

The University of Southern Mississippi  
**The Aquila Digital Community**

---

Dissertations

---

Spring 2019

## Probably Nothing to Worry About

Jennifer Bravo  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bravo, Jennifer, "Probably Nothing to Worry About" (2019). *Dissertations*. 1661.  
<https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1661>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

PROBABLY NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT

by

Jennifer A. Bravo

A Dissertation  
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 Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by:

Dr. Angela Ball, Committee Chair  
Dr. Adam Clay  
Dr. Emily Stanback  
Dr. Charles Sumner

---

Dr. Angela Ball  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Luis Iglesias  
Director of School

---

Dr. Karen S. Coats  
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2019

COPYRIGHT BY

Jennifer A. Bravo

2019

*Published by the Graduate School*



## ABSTRACT

These are (allegedly) poems.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Angela Ball, my committee chair and advisor, as well as my other committee members Dr. Adam Clay, Dr. Elizabeth Stanback, and Dr. Charles Sumner. Thanks also to Dr. Morgan Frank, in whose workshops many of these poems were forged anew, and Steve Barthelme, who once asked me what the hell I was doing here. I still don't quite know.

I would also like to thank Judith Mixon, who nurtured every spark of inspiration that formed in her classroom, and Dr. Janet Lowery, who taught me to enjoy poetry again and suggested I consider a PhD in the first place.

## DEDICATION

For my parents, whose nearly inhuman love and support has allowed me to accomplish more than I ever thought I could, and my siblings, for their late-night puns and bizarre mailing address labels.

For the friends who are basically family, who listened to me rant and rave and generally be obnoxious about writing and everything else for the past six years or more: Dr. Michael Andreen, Tish Doolin, Alex Amar, Rob Wilson, Dr. Max Macpherson, Dr. Jern Snyder, Stephanie Nash, Jenn Hernandez, and so many others who have made my life so much better by being in it.

For every iteration of the *Laurels* staff, all the Taft St. creators, my fellow D&D nerds, and the citizenry of Nernia, all of whom kept me as close to sane as possible.

For Emma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ..... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iii

DEDICATION ..... iv

INTRODUCTION ..... viii

WORKS CITED ..... xix

PATMOS ..... 1

HACER ..... 2

DISINGÉNUÉ ..... 3

THEY SAY WE ‘LOST’ YOU ..... 4

MY HOUSE IS FULL OF THINGS THAT WATCH YOU WHILE YOU SLEEP ..... 5

I TAKE IT BACK ..... 6

RITUAL ..... 7

BEGOTTEN ..... 8

THIS IS THE HARDEST ..... 9

INSTRUCTIONS FOR A WINTER BURIAL ..... 10

THEY PUT US IN THE BRIDAL ROOM ..... 11

ANNIVERSARY ..... 12

PALINDROME ..... 13

LOVE POEMS ARE DIFFERENT IN THE SOUTH ..... 14

BESPOKE.....	15
OUT OF TURN .....	16
I FOUND MY HEAD—.....	17
I HAVE LEARNED FROM THIS .....	18
6.....	19
LAPSED .....	20
THE BOY .....	21
I MEANT TO SAY.....	22
I NO LONGER BELIEVE IN PEOPLE WHO SLEEP .....	23
SOMETIMES I THINK THE UNIVERSE IS TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER, AND IT IS NOT WORKING .....	24
CATHARSIS .....	25
OUR GRANDMOTHER THINKS YOU ARE STILL ALIVE.....	26
BLOCKED.....	27
ON BURNING LEAVES IN MISSISSIPPI.....	28
IT’S JUST THAT YOUR FACE MAKES ME IRRATIONALLY ANGRY .....	29
I SEE YOU WHEN I SHRED CHICKEN .....	30
INTERSTATIAL .....	31
TELL ME ABOUT DRESSES.....	32
I WONDER IF THEY KNOW, .....	33

CHRISTMAS.....	34
IN WHICH A METAPHOR, LIKE A CATERPILLAR, BREAKS DOWN	
SOMEWHAT .....	35
RESIDENT .....	36
ONLY BACKWARDS.....	37
MAY 11 .....	38
GUARDIANS.....	39
GLOSSARY .....	40
DRINK WARM LEMON WATER IN THE MORNING FOR A YEAR (AND THESE	
20 THINGS HAPPEN).....	41
I ALWAYS HAVE SHARP THINGS .....	43
YOU WILL CARRY THE SAME HEART ALL YOUR LIFE, .....	44
11 YEARS, 59 DAYS.....	45
WAKE.....	46
18.....	47
CONDOLENCES .....	48

## INTRODUCTION

I have never been a person who is particularly open about emotions. For most of my life it was not so much that I had none as it was that I had all of them and had also possibly invented new ones. I was so full of feelings I had become a raw nerve, and the slightest exposure was far too much. Getting around this required what one psychologist I very briefly saw and hated called “a tendency to over-intellectualize everything.” There is some relief from this constant vigilance against vulnerability in writing. In early workshops, we were encouraged never to say “You say...” in workshops, but rather “the speaker says...” and to reject any assumption that the author and speaker might conceivably be the same person. If I could claim some objective, academic distance, everything would be all right, because it would not be *my* feelings so lewdly exposed to the world. I would be a mere observer. I could stay out of it. Maybe *you’re* the one feeling things. Not me. In poetry, there is a way to say things without saying them, and with that plausible deniability in place, the process of writing became an outlet that I sorely needed.

