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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE NAMING OF STRAYS

by

Erin Elizabeth Smith

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2009

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The University of Southern Mississippi

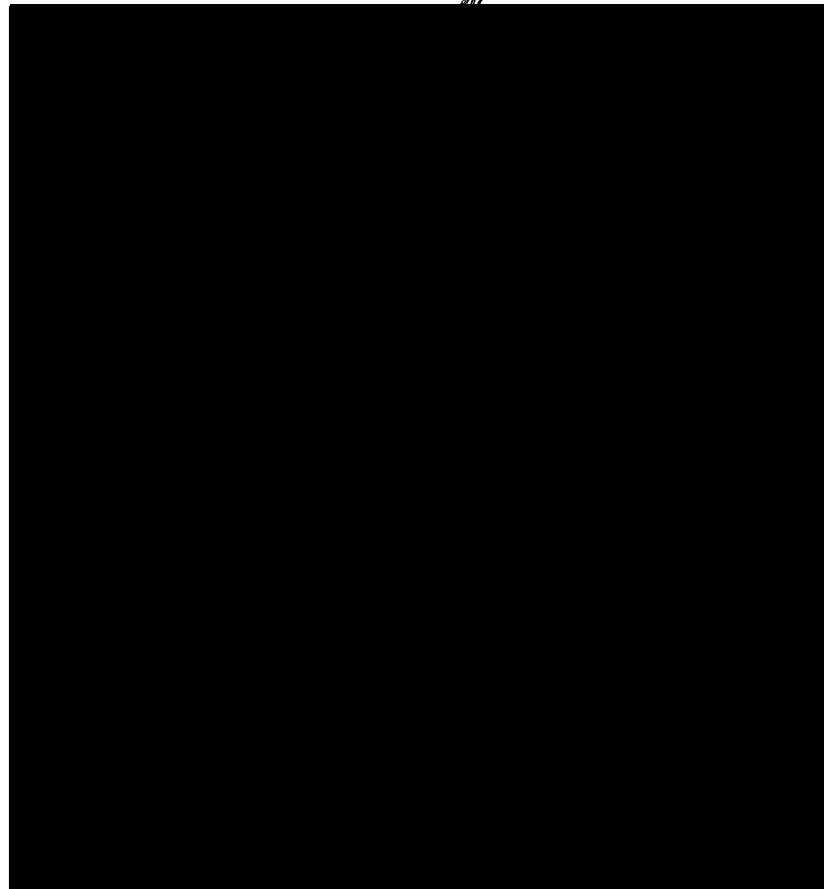
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ABSTRACT

THE NAMING OF STRAYS

by Erin Elizabeth Smith

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The Naming of Strays is a collection of poems that deal with issues of place, gender power, sexual fidelity, and transience. While the majority of the poems are written in free verse, the dissertation also features a handful of formal poems including sonnets, sestinas, and prose poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

In Adrienne Rich's 1968 poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," she ruminates how:

What happens between us
has happened for centuries
we know it from literature

still it happens

sexual jealousy
outflung hand
beating bed

dryness of mouth
after panting
there are books that describe all this
and they are useless

The poems in *The Naming of Strays* deal with the same themes that have haunted writers for centuries – sexual love, fidelity, patience, geographic transience. Yet as Rich believes, while these ideas have been interwoven into everything from Shakespeare to Eliot, there is a reason for their continued reemergence. Whether it be the importance of sexual fidelity to one's peace of mind that defines Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or the belief in emotional floundering that Jorie Graham posits in the opening poem of *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* – "The way things work / is that eventually / something catches" – themes repeat themselves over and over. This belief is intrinsic to my collection, as that the stories and poems of other women make continued showings throughout, and the narrator continues to make the same mistakes despite her literary knowledge. At the close of the poem, Rich states "no one knows what may happen / though the books tell everything // *burn the texts* said Artaud." *The Naming of*

Strays is a move not toward burning previous histories, but instead engaging them in a shared dialogue of empathy, an understanding in the humanity that all history shares.

Myth and the Mythos of Women

Growing up I was a grammar school scholar on Greek and Roman mythology and had always been fascinated by what the human brain creates to explain mystery. What I was attracted to in Greek myths is the power that women hold, ruling not only as the goddesses of love and the home, but also of wisdom and the hunt. On Olympus, one's realm of influence is not limited to a sexually appropriate role. While later I realized that there were often as many gendered problems with the gods as there are with mortals – Zeus's philandering, the obnoxious beauty contest Paris was forced to judge, Pandora's curiosity that mirrored Eve's fall – there still seemed to be something liberating in what the women of those old stories can do, especially compared with the women of the Bible or other more legitimized religions. As Mary R. Lefkowitz comments in her book, *Women in Greek Myth*, "even now when man has acquired greater power than ever before to alter the natural world, the old myths continue to haunt us, not just in the form of nymphs and shepherds on vases and garden statuary, but in many common assumptions about the shape of human experiences" (xv).

During my Master's program, I took a course in Celtic mythology at the University of Illinois, where I found that many of these same powerful women had been transformed into characters of malevolence or banal piety. Instead of Athena's strength of intellect, one had Queen Medb in *The Tain*, whose power grab at the kingdom of Eerie

was easily thwarted by Cu Chulaind, and the woman warrior Aife is raped by the same hero in an earlier myth. Like Yeats, though, it was many of these women I found myself most drawn toward despite (or perhaps because of) their diminished power. In particular, I was fascinated with the story of Emer, the eventual wife of Cu Chulaind, who is extolled for having “possessed the six gifts of womanhood: beauty, voice, sweet speech, skill in needlework, wisdom, chastity” (Mackillop 181). This woman, much like Penelope before her, is forced to wait out her lover’s infidelities (and eventually endure them throughout her marriage) in order to maintain the stability of their relationship. Not only did I empathize with Emer’s impatience for her lover’s return, but I also felt a sort of kinship with her inability to change the course of her life, her desire to act and the familial and societal restraints that hinders her in doing so.

