’s article, “The Hauntology of Media Addiction,” which was originally published through the University of Edinburgh’s *FORUM* journal, although I encountered it on Tumblr.

“Void of Space,” aside from being inspired by and titled after a René Magritte painting, takes some of its language from a comment he made about his use of the jingle bell motif in various paintings: “I caused the iron bells hanging from the necks of our admirable horses to sprout like dangerous plants at the edge of an abyss.” Painting and quotation can be found on the Guggenheim website.

“Ghost Phenomena,” aside from the influence of Friedrich Kittler, owes much to Dr. Craig Carey and his Weird 19th Century class. The line “*Zoom rhymes with doom*” is his.

The italicized portions in “Kilonova” come from the article “How the Universe Creates Gold” by Duncan Brown and Edo Berger, which can be found on the EarthSky website.

The italicized phrase from “Bodymind” comes from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Steven Chbosky.

“Part Etymology” began as a lipogram of a workshop poem by David Greenspan.

The italicized portions of “Interglacial” were inspired by the article “How Often Do Ice Ages Happen?” by Laura Geggel, which can be found on the Live Science website.

The title of “Requiem for a Tuesday” comes from the television show *Parks and Recreation*, season 4, episode 11, “The Comeback Kid,” in which one character makes a Claymation video by the same name.

“Witchcraft” takes the majority of its language from a translation of the Old English “Nine Herbs Charm.”

“The Ask” is another patchwritten poem. The source material is as follows:

The line “this ground we’re stepping on here is wall to wall minefields” comes from the movie *How Do You Know*, directed by James L. Brookes; “I feel like I’m just looking for the name of the disease that makes me make sense” is from the film *We’ll Never Have Paris*, directed by Simon Helberg and Jocelyn Towne; “I guess some things can’t be explained, only forgiven or not” and “people forget about creatures that live in shells” come from the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens; “When we gaze up at the immensities of the stars we understand them because there are immensities within us” comes from the television show *The Big Bang Theory*; “let it be bigger than your comprehension” is from the film *Bliss*, directed by Mike Cahill; “spirals grow infinitely smaller the farther you follow them inward, but infinitely larger the farther you follow them out” comes from the John Green novel *Turtles All the Way Down*; “I’m looking for the face I had before the world was made” is from W.B. Yeats “Before the World Was Made;” “the ask and the answer” is taken from the title of the second book in the Chaos Walking series by Patrick Ness.