My youngest sister Emma was eighteen years old when she died on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. She was born when I was eleven, and for much of her life I was a caregiver, acknowledged by both her and our mother as another parental figure to her. Her death was sudden and completely unexpected, and for several years I wondered if I should have left school when it happened. In retrospect, I should have at least taken time off from coursework or teaching. Instead, I plowed forward, not always able to fulfill all my obligations but stubbornly remaining. I received an outpouring of support and condolences from my peers and professors, and Dr. Morgan Frank suggested that perhaps

poetry could be a way to work through what was happening. Though my initial reaction (which I kept to myself) was something along the lines of “Really? You want me to think about poetry right now?” I created a folder on my computer, filling it with poem after poem. I never planned to share them; to me they were a tether to my sister and a way I could still speak to her. For the first time I explicitly rejected the distance of the speaker or the ambiguity of a loosely-referenced audience, choosing instead to write as unquestionably myself, unquestionably to Emma. The twenty-odd pieces, almost all written within a year of her death, share some common features. There is a singular “you” within the poems, always an intended audience who will never see them. Each poem features some punctuation, but no periods. Originally I had some fanciful notion of creating a small chapbook, with the first page starting off with a dedication to her, and the last page concluding with a statement that finally ends in a period. The initial lack of punctuation was a function of grief; a numbness that led to all thoughts and eventually all words bleeding into one another, the sentences flowing unimpeded the way they do when the speaker is trying to force them out between sobs. Years later, as I penned the latest of what I coarsely refer to as “the Dead Sister Poems” I found myself still unwilling to add a finalizing mark. I did not want this conversation, however one-sided it may truly be, to end. This is my sentence, an unending outpouring of love and grief and memory that will go on as long as I do. I suspect “I meant to say” will never truly be finished; there will always be more to add, more I want to tell her. In that, perhaps, I have come to regard my own poetry as more than a confessional or a repository for thoughts I lack the desire to articulate to others. It is a thread, constantly interwoven with the words and deeds of

others, not only alive, but life-giving. Jahan Ramazani pinpoints the unique role fulfilled by poetry in the world of grieving, stating:

At a time when intimate grief has been shunted aside as embarrassing, strange, or even pathological, when the dead have been shut away in the basements of hospitals and objectified in obituaries, when funeral directors have become the custodians of the dead, when mortuary rites have lost much of their meaning for the living, poets have cultivated poetry as a death-steeped language of mourning. (Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?)

Poetry's role, then, is as an aid in encountering, processing, and accepting death and all its accompanying detritus. It has certainly served in this capacity for my own grieving process, and the sheer number of elegies written by poets would indicate that I am in no way unique in this.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to think of grief as a monolithic entity; this enormous thing that pins us down and we eventually burrow out from under, something singular and capable of being overcome. Stefi Weisburd's "The Grievs" offers a far more realistic interpretation: there are endless tiny griefs, each one layered and capable of exponentially increasing the others, to the point where even moving on is a source of pain, a "... grief of no longer being defined by grief." I found myself returning to these griefs as they occurred, noting how they layered on each other. The absence of grief felt as stunning as the initial moment itself, though it did not get replayed as often. Kim Addonizo describes it as "... a moment of sudden, irrational joy over nothing of consequence, / really, which makes it all somehow seem even worse" (88). Perhaps absence is the wrong word; it is more of a muting, especially at first. A brief burst of something and for an instant, you can forget.

---

<sup>1</sup> In re-reading Mary Karr's *Viper Rum*, one of the first proper books of poetry I ever purchased for non-academic reasons, I am struck over and over by how many of her poems are dedicated to individuals, some clearly elegies, others less defined. It feels a little too macabre to want a "Best of" collection for poetic elegies, and yet...

In the first few years the almost-forgetting was the most difficult part, because it would be followed by a flood of remembering, the “thousand pinprick revelations” that it is impossible to prepare for (*I Have Learned From This*, 18). There is a trauma associated with loss, one that diminishes with time but may never truly be resolved or “fixed.” To that end, these poems are not intended as inviting a sense of closure; to the contrary, they are an open conversation and a marking of time. Milestones such as the first Mother’s Day, the first Christmas, and the first anniversary of Emma’s death lend the titles for several poems (“May 11,” “Christmas,” and “Anniversary,” respectively). In “Sometimes I Think the Universe is Trying to Make Me Feel Better...” there is one of the few absolute, public chronological anchors in the 2016 election:

As we watched election results roll in,  
I texted Lola, asked  
*Is it wrong that I'm almost glad Emma  
isn't alive to see this* (24)

The timing of these poems is important, both for their position as a record of the progression of grief and in terms of limiting their universality. Including references to contemporary culture and technology always feels like a gamble; there is the chance that it alienates the reader or ages poorly. For these poems, however, it felt appropriate to incorporate things that are very grounded in a place and time—references to my other siblings in “They Put Us in the Bridal Room” and “Sometimes I think the Universe is Trying to Make Me Feel Better...” for example, or the nursing home room of my late grandmother. Perhaps the ultimate indignity is that the universe does not care whether one is mourning, and insists on continuing about its business regardless. There is no time to stop and process the trauma, rather, more will be piled on. Previous grief and trauma

jockey for positions as primary focus or background noise, with the end result often a cacophony of memories and reactions that can easily lead to complete burnout or breakdown. Ramazani argues that “modern and contemporary elegies mourn without healing,” and that applies not just to poetic responses to national and international incidents, but the everyday mourning and grieving process undergone by ordinary individuals. There is, especially for deaths that are sudden and unexpected, a lack of consolation in the pageantry of burial and funerary processes. Funerals are for the living, but their efficacy is greatest for those further distanced from the deceased—a closing of a chapter, a way to say “there will be no more stories in my life with \_\_\_\_\_ in them.” The family, the lovers, the closest friends are left unraveled, having planned lives that included the dead and must now be planned anew, alone. Grief, for all the cultural requirement that we gather and memorialize the dead and comfort the living, is intensely solitary, and any healing to be done must ultimately be done alone. One of the first poems written after Emma’s death was “Only Backwards,” which opens:

The physical division of time is possible,  
a demarcation between Before  
and After the word “dead”— (30)

In the experience of grief, the realization that one’s perspective has irrevocably shifted is constantly reaffirmed, as is the understanding that one is alone in grief. Even those who share in the mourning must to some degree retreat into their own understanding of the deceased and their relationship, serving as singular memorials and keepers of once-shared experiences. This change can feel as though suddenly everyone has begun to speak another language—a familiar one, but they insist on speaking so fast and giving so little

context that keeping up becomes nearly impossible. This startling change in outlook is beautifully articulated in Raymond Carver's "Grief":