Irish poet Sorley Maclean, whose most famous collection, *Dain do Eimhir* (*Poems to Eimir*), uses the ideal of Emer to “embrace several different women, covered in the fashion of a *senhal* in the work of a Provençal troubadour by this name drawn from Celtic legend” (Whyte 11).¹ However, the poems dedicated and inspired by the suffering of Emer in this work are meant more as discussions with the women herself. In refusing to sentimentalize her, as Maclean does, I am trying to bring back the aforementioned shared humanity between Emer and me. Likewise, in dealing with notions of Penelope and Eve (“Basement of Eden”) as women who are deceived through power by the men they love, it becomes easier to deal with my own emotional blindness. Certainly these stories do not work as allegories for the ways in which to live our lives, but rather a means of enriching our own narratives and joining them to a larger humanity. As Louise

¹ Eimhir is an alternate spelling of Emer.

Glück, herself a poet who frequently uses myth as a means of speaking about her own life, has stated,

We all, at some point, love, with the risks involved, the vulnerabilities involved, the disappointments and great thrills of passion. This is common human experience, so what you use is the self as a laboratory, in which to practice, master, what seem to you central human dilemmas. (Cavalieri 1)

Form, Function, and Strays

In 1960, Robert Lowell discussed the state of American poetry in terms of “the cooked” versus “the raw.” This metaphor was meant to exemplify the two current modes of poetry, which fluctuated between the raw emotion and free styling of the Beats and the Confessionalists and the rediscovered tightness of emotion and form of the academic Formalists. This belief that the form of the emotion follows the form of the language (and vice versa) was certainly not a new idea, being extolled in previous generations by Charles Olson (most notably in his call for “open field” poetry in his famous essay “Projective Verse) and others. With the contemporary poets of the past twenty years, however, Lowell’s dichotomy doesn’t seem to stand as distinctively as it previously did. Today, many poets fluctuate between a number of forms, both traditional and experimental, in the same collections, and few writers write solely in one specific formal style anymore. Yet this does not mean that the form/function correlation does not still hold; now, more so, it is that writers have access to a wider range of poetic formulations into which they may mold their work.

During my time at Illinois, my then advisor told me that my work was too neat, too tightly wound into itself, the “cooked” kind of poetry that Lowell said was “expert and remote... constructed as a sort of mechanical or cat-nip mouse for graduate seminars” (qtd. in Hamilton 277). In order to break me of this habit, or rather, to loosen my poetic tongue, my advisor recommended I write what he referred to as “block poems”—prose poems without capitalization, traditional punctuation, and written as a stream-of-consciousness exercise. In future drafts, it was fine to shape this raw linguistic clay into neater and more traditional verse, but he believed that the form in which they were originally written would fundamentally change the subject and emotional presence of my poems. He was right. Instead of creating the compact, tidy poems that I had been writing again and again (perhaps from reading too much Jane Hirschfield and Jorie Graham), the poems were messy, sprawling, and emotionally difficult. Since then I have come to utilize this method of writing more frequently, particularly when my subject eludes me, and many of the prose poems (and several of the more traditionally formatted poems) in this collection came from these exercises in automatic writing.

Ironically, these “raw” poems have more in common with my formal, “cooked” ones than they do with my traditional free verse. Seamus Heaney once quipped in an interview, “The quick free verse poem sometimes happens; but, oddly enough, my experience is that the poem comes more quickly if there is a form” (O’Driscoll 1). This statement continues to be true in my own work. When given a formal element to guide a poem, the verse seems to move quicker as if the restraints are writing the work as much as I am. Also, in forcing me outside of the comfort zone of Frost’s net-less tennis, the poems often end up in much stranger places that I would have anticipated. Thus, while I

feel that many of my free verse poems are working toward a predetermined end line, the poetic restraints of form push the work outside of the direct progression, ironic considering that one can more easily map the poetic topography of form than free verse.

Not only are many of the poems in the collection intentionally formatted to highlight the themes (the rush of memories in seeing an ex in a coffee shop shown through the breathlessness of a prose poem, the inevitability of infidelity as written in the repetitive structure of a sestina), but the collection itself is formatted through the multiple meanings of the word “stray,” which has numerous definitions in this collection. Since the opening section deals with the definition “to wander from the direct way, deviate,” the poems are meant reflect both a movement of place as well as a movement in mental state. They ramble from the past to the present, moving around through the ideas of loss and rebirth. The second section is inspired by the idea of straying as a form of infidelity (“to wander from the path of rectitude, to err”), looking specifically at the aforementioned notions of femininity and the way that depression can lead to a philosophical/sexual groping for stability. The third section is a digression of sorts itself—the definition for this section is literally “to wander up and down free from control, to roam about”—and begins to look back at different cities in order to parse out the places from which my poetic themes arose. This section stares back at stories from New York and Illinois and starts to place them within the context of a life in Mississippi—how each path leads to the newest. In the final section, the definition of stray as a stray animal is seen specifically in the titular poem of the collection, where the piece muses on the idea that “love is simply the naming of strays,” that giving a name to a person is what makes them real. By giving structure to the collection, I feel that it

works not only to tie both the cooked and the raw together, but give the latter a more intellectual grounding, lightly searing, per se, those sushi-esque poems.

Sex, Booze, and Jane Miller

I spent the summer before moving to Mississippi reading the entirety of Jane Miller's and Kim Addonizio's literary repertoire. While I had read any number of male writers who were frank about their sexuality, drinking, and drug use, I still felt that the majority of female writers to whom I had been introduced were still much more interested in the bucolic and pastoral rather than the frankness of lines like Miller's "I intend to / pace the pier and receive / the appreciation of the fishermen. / I have a mind to fuck / one for the afternoon. This probably won't happen, and not / because I'm not good looking, and tender / in grief" (111). Much like the block writing exercises, these collections were a liberation of sorts for me, as I wanted, in many ways, to replicate the lyricism of these two poets while balancing racier topics than those which I had previously explored.

There was no doubt that many of my earlier poems had been sexual in nature, but often, like a good Georgia O'Keefe, the sexuality was hidden within line breaks and imagery, not as jarring as Addonizio's "When I walk in, / men buy me drinks before I even reach the bar. // They fall in love with me after one night, / even if we never touch" (25). The flatness of the narrator's sexual prowess, much like in the Miller quote above, shows a bravado that I related to in these two women. I became fascinated with the female use of sex as power, but also the limitations of that use. Many of the poems in the

second section of the collection, “Charity” and “Drinking Poem” in particular, are directly influenced by these two writers, whereas work like “Coming to Terms” and “Lovebugs” are more reminiscent of the pastoral work of poets like Robert Hass and Mary Oliver.

