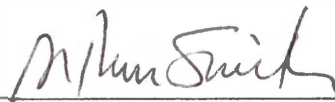


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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Erin Elizabeth Mulert entitled "Bins of Plums." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Arthur Smith, Major Professor

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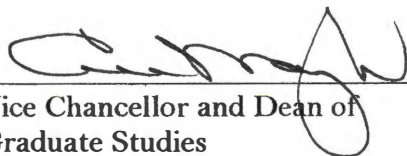


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Acceptance for the Council:



Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Thesis
2005
.M85

BINS OF PLUMS

**A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

Erin Elizabeth Mulert

August 2005

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Dedication

To David—

For understanding how to read with your heart

Acknowledgments

I owe many thanks to Dr. Smith, Dr. Kallet, and Dr. Leggett, for their guidance and patience both as my committee members and as my teachers. To Dr. Smith and Dr. Kallet, I owe my gratitude for helping me to both discover and refine my craft through all these years, and I am grateful to Dr. Leggett for helping me to understand my place in literature.

I also want to thank my family for all the encouragement, love, and faith they have sent me across the miles and for humoring their dreamer.

Abstract

This collection of poems represents work revised and completed during my tenure in the M.A. program in English. The pieces deal with themes of identity, family, and love, and the nature of poetry itself. An introduction is included that identifies my major influences and my purpose in writing poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a book in my parents' house on the same shelf I pulled it from a thousand times. It is a worn-out copy of *The Family Book of Best Loved Poems*, battered in the usual way: the spine is taped, the cover is frayed, and the pages are falling out. I do not remember how old I was when she first read that book to me, but there was something satisfying about the lines my mother read, something I had not found in the other books I devoured as a child. I savored this one. I could spend days reading the same poems, again and again, rolling the lines over and trying to see what would shake out. She told me our family's favorites: hers was James Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Ahdem." Her father's was an anonymous "Will You Love Me When I'm Old?" Mine was Edgar Guest's "It Couldn't Be Done." There was something about the reverence Mother had for that book that taught me at an early age to admire poetry. As I grew up, my fascination with poetry never went completely away, and I flirted with it throughout my youth.

From first grade on, I was always writing something. It was not until midway through my undergraduate studies, however, that I began to recognize myself as a poet. After a wholly unsatisfying stint as a political science major and a brief, disastrous attempt at fiction, I found myself taking refuge in poetry once again. I was introduced to the work of Yusef Komunyakaa, Lucille Clifton, Dorianne Laux, and Marie Howe. I admired the confidence and music in their work and, above all, its accessibility. As high school teachers became more reluctant to teach it and society stopped demanding it, poetry was a strange, distant thing; our poetry units lumped together as many major poets as would fit in six weeks' worth of class. We had Shakespeare alongside Frost, Marlowe with Dickinson, Donne with Eliot. Here were poems that required no footnotes, poems that were written by living poets. Before then, poetry had been the realm of long-dead greats. I tried to remain in the company of contemporary poets, but I soon discovered that I had to understand their predecessors in order to understand them and my place among their ranks. I began to read the Greek Lyric Poets.

I was fascinated by Greek and Roman mythology as a child, so my introduction to the Greek Lyrics was not only easy, it was enjoyable. It was like being in the company of old friends. The culture already made sense to me, so the

poetry was as readable as anything by Howe or Clifton. Of the Greek Lyrics, I have been most affected by the work of Sappho, Hesiod, and Praxilla; these poets each represent an element of poetry that I strive to capture in my own work.

From Sappho, I learned about elegance. There is a certain quietness in her work, even when she is in the grips of jealousy, love, or death. Consider the fragment, "To Her Daughter, When Sappho Was Dying":

It would be wrong for us. It is not right
for mourning to enter a home of poetry.

I am struck by this fragment more deeply than I am by any of her other poems. I am constantly amazed at its immensity. In two lines, she discusses death, the struggle of joy and grief, the relationship between mother and daughter, and the nature of poetry. The simplicity of her expression heightens the impact of her work, and she has taught me to cherish poetic economy.