Woke up early this morning and from my bed  
looked far across the Strait to see  
a small boat moving through the choppy water,  
a single running light on. Remembered  
my friend who used to shout  
his dead wife's name from hilltops  
around Perugia. Who set a plate  
for her at his simple table long after  
she was gone. And opened the windows  
so she could have fresh air. Such display  
I found embarrassing. So did his other  
friends. I couldn't see it.  
Not until this morning. (254)

The last line carries incredible weight in its four words, deftly demonstrating the sudden free-fall of loss and the memory of the time when you still stood on solid ground, confused by those who were falling. I focused on that sense of bewilderment in "Lost," the confusion brought about by the well-meaning things people tend to say which are ultimately rather useless, and the platitudes that seem darkly absurd in light of reality. The same sense of absurdity permeates my work, perhaps most evident in pieces like "Patmos," where an apocalypse is reduced to a repeated, occurrence, easily ignored by the general populace, or "Drink Warm Lemon Water..." which yields an increasingly manic attitude towards the titular beverage as the speaker unravels. In recent years, this kind of embracing of absurdity feels like a perfectly natural reaction to the state of the world. My freshman year of high school was marked by the Columbine massacre, and my senior year by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. I remember parents taking their children out of school, worried that Houston, as a major city and a center of the energy industry, might be attacked next. I remember walking with my middle sister, wondering

aloud how we were going to explain this to Emma. The time during which my peers and I would normally be expected to begin to understand more about the fallibility of major authority figures in our lives—be they church, government, school, parents, etc.—instead became one in which an overarching sense of anxiety seemed to black out the sky. There was no real end to it, and as divisive rhetoric, shifting social consciousness, and protests began to fill the swollen 24-hour news cycle, dark, occasionally existential humor became our refuge. Indeed, online memetic culture has long embraced a kind of nihilistic absurdity, one I saw reflected in my own approach to life, as well as that of my peers. We laugh because the world does not care how we react, and so we might as well try to enjoy ourselves. “Drink Warm Lemon Water...” was written as a response to the endless barrage of advertisements and clickbait experienced by simply existing on the internet, each bizarre claim more outlandish than the next. “[Y]ears have no real sense now; there is only Before/Lemons and After Lemons,” the speaker intones, reframing an entire life around the now-ubiquitous citrus that has taken on an unholy prominence (41). I am certainly no stranger to magical thinking, and the idea of having something stable, something that can anchor me or at least provide a baseline from which I can measure how strange things get, is incredibly appealing. The idea that we are all going about our lives to a soundtrack of endless internal screams we are so accustomed to that tuning them out is no longer a conscious act is, as the kids say, a “Big Mood.”<sup>2</sup> A particular work of art that achieved some moderate fame in the last few years and seems to

---

<sup>2</sup> This is the type of language that causes my students to remind me that I am “an old.” The ever-evolving nature of slang (especially the ways it warps on various internet platforms) will never cease to delight me.

encompass what appears to be a generational attitude towards the unrelenting chaos in which we exist is K.C. Green's "On Fire," from his webcomic *Gunshow*:



*Figure 1.* An approximation of ~~the past five seven sixteen years~~ life.

(Comic by K.C. Green, 2013. Reprinted with the author's permission and probably also sympathy)

The image, first published in 2013, began recirculating wildly during and after the 2016 Presidential election, with the first two panels in particular becoming a wildly popular meme. The sense of simply shutting down in the face of disaster is a familiar one not only to me but many other graduate students (as well as a not-insignificant percentage of undergraduate students) I have met, something I believe intensely informs my work, particularly the more irreverent or humorous pieces.

Children who are labeled "gifted" when they are young often struggle as adults when they find that perhaps their peers have caught up to them, or perhaps the skills

towards which they are naturally inclined are less than useful in their lives. In my case, I have difficulty being bad at things. That is not to say that I am good at everything (far, far from it), but rather that because in my youth it was assumed that I would get things right on the first try with minimal effort, and that this rapid acquirement of skill and seeming lack of work was attributed to some inherent intelligence, any time I did not feel particularly capable, or worse, was actually not particularly capable, I had to realign my worldview, or watch it break down. It... broke down a lot. The end result was a chronic case of Impostor Syndrome, a trait shared by nearly every graduate student I have ever known, and the horrified realization that not quite “getting” how to be bad at things meant not understanding how to *improve* at them. Grappling with working through the shame that accompanies the realization that one is not very good at something, or at best woefully ignorant, while still attempting to create, and dealing with a brain that is quite content to misfire on an unpredictable and entirely unwanted schedule, resulted in an early portfolio that veered towards navel-gazing. One of the early poems I produced while at the University of Southern Mississippi is titled “Disingénue,” a rather look-how-clever portmanteau of “Ingénue” and “disingenuous,” addressing the conflict between the level of competence I struggle to achieve, the level I feel I should have already achieved, and what I am told others perceive in my abilities:

Clever girl,  
but no brilliant thing  
gifted in the sleight-of-tongue  
and silver-quick to  
redirect,  
deflect,  
barter laughter for stalled time  
to reorient and realign— (3)

Here I highlight the difference—a crucial one—between legitimate brilliance and cleverness; within the poem, or perhaps in casual speech, I can be witty and referential<sup>3</sup>, but everything from the sounds of the clipped words to the one- or two-word lines that scatter throughout the piece are intent on pushing the reader forward. Looking too long and too closely might reveal things that no one wants to see. This conflict between the inner (or perhaps imagined) self and the exterior personality experienced by others is one that repeatedly appears within my poems, alongside as much distrust for the physical body as for the mind it contains. In fact, many of the poems from my first year at the University of Southern Mississippi are focused on the body and the care and keeping thereof. The “uneasy truce” in “Begotten” is a longstanding one; an awkward standoff between the intellectual and physical self, with neither particularly invested in winning (8).