For me, as well, it was not only the narrator’s openness regarding her sexuality, but also how frequently sex and alcohol were tied together. I remember talking to a colleague at a bar one night early into my PhD, discussing how often writers in our department drank, and how rarely that turned up in the poems. In Addonizio’s book *what is this thing called love*, the poems are just as often about alcohol as they are about sex or death or love. In the same way that many of the Beats were mocked for their blatant sexuality, the transparency of her subjects has divided audiences on her work. Addonizio herself states

I get all kinds of negative feedback from various quarters, about being too confessional or personal or whatever ax someone's got to grind. I'm sure there are some people who are offended by my work. There are certainly some who are dismissive of my subject matter. Any time you put yourself out there, you can't control what people are going to think or how they're going to react. (Mhyana 1)

I worry about this in my own, the way that overt confessionalism can sometimes limit the experience of the poem to the experience of the poet. Yet there’s something to be said for the empathy that poems based around a first person narrator can create. In Miller’s “Sunset Over Handmade Church,” there is something to the specificity of lines like “What a night in a featherbed / in a room with a high ceiling, / life has been good, good,

finding / our empty purse & providing / the wine we drink under a quilt. / I did not want anyone to see that my face was so happy” (125). While the lines themselves are obviously directed to a specific moment in the author’s life, the fact that it reminds me of similar times from my own existence does more for me than any sweeping abstraction or poems where the characters are generalized to the third person. In reading poems these poets’ work, I never feel as if they are being egotistical or off-putting in their use of the overtly personal, rather that they are creating portraits of the greater humanity that poems based on mythology or history also do by making the “I” a character unto herself, a part of a greater cast list of literature.

Conclusion

In many ways, *The Naming of Strays* picks up where my last collection left off, beginning with the end of a relationship and my own floundering to find peace in a land similar to where I grew up. These poems do deal more overtly with sexuality—and its emotional repercussions—than the previous work, as well as issues of infidelity, self-acceptance, and the struggle to find peace. Here the work has less to do with the rootlessness of existence and more about the attempts at creating a stability that is again and again undercut, either through alcohol, geography, or impatience. Like Rich says, “there are books that describe all this / and they are useless.” These poems are meant to exemplify this idea; regardless of what we learn through history or literature or mythology, one has to be their own “I,” live their mistakes for themselves, and make something beautiful out of what they lose.

I.

stray (v) to wander from the direct way, deviate.

HOW TO FALL IN LOVE

Here is where you pack the heart. In a small dark box. A box cut for heart-shaped things. Like a case for a French horn, a crystal paperweight. It can be stored anywhere – in a cool linen closet, in the cat-eyed dark beneath your bed. You may line the box with tissue. You may spin the combination on its fire-proof lock. You may look at it sadly or punch the fist-sized object with your own closed palm. But you must forget it, must not dream about its soprano in the shower, its sleepy Southern lilt.

Once it is packed and put away, go outside. The sun will set, but before it does, it will pour hotly onto your little shoulders. It will sink into your neighbor's roof, and as it turns the sky a candy-colored blue, you must say aloud "It will not be like this again. It cannot." When you do, there will be a moment when you turn back toward your house. You will see something common – a kitchen window, a shovel leaning against your porch – and it will be transformed. Touch the doorknob to your house. Hold it firmly in your hand until it's warm. Then turn it. You will turn it slowly. You will go back in.

A BOX OF PAPERCLIPS

In some ways it's simple. Here
is the weight of a hand. It is a box
of paperclips laid on a chest. It is the wet
heat of Mississippi, a longing
of the bones to be free
of the skin, the way they lean
and lean from the body
into the frenetic air.

Or the hollowed skull
of an acorn squash. A postcard
on a refrigerator door.
The haloes of halogen
and that unformed object
at the end of the trail.

Love, what does this turn
us into? What does distance do
except open like a cracked geode
to reveal itself – bright
and impossibly hard.

AROMATICS

On John's countertop
in a pair of black heels,
I waited for him
to say we were through,
but instead we made a soup
of Portobello, lentils,
kale. I stirred above the stove,
while the broth boiled
into steam, its deep
tomato red warming
the house. He chopped
garlic into fine squares.
In bed I licked its scent
from his skin.

Months later, he calls
to give back my pan.
We meet in the city,
that meal a ghost story –
the dead rising
in the supermarkets
to buy rosemary and wine.
I stand in the street,
the black weight
in my hand, and I think
about the smoky paprika,
Hungarian sausage,
one yellow onion gone
translucent in the base –
and I feel the fever
of the city's ovens rise up
in that single-bladed cold.

ELEMENTAL

The child burns.
Like the scaled backs
of summer skinks,
the poker hot feel
of ribs in the skin.

Or rather we think she does,
beneath the cycling smoke
on a Southern horizon.
We hear a kettle high sigh

in a red window,
a voice in the neighbor's
farmhouse turned
an ibisco of flame.

Do we save her?
Secure our lungs
in their flesh sacks
and pull the pinafores girl

to our hot, freckled cheek.
Does she belong to us?
Can she speak anymore?
We must put her on an island

too green to burn.
Hold her so still
that the ember is drawn
from the limbs.

BASEMENT OF EDEN

for Christine & Adam

The three of us escape into the earth,
the basement quarried for this waiting.
These storms are simple –

the sky spins, trees leap from their roots,
then the black passes and nothing
is changed. Still there is a moment

we think the end and we will be left
to repopulate this city – a woman who kneads air
into bread and out of clay, a man who takes

rhythm from outside the body, and me,
named for a country that tried this
and failed. If no one else survived,

must we touch down on the emptied land
and fill it? Must we bear this city,
until what we carry razes us?

We would be two women and Adam,
who would point into the tilled distance,
call it time.