From Hesiod and Praxilla, I draw a sense of the beauty of the ordinary. Hesiod's "Summer" from *Works and Days* is a testament to the simple pleasures, to "a shady ledge and your choice wine" (line 8). The extant fragment of Praxilla's "Adonis" echoes this sentiment in the figure of the dead lover, as he contends:

Finest of all the things I have left is the light of the sun,
Next to that the brilliant stars and the face of the moon,
Cucumbers in their season, too, and apples and pears.

When I discovered this elevation of the ordinary, I finally felt a connection to other writers that I had not previously felt. With the exception of Shakespeare and Donne, I had failed to relate to other writers. I did not sympathize with their lofty ideals, I reacted violently to their devotion to rhyme and strict meter, and I disliked their penchant for melodrama. With my study of the Greeks, I saw the origins of my own work, and I began to understand poetry as an organic whole, as a continuing conversation that I was joining.

Shortly after this discovery, I turned to the Moderns hoping to find more recent influences. I assumed I would have an affinity for them, as I knew they reacted against the Romantics and Victorians as I did. I was frustrated and disappointed by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, not only because of their cryptic poetry, but because the poems came out of critical theories so close to my own. Pound's Imagists believed in poetic economy.

Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" makes sense to me, and I agree strongly with his espousal of historical perspective. I struggle to understand the disconnect between their poetry and their critical work. I do not strive to imitate the poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, but I find that I cannot escape their poetic influence, even if I only use them as reminders of what not to do in my work. With their difficult, esoteric poetry serving as a backdrop, I discovered a new appreciation for William Carlos Williams.

There was a time when I hated Williams. In high school, teachers championed "The Red Wheelbarrow." I never was told why it was worthy of canonization; I was merely told that it was an amazing poem. I had a similar experience with "This is Just to Say." Williams's simplicity was infinitely frustrating to me because I had not yet learned to understand his work as part of a literary continuum. His poetry became less frustrating as I learned to unfold him and understand his influences and formal methods, and these two poems have ironically come to hold a place among my favorites.

In the wake of Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it is Williams' work that has most freed and rescued poetry, and he repaved the way for today's poets to talk about the ordinary without censure. While I do not include his formal experiments in my direct influences, I am indebted to his use of ordinary language and rejection of elitist poetry.

Like Sappho, Williams is able to accomplish much in his small works. He relies, however, on what is outside the poem. "This Is Just to Say" becomes a statement about temptation, marital tension, and arrogance when contextualized as a note left for a loved one. "The Red Wheelbarrow" gains its meaning from what must be the rural setting of the poem. The wheelbarrow makes no sense outside of the farm; inside it, it is a tool for survival. Williams' reliance on context gave me the freedom to ask the same of my readers. I believe it is acceptable to make the reader work with the piece; while there is a danger of not giving the reader enough information, it is much better to do that than give away the poem's secret and therefore destroy its resonance.

Also highly influential in my work is Jack Gilbert. He seems to defy categorization, weaving ancient lyric, modern awareness, and ruthless simplicity. I will always remember the first time I met him. It was January, the beginning of his tenure as a Knoxville's writer-in-residence for the spring of 2004. His poetry is so fierce, so confident, that I expected him to have a large, blazing personality. When a small, old man in an oversized sweater shuffled into the room, I at first thought he was a visitor coming to meet Mr. Gilbert. Then he looked up. Those sharp, naked, laser-blue eyes could not belong to anyone but a poet. Something in me, like the vibrations of a tuning fork, recognized the music living inside this man. I freely admit that I felt like a groupie.

Under his guidance, something broke in my poetry that semester. I had long considered myself a lyric poet, but the work became more ambitious. It began to open beyond the page. My work had previously been too confessional, too personal to have any real meaning for others. He would not let the class get away with work that was merely pretty or self-referential to the point of being exclusionist. What I learned from Jack was to try to find the essence of a poem. He taught me to look for the color of a poem, to judge if it was alive.