The arrangement of the poems within this dissertation may require some explanation. There are two sections, or perhaps classifications, of poems. The first, “general” poems that touch on concepts of place, the body, and the mind. They are, as a group, nameless, collected instead under a numerical heading. After all, in literature, a text is always happening in the present tense, and it is impossible to know you are in the “before” part of a tragedy timeline while you are in it. The second is the collection of poems I have taken to referring to as “After,” all written after and in response to my sister’s death. It is worth noting that time becomes a funny thing as one ages and accumulates more losses. Simple things can trigger memories strong enough that it feels

---

<sup>3</sup> While I managed to stop myself when reading it aloud for workshop, the first line will always, in my head, be spoken as the line from *Jurassic Park*, because I am deathly allergic to taking myself too seriously.

as though a timeline has been disrupted. We cannot shed our pasts, we instead contain them like befuddled Matryoshka dolls, slowly building new layers over and around the old. To that end, while the poems are listed according to category, they are interspersed throughout the text, allowing the reader to shift between states—before and after—and reflect on each in light of the other. The “After” poems, listed in the Table of Contents according to the date they were begun, are designated by the date on which they were completed, below the title.

## WORKS CITED

Addonizio, Kim. "Happiness After Grief." *Lucifer at the Starlite: Poems*. W.W. Norton, 2011.

Carver, Raymond. "Grief." *Poetry*, vol. 145, no. 5, 1985, pp. 254–254. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20600178](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20600178).

Green, K.C. "On Fire." *Gunshow*, Jan. 2013, [gunshowcomic.com/648](http://gunshowcomic.com/648).

Ramazani, Jahan. "Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?" Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68676/can-poetry-console-a-grieving-public-56d248486a430](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68676/can-poetry-console-a-grieving-public-56d248486a430).

Weisburd, Stefi. "The Griefs." *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2012, pp. 14–14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23222458](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23222458).

## PATMOS

The world keeps ending; short days from one apocalypse to the next, but like roaches and deep-water plesiosaurs, I survive. Most folks don't know or notice, forget the sun went out last week. We used to have a different moon, but their Now is working for them.

I gather obsolete warnings stapled to posts and fences, keep vigil beneath lit billboards, arranging dates on empty calendars, leafing through endless end time warnings and meditating on crucial differences between JUDGEMENT DAY for ALL MANKIND or SINNERS only, depending on the host, and DAY OF JUDGEMENT, the litany of sins like a Vegas itinerary.

I walk unheeded between the wild arms of sun-sick sidewalk prophets, invisible by virtue of belief and immune to incensed timetables. The wind is picking up; the busy season's coming, get your salvation here. Mercy markets better than vengeance, but hellfire still sells with the old crowd. That ten percent makes for a hefty premium but oh, won't you be glad when

HACER

*February 25th, 2014*

Tenses are a struggle  
*You are* flypapering  
itself to furniture, twisting  
in our hair;

*You were*, verbal kudzu,  
crept around seconds  
and choked;

I laquer *you will be*  
to my skin against  
the scrape  
of *would have been*

## DISINGÉNUÉ

Clever girl,  
but no brilliant thing  
gifted in the sleight-of-tongue  
and silver-quick to  
redirect,  
deflect,  
barter laughter for stalled time  
to reorient and realign—  
brain's no Google, but  
it devoured libraries  
before you starved it out;  
faint newsprint smudges linger  
on those wasted lobes  
remnants of books grown brittle  
from disuse—  
cradle them like sacred relics  
and pray to living poets  
to be mistaken  
for some mad savant  
until the pitch-black fever burns out  
this broken husk  
and your cindered bones  
become a martyr's corpse—  
young, if not beautiful,  
still clinging to the promise of  
*potential*.

THEY SAY WE 'LOST' YOU

*April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

As though you have been misplaced  
As though we do not know the soil, the stone  
As though we have put you aside  
As though we have stopped searching  
As though we are not soaked in you,  
drowning

## MY HOUSE IS FULL OF THINGS THAT WATCH YOU WHILE YOU SLEEP

### I.

These nail beds flood a bruised purple with cold and carelessness; blood is heavy and takes so long to move. I've not left in days, I think, except to pace unfamiliar halls and murmur sounds that might be words. I'm supposed to know this language but it tastes new on my tongue and clacks against my teeth, too big to fit and dribbling out slack corners, staining canvas better left bare.

### II.

My hollow girl is brittle, letter-thin skin built out of eavesdropped voices—lick the words and make them stick, ignore the sick-sweet envelope taste because who still mails things these days—spit-pasted and patted down by powdered hands wrinkled with clay like mortician's wax. Blow sonnets in her ear, half-rhymes that clatter on her lack-of-bones; soft tissue's gone to rot beneath, but bits of memory still hold. Not daughter, but there are traces; my fingerprints on lacquered lips, impressions of my palm in the patterns of her cheek. She has uneven eyes like mine, made to suit a dead thing's skull, set deep and prone to following.

## I TAKE IT BACK

*November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

I was the girl who wanted ghosts,  
smiled at the eye-corner flickers  
and followed noises in empty halls  
with a whisper *what do you want*  
*I can help*

I breathed deep in graveyards,  
waited for voices in an empty house,  
hoping that a spectral something  
would prove itself

I have focused all my listening  
on one frequency, asking  
questions unanswered by a voice  
I cannot hear and am so terrified  
I will forget

I am the girl who wants a ghost

## RITUAL

Measure the belly in widths of palms,  
hands crossing bone to bone,  
shift the flesh and remember  
how they protruded like handlebars,  
how you made yourself unwelcome  
on cold floors, woke aching,  
learned the signs of impending  
black. Try to force ribs to fold in,  
cut you in half,  
arch up, inhale, remember  
this body, familiar,  
alive.

## BEGOTTEN

I have an uneasy truce  
with flesh, we don't speak  
the same language, don't  
keep hostages alive,  
limited negotiations:  
*no, no, no;*  
I thought I'd turn animal, entrapped,  
gnaw off limbs, sift through viscera  
like wet laundry,  
looking for the red sock.