COMING TO TERMS

It is the season of artichokes
and lemon risotto. The azaleas
lash into pink, while chain-link
fence sags with honey-
suckle and summer basil blast
through potted soil. My cat tears
the head from a shrew. It's spring
in Mississippi. This March
I'm twenty-seven, an age
that used to feel impossible.
There is no alphabet for time,
the second hands with their tinny voice,
the deafening volume of our bones.

LOVEBUGS

Honeymoon flies, telephonebugs,
a life of endless in-flight copulation.
They swarm the humidity from the Gulf
to the wet Carolinas. Not a true bug
in the order *Hemiptera*, but a fly
that lifts from grassy lands, siphons
the nectar of magnolia, oleander. They bang
into banisters, off the flushed cheeks of men
waiting for buses, a ten-year-old girl's
open-mouthed laughter. Then, after it all,
the male just dies, corpse dragged off
by the female who lays her eggs
and joins him. The slow drift
of the insects like campfire ash,
the splashed bodies Pollocked
on each bumper, love turned
beast and blood in the streets.

DRAWING WHAT I HEAR

In the coffee shop, the last time I see him, I hear him move from me. My friend is saying "I don't know what he'll do. I don't like him anymore." She is talking about her husband. There is a swallow in my throat. Water drips into a pot. Steam. My body is shrill, the way the lids lower and brush to him. His hat, his shirt, they make no noise, but they did when he threw them on his bed, always unmade, always cold and expectant. Though some nights last winter we made it warm and I heard him say my name. And him saying, "Wait. No." Then the turning of my body in his hands. The sounds of sheets bunched at the heels. The night he told me about the ex who held him like I did. I hear his sink drip in the bathroom and do not rise to stop it. Dishes make glass sounds in the sink. The click click click of a pilot light and the opening conversation of flame. The near silent way his hand covered mine at the bar the first night I met him. The night he said "Come in." And I did. And here today, my friend saying "He was never this way. Or he always was." I say "Come here," and her hair makes a sound across my cheek. I do not hear the closed door of his leaving, his car start up in the lot. Instead I remember fingers in his hair the last day I knew him. The way I didn't say his name when he passed. The way the air didn't raise its breath to voice, but it could have been the sound of his voice. The sound of his voice saying "No" and then the brushfire in my bones, the low, long crackle.

SHERBET

In line at the grocery store, a man
is buying sherbet and sugar cones.
The tropical neapolitan of iced fruit
just in front of my basket
of red pepper, fleshy eggplant.

Tonight, alone, I'll make rice for curry,
the bottle of green paste whisked
through canned milk, heat in the nose
from backyard jalapenos. I'll roll
basil like tobacco, snipping
the ends into the pot, dice greens
into parchment strips and hold
the bowl in my lap and watch TV.

I know this man could be buying
his plastic-bellied sweetness for children,
a woman who bathes open-doored,
loves to kiss the cool lime syrup
from him after he licks his way to the cone,

but anymore, it's only sadness I can see –
his drooped neck, the unzipped
windbreaker opened to a grey shirt.
The certain possibility of spoons
in the soft, milky fruit, of someone alone
touching his tongue to the cool
center of impossible pink.

THE CHAINSAW BEARS

The chainsaw bears are unhappy –
no one can tell this from their scabbed on
smiles, the lacquer black wood that defines
their species. The wide-hatted tourists’
children finger the nicks in their bellies,
stuff their ears with daffodils. Each winter
they sleep in dim souvenir shops, untouched
and unbothered by the pincushion cold –
until the season of breaking moves them
into the yards of summer homes,
where the zoom lens sun bleaches
their faces until they are grey,
then dun, then nothing more
than the shadows of trees
they were and the beasts
someone wanted them to be.

OVERPASS

Running this morning,
I stood above the interstate traffic,
the dulled earth color of cars
traveling beneath. I held
my knees and breathed
through a wide mouth,
the green mileage signs to cities
unreadable in the distance.

You were not there when I wanted
to tell you it was striking,
the trucks like long-bodied
swimmers, the steadfast
pine coming back
from the last storm that shucked
them. And watching it alone,
breath filled the muscle and the heart
was revved and flooded with blood.

HALCYON

There is a lone woman in the community pool.
Her head pops from the moving blue. Childlike
in her one-piece, she backstrokes along a thin lane.

She holds a breath and lunges
against the late June air. She shakes her head,
rises from each stair, a chlorinated Venus
jeweled in her solitude, forward momentum.

TRANSFORMATION

What precise arcs of color
in transformation. First a girl
becomes a walking stick, then
a lioness licking back

a full mane. Each flirtation
apes solidity, each thrust
hip spirals into toothpaste,
green tea in a microwave.

I need to be a thimble
on a girl's tiny right hand.
The chartreuse drip of evening.
Sliced starfruit. A dashing man.

I cannot be this lounge chair
in the spiced sun anymore.

II.

stray (v) to wander from the path of rectitude, to err.

WHEN I THINK OF SORROW I THINK OF SPARROWS

When I think of sorrow I always think of sparrows. And zebra finches flushing to twice their size then shrinking again to something small something that disappears. I think of the rabbit that watches me from the lawn that doesn't run when I startle it walking to the laundry mat in my pajamas tipsy from drinking alone though they say wine might be good for me. And really I still smile when I watch the squirrels chase each other along the telephone line but it's on a night like this when I realize I can't see myself alive in twenty years though I can see myself in the kitchen, in anybody's kitchen, closing my eyes, biting down on a barrel like it's a muffin like it's birthday cake. And there are times when the shape of my hands on my thighs is almost enough. When the cold summer rain is almost enough. when the phone ringing in the other room is like a sparrow singing in the too-late morning when I'm still in bed when I'm watching the ceiling waiting for it to open to cave in. Waiting for the neighbor's dog to start barking for the fire engines blowing through the red lights for the moment when I turn and am forced to realize no one's there and that someone could be. That the bed is too big. That there are squirrels in every city and they could be the same squirrels really. Realize there will never be a time when it feels easy. Realize no matter how much I wish it the ceiling is solid and the rain is over and I'm here and cold and walking in the street at two with a basket of dirty sheets. Realize the rabbit has such large eyes and when I faint toward it, it takes off into the street. And somehow I'm surprised when its tail flashes like a lighthouse like a mirror in the sun.

CHARITY

after Rubens' "Roman Charity"

Red is the beginning,
the neckline lapsing
into the cupped white
breast she holds to him
like a spoon. In his eyes
is the feasting
of mealworms, a gnashing
feral hunger. For me it is not
quite the same, my back
pocked by brick, the quick
wildflower of hands
eclipsing a knee. The wet sand
that gives to the feet,
this charitable patience.
What alms do I have
but unbuttoning,
an erection of French
bread in a bag, the blush
of winter on a nose,
that canvas of my shoulderblade
in some man's dark,
humming room.

DRINKING POEM

I was probably drunk –
it's amazing more poems
don't start this way. The shot
glass O of my mouth
against his on the loveseat.
My bones so small,
like he was a slat wood
raft, a causeway through
the dirty Pontchartrain.

The day before my boyfriend came
home from London
I woke up with my pants
inside-out, a slit-eyed
memory of myself in a
bathroom, fumbling
with my tongued pockets.
And the day after he said
he would leave again,
I closed the wine bar
with another man, who cupped
my knee in his white horse
of a car and sucked
the air from between
our drowned bodies.

There is no forgiveness
in empty bottles, the silent
teeth of blackouts on bourbon
and cheap shiraz, but today
I found my landlord's white
pinwheel flowers had become
ten thousand blackberries
licking up my chain-link fence.
And my bell peppers have popped
from their starry beginnings
into the hard fetus of fruit.

I wonder sometimes
if patience turns us hard
like the hulled seeds of pumpkins
left to heat. Wait translated
into nothing more

than the brief pyrotechnics
of skin, the sure pop
of a button through a hole.
That long burn of a new cigarette
outside my favorite dive.

FLAMMABLE

Café Du Monde, New Orleans

Though we never set the table on fire,
we wanted to – a tundra of powdered
sugar flammable as polyester.
The next morning broke dazzling and awkward
and we must all try to go back to who
we were – acrobats of the unspoken,
the ones who would light the sweetened igloos
blowing the slim match clean above the burn.
But waking up together leaves us changed –
this shoulder marked in lips is no longer
my own, the skin made communal and strange
in the slim-sheeted dawn. What real danger
could there have been in restraint, bladed light
held above a simple promise of heat?

PENELOPE

First, I planted hyacinth in the courtyard,
pruning the wayward petals, which lilted
at my over-attendance, my slick, heavy watering can.

Next, I made robes for your father, brushing the velvet
'til it was colt-soft and bright. Polished the buttons,
weaved gold into his yellow cords.

In the fifteenth year, I took to oils, making the fine strokes
of my tedium into your distant ship. I painted you
a thousand ways, falling from the mast, the prow,

from the ocean into the even ebb of Styx.
Then my doorbell took to sounding –
I was forced to replace the welcome mat

with "Beware of Dog". But men persisted,
revived my gardens, dry-cleaned the robes,
auctioned my mid-day sketches for kingdoms, armies.

I took to tapestry only then to dissuade
their ardent verse, their gracious doors and coats.
This I loved though – the goldfish

of my hands slipping the weave. Creating
a cape of scenery, a story of thread.
I was patient with my unraveling, promising

once I finished this, my centerpiece, my heart
of cotton, I would take another from the sea –
a strange jellyfish, a bright and foreign conch.

When you arrived with your exultation
of flag, I was the first to welcome you,
with an albatross shot from the sea,

two arms at the ledge. And now that you're back,
turning in my bed, eating with your fingers,
grabbing my thighs in sleep,

I leave the waiting for the tired
sun, paper our house with tapestries,
finishing everything I have begun.

THE PATIENCE OF EMER

In Celtic mythology, Emer was said to possess the six gifts of womanhood: beauty, gentle words, a sweet voice, wisdom, skill at needlework, and chastity.

The Celtic phrase for beauty
is *skeima*, that word
that sounds the sweet
structure of certainty, the wisdom
in the slit eye of a needle,
its impossible chastity.

In the Irish loam, dogs chase
rabbits into their holes. These brutes
do not know the charming dark, how it needles
into each den, wards
off the sunlight of defense. How wise.
If I could sleep through the sweet

nights, the sun sweating
the hair on my neck to its chaste
down, maybe I could wait – the whys
muted into the sullen beauty
of sleep and reckless dream. No words
for promise or the animal need

that reaches its fist from the needless
chest, the unanswerable sweet
tooth in a chapel of salt. And still no word
from you in that unchaste
female country. The green buttes
of Scotland where the women are wiser

needing no man, while
I must be this woman with a needle
pulled into one hole. Beautiful
as carved alabaster, a suite
of ordered music. Yet to give chase
would undo the beautiful

homecoming. To acknowledge the beauties
that belittle my absence, the wise
distance in their ribcage. No. To chase
is to act, to melt the needle

of its use. Waiting is what sweetens
and Patience is both a woman's beauty

and her name. Chased, we turn to words,
trees, and brutes. Nothing so wise
as this stasis, need made ferocious and sweet.

THE CHAINSAW BEARS

The chainsaw bears are lonely –
the sunglassed tourists stroll

the boardwalk with latticed hands
and everyone in this vacation town

seems to be in love. The bears should
know better, but they can't want

like that. Carved from the solid
trunks of felled hemlock

they have no stomachs
that hunger, no blood that burns

beneath the skin. Not even
cupped paws to offer,

gesture 'Closer' or smooth
another's splintered back.

In their bodies there is nothing
to fill, no holes to mend.

Just the stiff hope that today
they'll be arranged on the store porch

so that someone will brush by
with palms or open fingers,

or stop and look into
their black, unblinking eyes.

FEBRUARY

Two days before my mother's birthday,
the daffodils nub their way through

Missouri's artie lawn – the bellybuttons
of blonde opening as they do in the Carolinas,

the yellow that signifies rest or resolve.
Like how my grandmother's forsythia breaks

in the blushing spring, the dandelions
with their removable heads, their roots

that suck and suck at the planless earth.
Yet in Mississippi the magnolia is still

hunched and green, budless, though the hot
morning seeped through my window like chamomile

as if light could become a body,
as if this season could build from it home.

GHOST LIMB

Depression is boring, I think.