## THIS IS THE HARDEST

*August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Summer is the hardest  
You were a summer baby, swimming  
soon as walking, permanently brown

Autumn is the hardest  
I watch lecture halls fill with your  
eyes, your laugh, your shy questions  
from strange throats

Winter is the hardest  
You were the last to believe in Santa,  
claimed you knew years before our brother let slip  
He asked *when do we tell her the truth  
about God*

Spring is the hardest  
I have the dress you bought  
when you visited, pale blue  
with pink and red flowers,  
pressed and displayed,  
blooming

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR A WINTER BURIAL

Break ground at dusk, drive out  
the frozen earth  
and place me in the hollow there  
Leave stones above my heart  
to press me down  
when summer rains return  
Allow five days for mourning song  
in the company of coyotes,  
lean with cold and sharp-eyed,  
who know the paths to stars  
Do not look up when my voice joins theirs,  
and when we depart  
do not follow

## THEY PUT US IN THE BRIDAL ROOM

*March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

Black-clad in a room for white dresses,  
Gabe cracked dumb jokes with me  
to distract from the relentless understanding  
that if we were to be tucked away  
in such a place, it should be with you  
sucking on your lower lip the way you did  
when nerves struck, Lola and I fussing  
at your hair, Mom crying because you  
are beautiful, Dad observing in silence  
with a face only we can tell is proud;  
the air should be light and the scent  
of flowers shouldn't fill our throats  
like this: bitter, thick

ANNIVERSARY

*February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

An empty year and I cannot fathom  
a world in which you are not  
There is no logic to understanding  
the way I need to, if this is the best  
of all possible worlds; if this is one  
of endless, unlimited, there must be  
some sensible planet still inhabited,  
with days that fall orderly  
and bottles full of wine

## PALINDROME

I can read you like a  
burnt-out manuscript;  
I can see the holes in your  
ashen, parchment-brittle mask.  
As I trail my fingers across the  
brilliant hieroglyphs,  
punctuated by freckles and  
unspoken hurt in scars like Braille,  
I recognize a silent autobiography.  
I have studied these markers,  
hidden mysteries  
buried and untranslatable  
beneath rough-hewn skin—  
there are worlds there,  
spelled out in ink-stained letters  
for those with time and care to read.  
The book of You lies open  
with yielding spine and well-worn pages,  
text scrawled across your skin.

I have grown fluent in your tongue.

Text scrawled across your skin,  
with yielding spine and well-worn pages,  
the book of You lies open  
for those with time and care to read.  
Spelled out in ink-stained letters  
there are worlds, there  
beneath rough-hewn skin—  
buried and untranslatable  
hidden mysteries.  
I have studied these markers;  
I recognize a silent autobiography,  
unspoken hurt in scars like Braille,  
punctuated by freckles and  
brilliant hieroglyphs.  
As I trail my fingers across the  
ashen, parchment-brittle mask,  
I can see the holes in your  
burnt-out manuscript.  
I can read you like a  
  
palindrome.

LOVE POEMS ARE DIFFERENT IN THE SOUTH

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
hot as balls  
weirdly sticky*

It's something in summer storms—the thud of fat drops  
into skin, the split-second splat of pressed flesh,  
deltas where freshwater meets the salt.

Nothing truly dries. Breaths between squalls come  
thick and wet, wind a shudder on the ground.  
Dusk roars in with the twitch and thrum of wings,

stifles cicada screams with steam heavy and close,  
yields to the moon's slow seep.

## BESPOKE

I'm afraid we got the skin wrong  
this time—you see, the scrape of scales that hiss  
when you scratch (don't), and there, the faint *klang*  
of elbow on door-frame as you find your limbs  
gives it away—no, give it here, the seams will rip  
and with those scraps still wet, they'll stain.  
We have a few in stock as well; I know you wanted light  
for summer wear. It's so hard to find something that breathes  
these days, but we're old-fashioned;  
we know a good foundation makes all the difference.

OUT OF TURN

*June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

I met death at six, young enough  
that “abuelo” feels foreign to my tongue  
The oldest of then-three, I knew our parents  
(not yours yet, for five years) would die  
and I would have to bury them.  
I sunk to the floor, dumb and heavy,  
clung to the windowsill in a nightgown of faded yellow flowers and cried

What does a six year-old know of funeral preparations

What does a twenty-nine year-old know

## I FOUND MY HEAD—

it had rolled behind the dresser  
among forgotten marbles  
and a desiccated spider's corpse.  
My eyes rattled, loose and wild  
as I shook stars from my hair  
and combed through wax-sealed lashes.  
My tongue had gone to seed,  
run through with coiled vines  
I pulled out by the tender roots  
that crept up  
from my throat.  
I paved the ruined garden  
with river stones,  
pale and honed.  
I poured honey from my ears,  
blew smoke into the hollows  
to send the bees along,  
and hung moonstones  
from new-pierced skin  
to weigh down my lightened skull.  
I sewed it on with willow reeds  
still green and soft  
but time will come  
when stitches snap,  
withered grass crumbles,  
and all the pretty ribbons  
in the world  
will not keep  
my head on.

I HAVE LEARNED FROM THIS

*March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

that grief makes us stupid, the obvious  
becomes unbearable and we shutter  
it away like a diseased cousin  
in the attic, shudder as it scrapes  
the floors and though we hear  
its thumps and keening it is still  
so wretched when we turn  
the knob, the thousand pinprick  
revelations that kick in all at once  
as it blinks in the sudden light—

you are gone.