-Anne Sexton

Happiness is boring, I think, an oasis
between sand and the close-fitting heat.
Between the shuffling din
of big city traffic and tail lights
that blink in a motionless draw.

I don't trust the way the days canter up,
but I'm afraid not to want it. Afraid I'll forget
where the mouth goes, where the muscle binds
tight to the bone. That I'll build a house
only to set it aflame, the cat's unearthly howl
in the quick-talking blaze.

Each day I wake in the same bed,
the ceiling white, the light in the window
like warm cream. The cat paws at my lover
who pulls me to his chest. I hold
his hand. I know the source
of my restlessness but do not
name it,

while dawn breaks with the same
fleshy flourish as a heart
opened wide with a knife, stuck forever
on the note it began.

FIDELITY

In the husky warmth of the Pine Belt, fidelity
 is impossible. Every road leads to a home
 built of sticks, of straw, and the dogs
 are not wolves, per se, but carnivorous as love.
 Who can hold still in this place? This bed
 that opens like a curtain, the morning distant as London,

that undreamable city where he lives. London,
 like a memory of heat that marks the skin, the fidelity
 of ghosts. Last summer, we made our bed
 large with how close we slept, as if a home,
 for a moment, were possible. As if hope or love
 could salvage us from the dogged

winter that would follow. From the wet and bony dog
 that howls on our doorsteps. From the London
 fog that doesn't rise despite how much we do not love
 that shadowy unknown. It's not fidelity
 that keeps a groomed herb garden, a home
 as white as writer's block. It does not make the bed

so tight that one cannot slip in, the clean bed-
 sheets cool as they can be lonesome. I hear dogs
 wail into the crisp dark, their home
 turned prison in the slumber of others. In London
 he calls and I'm cupped inside another man, fidelity
 having run empty on the long, unlit interstate. I'm sorry, love,

but the body is a field of lilies, only lovely
 when there is water and sun. Green flower beds
 to root and bulb in. The strict fidelities
 of a growing season. Are the flowers to blame for dogs
 that bury shoes in their soil, the Londons
 that are built where something might bloom. Come home.

There is still time to plant peach trees. Frame a home
 that's built of brick, a chimney that draws. Learn to love
 the held breath, the steady hand. What does London
 have over this city? Here, we could live in one bed,
 make wheat flour scones. Let in that wet, sad-eyed dog
 and name her Patience. Must we always keep this fidelity

to distance, to London's ancient, chilly homes?

In paintings, fidelity is not a flower or love
or a one-manned bed, but a pale and whimpering dog.

III.

stray (v) to wander up and down free from control, to roam about

LOVE IN MISSISSIPPI

is always a metaphor. Sheep
grazing on the shorn heath,
the grinding of vegetables
into a cool green soup.
Corridors of halogen
mark the straight
routes home, the turns
we miss or accidentally take.
Like the housewife pansies
or the woman who owns
a badger and leashes
it in the park. Rather no,
that was love in New York
where the rivers erected
themselves in the patchwork spring
and the windows were so small
even I could not slip through.

SECRET LOVE SONG

Six months ago, I had a dream everything was white –
the walls and pillows, my body slim and sunless on the sheets.
And it was you there, not the man I fell to sleep with,

hands mapping my hips, face lit like a chandelier.
There is something I needed to tell you.
Not this dream, though when I woke,

my chest felt like the walls of something lived in.
No, it was that we should have known, that night in November,
when the wind was bitter and smelled like snow.

When we broke to find our cars in the cold, waving,
waving as if our hands were the flags of two nations,
small and close enough to be one.

CITYSCAPES

1. Binghamton

This was the start of New York –
the hewn mountains nearly rising
with breath, winter's clean teeth
gnawing the maples. It's not
nostalgia, that word that staples
homecoming to *grief*. Rather the ear's
pillow heart, the roving home
like footfall in thick October brush.

2. Champaign

Some say memory is incurable,
but the prairie state can hypnotize
anyone into thinking all that's left
is a deaf interstate, the deadlock
of Illinois corn broken
by soy beans, skyscrapers.
No casserole dishes or dioramas
of families at the hearth.
No architected angels in new snow.

3. Hattiesburg

At night every car is the same
in this teacup city. History
a long-throated soprano or the purring
of stray. I wasn't willed anything
but the brown South, endless stalks
of pine, unbearable crimson skin.
But the welcome sign says *Mississippi:*
It's Like Coming Home. And it is,
sometimes, with all its pyrotechnic
lightning, a boomerang
of blackbirds against the six o'clock sky.

AT THE NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

I obsess about the wired flight
of stuffed starlings, how despite
their nature, they do not snap
at the songbirds in this mobile,
nor call – car sirens and snags
of dialogue in the throat.
Their freckled chest heaveless
and the hard marbles of their eyes
black as punctuation.

Does every state have birds strung
to a ceiling? In my hometown,
these same histories – the colonial
specter in the statehouse lit up
behind glass, the limed dome
before its new pennyness.
At our state museum, a barricade
of palmettos, cannonballs like wet
footprints, dioramas of wrens
and red hawks straining to break
their bent tethers, high windows
sealed to their escape.

EMER & I DISCUSS WAIT

Is it so different? The tufted ocean impossible
to cross, the pale blue of a linked sky

that only women in flight can traverse –
bird bodies chained to their ominous drive.

Still you and I, we cannot change
into anything but the women we are,

staring at the walls that need hangings,
the too large meals cooled and sealed.

We wait while our willed bodies wither
like tulips each March and hope

for a crack in the ceiling, a Grecian burglary
of rain. Or simply a man that presses

his calf into ours beneath a table, or takes
us in his room that's black as birth.

STILL LIFE OF COOK AFTER ONE NIGHT STAND

An uncooked bird needs brining,
its pale, rubber body warm in the sink.
There are cranberries to bleed. Lettuce
to crack and clean. Garlic cloves I could brown
into sweetness and shallots I'd peel to the tooth.
There are green peppers to stuff with rice,
marjoram, vine-ripe tomato, then yeast to warm
into rolls. A pound of pecans.
A bottle of viognier. The stirring of wild
mushrooms. While he sleeps, I stare
at his watermarked ceiling, consumed
with timing, temperature and the morning
birds with their impatient, ugly song.

BOYS I HAVE BEEN WITH

The coworker. The older man.
The best friend. One high school
crush. Three Texans. Three New Yorkers.
One Ivy Leaguer. Three people
who are in this room. Two Johns.
One best friend's ex. Another
whose name might have been Michael.
An adjunct. A salesman. Three bartenders
at least. One man older than my father.
Four with kids. One Latino.
Three who were not even male.
One one-night stand
who still drunk dials me.
Another ignores me in local bars.
There's a high school teacher,
some fiction writers, and one
with Nietzsche's picture above his bed.
Twice in my car in Hattiesburg.
Two more times black-out
drunk. There's a few
who've never spent the night
and one has left four single socks.
There was another I swore I'd marry
and then one conference fuck.
There's been three who made coffee
the morning after, and two who just made tea.
Five who've claimed to love me. So many
more who very well could have.

INDEX OF THE MIDWEST

A poem about bridges leads to the voice
of a man who I almost forgot
I slept with to a street I got lost on
to the pink slip of tongue
left between a calico's teeth.
The industrial corn stretching
out into endless factory
of gold, nights in the complex pool,
airport food courts, breaking in
a front porch like a ship. Beggar's purses
with feta and corn. Shot glasses
like church windows and afternoons
smoking Camel Lights. No coming
to peace. No leaf turning
on an ancient record player.
If only there had been an escape hatch
in August's shorn fields. One that falls
forever into a gothic dark, the story
of a girl who is almost.

DRIVING IN MISSISSIPPI NEXT TO TWO MEN I'VE SLEPT WITH

Outside Pascagoula, there's a store we don't stop at
advertising liquor and knives. In the bayou, the trees
don't speak at all, but deal in secrets

and human combustion. It is March already.
Azaleas stain the graying brick houses,
while forsythia sinks into its long wait.

We are three in this car but have been two –
and two again. We try to believe nothing
before this highway existed, bodies that sheen

like blades. And no one notices as we move
soundlessly across the red ground,
past chronicles of scrub pine and parked cars,

names breathed in other men's beds. If only
it were possible to be just a woman sitting
in the backseat, the one drawing water to her mouth

THE CHAINSAW BEARS

The chainsaw bears want nothing
but to be bought today.

They are tired of being touched
by travelers who don't want them,

hands that linger on their paws,
a tan arm canvassed across

their bare wooden shoulders.
It's unfair they can't choose

their homes – cabins in the cleared
wood, the living rooms of A-frames

where girls in laurel
green skirts would clean

their dusty shoulders, touch
up the inky knobs of paint

on their dry noses. But for now
they are okay with settling –

like silt kicked up in a glass
pool or tiny houses that moan

in the mornings under
their compromise and weight.

THE MAN WHO COULDN'T

The smoke detector wails in the living room,
the hard wood of her house gone
cool in the first freeze. Her wet hands
form a tan dough. This is what hurt turns into –
the puffed moons of overcooked scones,
a mug of bourbon drained to its glass canyon.

What made him realize he couldn't?
Those birds in his heart done preening,
their swing pushed and pushed,
songless in the chest. For a summer,
she turned out his bedroom light and pulled
up the cold sheets, and he put his hand
into hers and that breath held for a season.

So when he finally said "I can't love you"
what descended or lifted from the skin?
She wonders if it is like the looped string
of an anchor cut or the darkness
that makes lakes infinite, the headlights
that strike them up like glass.

IV.

stray (n) An animal that has strayed or wandered away from its flock, home, or owner.

LOVE POEM

Scotland, 2006

Rabbits gather over clover,
tails turned their unharried dun

and the loch of lidded mallards is still,
each bill tacked under the wing.

I envy this. The deliberate pause
that comes with history and age –

the way a country can rise from bed
and read to itself over tea. The breath comes

long and steady. The skin an unhowling
spit of rain. How do I love you

like this? Here there is no distance,
no hurry to sandbag the rainless city. To live

in a space where neither must say *Come
closer*. Where it is just enough

for one to muster up a high hill,
while the other follows after.

ON LEARNING TO BE OKAY

On leaving the bus
I smile and tell the driver
Thanks. It is easy
giving this to him, taking
what he gives back.
Then I walk home
on the curbs. I do not
crush acorns
with the flat of my boot
or shoot gravel
into the neighbor's yard.
Instead I wonder why
every pencil I own
must be sharp,
every shirt ironed
straight and flat.
I do not think
about spring
or how it feels
to be loved –
nor do I think about killing
the house spider that floats
down my living room
wall. I do not want
a hand
any hand
on my knee or the phone
to sing out from the still.
I do not wash
every dish I dirty
or pull tight
the sheets to dig in them
again. Instead,
at home, I make
a thick pea soup
and listen
to the radiator
as it bangs
its way to life.

THEORIES OF THE EARTH

Nothing is so infinitely old
that it can't be transformed.
The deep time that builds
and potholes the land
can be as shallow as teeth
turned dun in the mouth.
The unrecallable silver-dollar
bruise on the top floor
of a thigh becomes skin again
and pale. It is not
the flood that makes the rock,
but the churning earth
fluffed with breath then packed again.
New Mexico's ship-shaped rock
may weather into a black quarter
horse, then a television set.
And the soil can hold each
five pound cut of coal,
the ground shrubs scared up
with titmice, on top of all the distance
between Mississippi's toothpick forest
and Chicago's neon boutiques.
Outside a girl rides her purple bike
beside the road. Another dams
the backyard stream with stone
after stone from its own bed.

THE NAMING OF STRAYS

You never know what the preamble will look like –
wrought iron tables, pasted napkins
on the butts of steins, my elbow
and his pitched in conversation.
The wet shawl of the Deep South
on my spotted shoulders.

Later, I marvel at how he does not touch me.
After two years of floundering in unmade beds –
bar rat's rooms with their armies of tossed laundry
and abandoned dryer sheets – I am fearful
of absence, the bare feeling of my white legs
slipping from the dress.

This night is different. The playground across the street
with its stilled swings, my cat clipping
between his legs, the sweetness
in how he touches its back, the arching
acceptance that is a language
it alone understands.