*March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

We were six, balanced,  
now five, hobbled  
and limping, unable to keep  
upright at first, crawling  
in slow ellipses, all stone-pitted  
knees skinned to bone,  
and when we stand—  
our atrophied limbs  
will shake in betrayal  
and our hands will close  
around nothing, still grasping dumb  
at what should be—  
our flesh will twist around  
the screaming space,  
muscles compensating  
for an empty scar

## LAPSED

I do not  
burst into flame  
on the threshold of a church

a childhood's worth of belief is enough  
to barricade me  
from open baptismal fonts  
and wells of holy water but  
I could trail my fingers  
scatter sacred drops  
without the hiss  
and smell of sulfur

I did my time in that holy bath  
water warm as skin  
lost my legs to womb-like ripples  
climbed out stinking of chlorine  
and purity  
limbs mercifully reformed

accepted Bible and silver cross  
on a delicate chain  
that caught on tendrils of hair  
coiled above the nape of my neck  
and broke quietly like a good metaphor  
unnoticed until a distracted hand  
reached  
was left wanting

water leached from my bones  
dried clear on skeptic skin  
beads of prayer across hardened scales  
dripped away unnoticed  
until I felt the cold  
of an emptied pew and found  
Sacramental wine is vinegar  
on unbeliever's tongue

## THE BOY

*March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

I am staring at the boy  
who plunged a needle in the North Star  
and flooded it black,  
his wrists jutting  
from sleeves someone bought him  
before the final gasp of puberty

I wonder when this boy with sharp  
shoulders wore his suit last,  
who starched it for him,  
called him “baby” and meant it  
the way I meant it for you

You said he was beautiful

He cries into my neck,  
I tell him he can still  
prove you right

I MEANT TO SAY

February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015

I have written forests of notes  
to remind me of topics, scrawls  
I half-recognize weeks later, my own  
handwriting a perplexing disaster  
—what did you think of the Taylor Swift song  
    No, the other one  
    No, the other one  
—Lorelai did this on *Gilmore Girls*, too, these notes  
—Did I tell you I watched *Gilmore Girls* and hated almost everybody  
    I sobbed at every milestone you had and should have  
—Your friends still follow me online,  
    I worry about Sarah;  
    the only thing worse than burying one friend at eighteen  
    is two  
Sometimes I see their smiles and I almost crack  
through my molars;  
forget that I am supposed to cherish them  
and instead want to ask someone, anyone  
    (let me speak to a manager)  
*Why them? Why not you? Why not me?*  
—I think you would have loved Hamilton  
    I can't listen to the Philip songs  
    They remind me of you  
It has been long enough now that I start to wonder  
how you would have changed  
You are perfectly museumed in the contents of a bookshelf,  
    iPod,  
    T-shirt quilt,  
but everything else keeps moving  
I have so many questions  
I have so much to tell you

## I NO LONGER BELIEVE IN PEOPLE WHO SLEEP

At 3 AM that new-skin itch  
is maggots burrowing in  
gangrenous me,  
the rustling of my hair  
is the pin-feet of spiders  
pricking their way into my ears,  
unbidden silence  
is tongue overgrown,  
engorged with swallowed mutterings  
and squelching sounds,  
salt skin cracking at the pull of sheets.

SOMETIMES I THINK THE UNIVERSE IS TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER,  
AND IT IS NOT WORKING

*November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

As we watched election results roll in,  
I texted Lola, asked  
*Is it wrong that I'm almost glad Emma  
isn't alive to see this*  
With each new morning news' worth  
of horror the twinge returns, guilty  
I'd give anything for a world  
with you still in it  
but if we're making impossible wishes  
maybe a few other things could get fixed

## CATHARSIS

Let things rattle—  
tears, blood, and bile  
redistribute,  
coagulate  
into the taste  
of fingers  
beckoning to the black  
of your throat,  
*come,*  
*this fullness terrifies.*  
This is what it's supposed to do—  
empty you  
*of you.*

OUR GRANDMOTHER THINKS YOU ARE STILL ALIVE

*March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

The weekend you died, she stabbed  
a nurse with a butter knife.  
I brought her funeral flowers;  
she asked where you were.  
*Home*, I said. *Safe*.  
She thinks you are seven  
and said you should visit,  
words congealed in thick drugs.  
She marveled at the fire engines  
on the ceiling and I breathed  
in white lilies.

BLOCKED

*Travel.*

*Buy a one-way  
plane ride.*

With the certainty of someone  
whose obligations  
end at smiling  
in family photos.

*Get in your car and go—  
drive until you don't know  
who you are.*

with the confidence of a man  
who has never woken at two a.m.  
to the clatter of elderly bones  
on a cold floor.

With the self-assurance  
of one who has never  
memorized the patterns  
of familiar ceilings  
listening to the thick silence,  
between ragged breaths,  
he insists that I

*Start a new life among the natives  
of whatever backwater  
you are closest to  
when the gas runs out.*

## ON BURNING LEAVES IN MISSISSIPPI

The first time I saw the fires my heart  
clawed up my throat, I was a girl of drought,  
of unrelenting heat that boiled the breath  
from you. I remembered smoke as bitter, unclean,  
it raked the lungs and reeked of things  
that shouldn't burn, burrowed indiscriminate  
into whole towns. I watched a tow-headed father  
keep one eye on a laughing child, another  
on the pyre that bent the air in the green  
of his lawn, more marvelous for his disregard.

IT'S JUST THAT YOUR FACE MAKES ME IRRATIONALLY ANGRY

If I say *love* it will pull  
from a straightened spine,  
lip curled into a crescendo  
of teeth, head that shakes  
loose the oil slick taste  
of want from a tongue  
that has wrapped in weakness  
around words less suspect,  
grinding its barbs  
to pulp, formless, wasted.

## I SEE YOU WHEN I SHRED CHICKEN

*August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

Pull away the bones, fingers slippery  
with fat, dig my nails into the muscle  
and hear our mother ask *where*  
*will you get protein, can't you eat*  
*an egg, nothing died for that*  
You pursed a mouth too soft  
to take life, gave no ground

I learned lentils, quinoa, mushrooms,  
made cheese from quote-unquote  
milk, lamented the difficulty of finding  
tiny almond nipples  
There were cookbooks at Christmas,  
pages of scribbled recipes  
frankensteined together,  
cobbled from a decade of spelling  
*I love you as*  
*eat*

## INTERSTATIAL

Where the highway turns  
just short of north of town  
the new freeway rises  
on gleaming white supports  
like the ribs of a rotting giant—  
there is an off-ramp that ends  
ten stories up.