Love might be simply the naming of strays.
This black tom roamed my parking lot,
the bottom half of a lizard zipped in its teeth.
Without a name, it was homeless –
no back door where it could smuggle
squirrels, no stretch of shoulders
to paw on afternoon beds. And any name
will do, each comes equally from the lips
to make him gallop towards us
through the yard and home.

GRAVITY OF LIGHT

Where do we place this? Spring
with its parceling bloom, radiator
blue horizons laced with Southern trees.
Or winter, Illinois's clean cold buffing the sky
through windshields. It is not that kind
of story. Instead wall painting,
the squealing drill, that tug and pull
of red curtains through their poles.
My hand between the flapjack pillows,
eyes inked with sleep, and the long stretch
of your back against our sheets.
This could be anywhere, you say –
Minnesota, Alabama, eastern Idaho –
and sometimes it is, when morning
is barricaded at the window, your lips
touched to the valley of my shoulder blades.

ALL THINGS RARE

With cinnamon in 'em, and all things rare!

-James Whitcomb Riley

I chalk the walls with cinnamon
to keep the ants from coming in.
What strange passages bring this spice here --
panicked flowers, ovate green popping
from the unshaved limbs
to Nero's funeral pyres,
Biblical beds perfumed in aloe
and myrrh, the groves of Sri Lanka
where the toddler trees wait to be
coppiced and macerated. Now
in a yellow rented kitchen
in Mississippi, that same
smoky sweetness glazes
snail bread, deep red chickpea stews.
Becomes a brown band-aid
against the whip-black army lined
on the countertop. What else can quills
of sweet wood cure? Fever. History.
Spring's yellow-bodied colds.
Solomon's beloved bark-spiced,
the smell of Lebanon.

CLOSET SPACE

I haven't decided what to wear,
my closet plagiarized from other lives—
the lime halter I doffed in New Orleans,
the burnt orange tube top with Zodiac broach,
ruffled zebra print, white linen
pinked in the wash. I wonder how many
floors have they slept on,
while I thrashed in some bed,
or who brushed against them
in a supermarket, while I was buying quince
and white wine. I tug at the hem
of a black skirt that used to be too small,
and a white shirt whose buttons I've undone
so many times now. How simple
it can be—a hole life in a zipper,
the kick of a shoe to the floor.

IT'S SPRING AND EVERYONE'S WRITING LOVE

What easy metaphors—

A violin of marrow. Avocados
in summer. Lime like a small ship
in stemless glass.

This is not us.

Instead—

The hummingbird sheen
of oil slicks, sprinklers
wetting jalapeno plants
in a neighbor's side-yard,
tilted husks of hydrangea,
that impossible green
of religion.

THE SWIFTNESS TO ASH

They are burning pizza boxes in the backyard,
after building a three-hour lasagna
and getting drunk on sparkling Shiraz.
The girl drenches the chipped wood with gasoline,
throws in hedge clippings, a pyre
of rhododendron, butterfly bush,
while the guy tosses beer boxes onto the blaze.
Each blue opening melts to black,
the abrupt burst of flame and its swift retreat.
The wood holds, though, heat in its splintery bones,
while they marvel at the swiftness to smoke, to ash.
In the damp dark, they sit together on a plastic chair
certain anything they hold could smolder.

THE CHAINSAW BEARS

The chainsaw bears are done.
With porches, with store managers,

with being for sale. Done
with the tourists' passing

hands. The significance of touch
and that gut-needling craving

to be real. All the red fish
in the river, those children

who chin-up on their arms.
That angling for a home

in the soft-spoken pines
that is not exactly love

but comfort, perhaps.
A black-haired woman

turning off her lamp. The impossible
calm of that dark. Or one lucent

whippoorwill. The certainty
of a durable sleep.

SNOW IN MISSISSIPPI

This morning my ex called
from New York to tell me
it was snowing in Mississippi,
the first opera of white we've had
in years. My boyfriend opens
the blinds to the monosyllabic wet,
the white not unlike my years
in mulberry weather, northern
pines portly with snow, salmon
sunsets along quilted ice.

This is not who I am now.
My cat's rough tongue
on the pane's condensation,
the distant replay of yearning
for what I might have had –
an amnesiac winter, the cutting
sun as it flips its reins over
the slender asparagus palms.

WHAT IS REPEATED

*There are books that describe all this
and they are useless.*

-Adrienne Rich

It is the same. Not the orange gourd
from the farmer's market I brought
you that October, but its shadow,
and how it grew in the dimming

as we sat on your unspeaking porch swing.
I was younger then, twenty-four,
wondering when the summer
green would blister, when the asphalt's hot
breath would turn to smoke.

You aren't the man I am trying to write about,
or the porch that warbled with rust and old links,
but it's easier to go back to your stories –

a day on the stiffening grass eating take-out
trying to believe you still loved
me. Maybe I should have conjured
some other man I loved, on a hotel balcony
in the bloodshot city. Each has history—

the moon thumbnailed in the January sky
was here before, looping above the pinprick of Mars
and the playground swings chilled
with night. There was a park you took
your daughter to where the inked
night made similar pictures.

And there are women somewhere,
watching this same dark above chimneys
or pine trees, with their same memories
of men who deserted into streets.
There are songbirds asleep in the boughs

though we do not think of them
sleeping, and they do not think of me,

with my moaning skin, this language
of human need for trust, or even

tiny pumpkins throwing shadows.
How you wanted to love me

and how I wanted to be scrawled,
for a second, on your body,
and tell you about the history of love-
bugs, cinnamon, or the sadness
in leaving a city you've grown into.

No one is erased. Not even you, John,
with your amphibian eyes, pushing the swing
with your toes, my heavy, tilted head
cupped in your lap, the way
everyone finds themselves

on porch steps in the after nights,
drawing out the same uncharted black.

NOTES

Page 35: In Celtic legend, Emer was the fiancé of Cu Chulaind. Like Penelope of Greek myth, Emer waited for Cu Chulaind to return for her after his education in Scotland.

Page 39: The Sexton quote is from her poem “The Fury of Rainstorms” from the posthumously published *The Death Notebooks*.

Page 65: This quote comes from Adrienne Rich’s “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” from her collection *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*.

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