You can park your car a half-mile down  
on the wide new shoulder  
and walk along the concrete skyway  
until you reach the sectioned edge  
corded with wire and reflective tape  
strung between orange barrels.

If you are brave  
or careless,  
you can sit on the edge  
of the warm gray slab  
dangle your feet the way you did as a child,  
in too-big chairs  
as you watched your mother  
whisk together magic  
from paste-flour and grease,  
your sandy heels thumping against wooden legs.

You lack the weighted rubber  
of the fluorescent orange barrels,  
and the yellow glow of the city's lights  
will become pale indentations in the night  
to match the jagged rocks pressed  
in your palms like holy relics.  
Your mouthed words,  
thick with humidity  
and the gray grit of  
concrete dust,  
fill your stomach  
with heavy things  
that call you to the ground,  
a newly mixed pillar  
resolute beneath the weight  
of endless mile markers  
for roads not yet built.

## TELL ME ABOUT DRESSES

Tell me about lace, in different tints  
of yellow and blue too pale to register,  
about seed pearls scattered across a veil  
and folded satin like flower petals.

Tell me about the pinch of elastic, silk  
that hisses as it slides, the shimmer  
of sequins like scale armor,  
and the rasp of tulle against bare skin.

Tell me about the stays, the spine  
pulled straight as swords,  
about the ballast weight  
of buried pins  
and the indentations  
of whalebone ribs in the flesh  
of a trembling belly.

Tell me about the spike  
of heels, the rushing steps,  
the glittering of hard-cut stone  
and metal warm as blood  
in shaking hands.

Tell me how to hold my peace.

I WONDER IF THEY KNOW,

*March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

these beasts we keep, spoiled and dozing  
in the softness of your recovered quilt  
Do they remember you, the puppy  
who carried them until they outgrew  
your limbs, who wrapped your arms  
around their necks and mumbled  
*good doggies* Do they understand  
“gone” the way we do, can they grasp  
why the house has become a new  
kind of noisy, the flood of people  
with hands and faces of salt  
One day when something smells just so  
will they, too, lift their heads in memory  
of the one who loved them, and left

## CHRISTMAS

*December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

We are skirting around the edge of you  
avoiding your name and the things  
it will summon, putting skittish distance  
between what we have always known  
and newfound coping mechanisms  
There is no tree, our decoration-obsessed  
mother has left bins in their dust-glazed sleep  
and if not for the boxes—unwrapped—  
one might not know how disappointing  
the heat is, how sharp the taste of cinnamon,  
how much space can be taken up  
by someone who isn't there

IN WHICH A METAPHOR, LIKE A CATERPILLAR, BREAKS DOWN

SOMEWHAT

It is required by law that every Self-  
Help Weight Loss Sort Your Goddamn  
Life Out book include at least one  
caterpillar-to-butterfly metaphor,  
because we like to think of insectoid  
puberty as gawky limbs and fuzz in exciting  
new places; we want to split the pupa  
to see jutting nubs of wings, the blush  
of beauty in transition. We are unprepared  
for the gush of rotted larva, the formless  
stuff of potential dripping on our shoes

## RESIDENT

I could shoulder you over, bloody your nose without effort, and leave— we have no keys, shutters hang off the hinges and our faulty latches swing loose on broken windows. Our doors don't close right, frames angry and swollen, and our fence is barbed-words, sagging and rusted over. We have valuables scattered, self-respect collecting dust behind a busted couch and hesitation turned home for wayward spiders on the landing just below the broken stair we have agreed to never mention, resigned to a normal that includes drunken stumbles when the lights burn. I bought no flowers to pretty up the empty halls and never painted over crumbling frames to disguise the rot, but I have pulled the heavy splinters from my feet and colored walls with smudging hands—the shredded lines that tie me here have never known anything but slack.

## ONLY BACKWARDS

*February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

The physical division of time is possible,  
a demarcation between Before  
and After the word “dead”—After  
no longer marked in heartbeats  
but in ragged breaths, symmetry  
inaccessible across the split-  
second endless channel

I have assembled time  
machines of glossed paper  
and I clamber towards  
the chasm on flimsy spider  
legs and recollections  
of laughter

If I cannot cross,  
I will hurl myself in

MAY 11

*May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

It's the first Mother's Day since you and the living room is a greenhouse watered with guilt. The blooms are echoes in all but pink, a favorite color sacrificed to ghosts of arrangements we didn't watch fall apart. They smell wet and heavy, the cut-green of leaves taken from the root. There's an ache I don't deserve—this is not for me—but I nod when told *please take them* to family, friends, once a sad-looking woman outside Kroger. Like the pink and white blurs I handed out before: we couldn't stand any more beautiful dead things.

## GUARDIANS

The Junebugs came in March that year,  
waves that buzzed, crunched underfoot  
like faulty clockwork leaves.  
We pulled them terrified from the water  
limbs scrabbling for purchase  
on the nut-brown carapaces of their dead.  
They bumbled, fear-stupid ,  
back into the lapping bayou  
as we stood, hands cupped, heads bowed,  
humming cicada song.

## GLOSSARY

*March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

We have had to redefine *okay*,  
because people keep asking if we are,  
or will be, and I am not allowed to bite  
them and it is frowned upon to scream  
but *okay* is ash in my mouth and *okay*  
is not and won't be again; we have buried  
*okay* in a wooden urn and all the flowers  
do a piss-poor job of covering the rot  
as what remains of *okay* is scraped  
into something I can wear  
on a chain around my neck, this new  
*okay* like a curse, like a warning, like  
they can smell it coming

## DRINK WARM LEMON WATER IN THE MORNING FOR A YEAR

(AND THESE 20 THINGS HAPPEN)

You have swallowed so much juice, all unsweetened. Cranberry is a pucker that goes all the way through your chest, astringent and desiccating. Grapefruit tastes like hate after a New Year's week of nothing else, even though you broke eight days in, added a slow glug of honey. So what's a lemon a day, diluted in enough water that teeth don't slough off?

You recall the childhood mistake: orange juice after toothpaste, some citrus-minty hellscape on your tongue and the flat smacking sounds you make, an animal's attempt to dislodge taste, yielding odd looks from other drivers and regret.

You try yoga, wanting the health, the glow, comfy pants. Your knees make a sound nothing made of bone should ever make and you don't speak of it again. You keep the pants, tell yourself your ass looks like the ass of someone who does yoga and drinks warm lemon water and doesn't say "fucknuggets" very often.

You realize how fucking expensive organic anything is, regret living in a town where the most interesting thing to do is leave. Everything else rots in the windowless damp of your kitchen, but lemons petrify. You learn that your sharpest knife is no match.

You buy a sharper knife, more lemons. There is a learning curve. You ignore the faint reddish tint in the water, the shrieking sting of your finger. Iron is good for you and tastes like victory. Your kitchen is full of the little yellow bastards. Other fruits have been banished to dark corners or the fridge; only lemons on the counter.

It becomes a ritual like all the others, that twinge of magical thinking, alongside "no eating on New Year's Day" or "eat French fries in twos;" the ratio of boiling water to tepid, number of lemons squeezed. You mess up, throw the whole thing out, learn not to mess up.

Days when you mess up seem somehow dimmer.

You have one of those lever things for juicing citrus, a mocking orange contraption that clacks against itself every morning. Your right hand can drain a lemon in thirty seconds. You start using your left, envision walking around with one muscular extremity like a lobster. You haven't had lobster in years but if you had it again you wouldn't put lemon on it.

You meet a guy and bring him home, he is too drunk to notice the massive pile of lemons in what was once a regular fruit bowl on your kitchen counter and you are grateful; who would fuck a fruit racist? You kiss him, swear it tastes like lemon. The next morning, he doesn't understand your lemon water, leaves. You grip your mug, grim and grimacing, almost choke on a seed.

You arrive home with your shining yellow bounty; Janice from next door greets you with *More lemons, what do you do with so many lemons?*

*I shove them up my ass,* you reply, not breaking eye contact.

Janice will never invite you to another neighborhood potluck. You are finally free from her Ambrosia Surprise.

The year ends, but years are not real; there is only Before Lemons and After Lemons, all of time a web of pith across your mind. This is the clarity you were promised, free of toxins, something to do with acidity or alkalinity; you are balanced. Whole. You are so fucking sick of lemons.

## I ALWAYS HAVE SHARP THINGS

I spend my nights attaching knives  
to places knives do not belong:  
clock-arms and candlesticks,  
your yellow toothbrush.

*Why should roses have all the fun*  
I say, string razor blades across gardenias,  
shake free a glint like fairy-lights.

The glass is for emergencies.

YOU WILL CARRY THE SAME HEART ALL YOUR LIFE,

thawing slowly in dented Styrofoam coolers,  
handed off like a plutonium baton, abstain  
from too much touching; the inside's still  
frozen but too much pressure will burst  
everything, it's not safe yet.

wrapped in plastic, wedged in your purse  
like a forgotten sandwich you meant  
to eat today, but time got away from you  
and you find it, barely recognizable,  
stinking up the back of your car.

starting to crack on its shelf, shellacked  
within an inch of life, papered over like  
a science fair volcano, until what you lift  
is not itself any more, but varnish and blurred  
newsprint, a découpage cast heavy in your palm.

11 YEARS, 59 DAYS

*March 13, 2014*

Obscene to know the entirety of a life,  
bookend your consciousness with my own,  
watch the straight line—  
shortest distance between us—  
extend, unfeeling, monotonous  
walk through a world  
    without them  
and then a world without  
    them

One day I will wake up  
—probably, but then, I thought you would, too—  
and realize I have breathed air longer  
with you as memory  
    than with you

## WAKE

My sister pulls behind me, suddenly shy—  
this creature whose lungs have filled the house,  
whose laughter ricochets off windows  
and drips from rafters,  
this child I have prodded to boldness,  
goaded with questions  
this girl who has seen a thousand murders  
in hyper-saturated color  
solved by attractive women in  
impractical shoes  
(It's the husband, it's always the husband)—  
she has never seen a body  
without breath to hold  
and the waxy stillness  
itches her skin,  
nerves dancing  
to demonstrate  
*I still can*  
*and it will have to be*  
*enough.*

*August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014*

We had eighteen years  
but I am greedy,  
I wanted you forever

The mourning is for you, of course  
but also for a life that has to be recast—  
rewritten;  
the role you originated is a draft  
that never made it to the stage

When we moved into the house  
where you would spend fifteen of your years  
we took the door off the safe,  
enormous metal walls  
turned open oven in the summer  
We tucked you in there to wait out hurricanes  
nestled in the safest spot  
untouchable

Tiny you was scared of thunder;  
I fear the sound of your voice  
slipping from my mind, I rehearse  
every time it rains, remember  
holding your small hands and lying  
*it's okay, I've got you*

## CONDOLENCES

*July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

A student came to me,  
said *I'm leaving*  
*Someone close to me is gone*  
I heard an echo:  
*It hurts too much to stay*

Rehearsed lines dribbled out  
*I'm so sorry for your loss*  
*Please take care of yourself*  
*Do what's best for you*  
*I hope you can continue*  
*but I understand*

We are not allowed to hug  
these children, the same age you were,  
no matter how broken,  
no matter how badly they need  
to hold together;  
the way I held your friends,  
so small again,  
as they heard, remembered

I could not take this girl's hand  
and say *They will tell you it gets better*  
*but it won't feel better*  
*You carry a weight now*  
*that may never be put down*  
*But you'll learn*

*The ache that crushes your lungs*  
*is your ribs shifting,*  
*your body making room for it,*  
*muscles tearing and rebuilding*  
I could not tell her *Some days*  
*it will drag you into the pit*  
*and you won't want to return*  
I could not say *This is your job now:*  
*Remember that this is not all there is;*  
*that it is possible, in theory,*  
*to feel something else*  
*You will not always succeed*

I said *I am here*