I am no longer under the illusion that lyric poetry is simple; it is the elegant phrasing of human complexity. Jack taught me to write love poems to everything. I also learned a poetic stubbornness from him. His mulish insistence on real, breathing poetry gave me the reassurance I needed. I know that my poems are not wild experiments in form or language, and I am not ashamed by that. I have come to realize that I do not have to be on the cutting edge to be relevant.

I, like Eliot, believe that the poet must know and accept all that has come before: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (16). I pay tribute to my predecessors and attempt to understand myself in relation to them through my allusions to their work, mostly that of Gilbert and the Ancient Greeks.

I frequently make use of the ancient Greeks for several reasons. First, they had the advantage of having fresh eyes and hearts for poetry; they have a certain

brightness that attracts me to them like a crow to a new coin. The mythology of the age is also a great draw for me; the characters and situations in myths are among the most economical of symbols, and they allow me to accomplish so much in the small space of my poems.

The Ancients were privileged to have all of poetry ahead of them, and they were not encumbered by cynicism or doubt in the beauty of the world. At this point in my writing, I have taken the past not as a garbage heap of used verses, but as a repository of song and story from a time so distant that the reader is able to see it as though it were new. Poetry is an old profession, and even as human language evolves, there are only so many ways to express our limited range of emotion. However, I do not believe that one must reject it all like Stevens' "The Man on the Dump." Instead, I find myself reacting like Gilbert's speaker in "What is There to Say?":

...What can I say then each time
your whiteness glimmers
and fashions in the night?
If each time your voice
opens so near
in that dark

new? What can I say each morning
after that you will
believe? But there is this
stubborn provincial
singing in me,
O, each time. (lines 12-23)

I am another stubborn provincial, singing love songs to everything. I want my readers to take another look, to see the intrinsic loveliness of quiet, ordinary moments. What we lack in today's world is not people of extraordinary sentiment but people willing to spend the time honing that sentiment. There are many people, as eloquent and observant as any poet, who choose to dedicate themselves to other ways of life. The poet, then, is set apart by a desire to observe beauty, by a need to set these moments down and dissect them so that others can see the glossy colors inside them.

At this point, I must clarify what I mean by beauty. I do not mean only that which is pleasing to the eye. Beauty in that sense is impossible for the modern, skeptical mind to believe. We hold the notion that beauty does not exist in a pure form; it must be tempered by ruin. This doubt reveals a deep-seated pessimism; we are quick to dismiss the unblemished as contrivance or cliché because we are hypersensitive to the presence of disaster in the world; it is nearly impossible for us to believe there can be an absence of them. What I have tried to do in my work is to not only acknowledge the presence of ruin in our everyday lives, but to argue that ruin does not oppose beauty, it is beauty. It is beautiful because it is part of human existence, and as such, it is my task as a poet to celebrate it. Consider Jack Gilbert's *Stubborn Ode*:

All of it. The sane woman under the bed with the rat
that is licking off the peanut butter she puts on her
front teeth for him. The beggars of Calcutta blinding
their children while somewhere people are rich
and eating with famous friends and having running water
in their fine houses. Michiko is buried in Kamakura.
The tired farmers thresh barley all day under the feet
of donkeys amid the merciless power of the sun.
The beautiful women grow old, our hearts moderate.
All of us wane, knowing things could have been different.
When Gordon was released from the madhouse, he could
not find Hayden to say goodbye. As he left past
Hall Eight, he saw the face in a basement window,
tears running down the cheeks. And I say, nevertheless. (26)

The speaker is celebrating the ugliness of life. He argues that if you love life, you have to love all of it, not just the joy. It is my job to say "nevertheless" and praise even the blemished moments.

In this thesis, I have collected a menagerie of these moments, focusing on love, identity, family, and poetry itself. The poems are not generally long, and this shorter form fits the snapshots I try to capture in my work. I find that my longer pieces tend to attempt too much at once. Within the individual poems, I have tried to follow the movement of the sonnet and the ode; I say movement instead of form, because I believe that strict form is largely inappropriate for the subject matter that I attempt to discuss. I am more interested in displaying emotions and

situations for what they are, with all their inconsistencies and surprises intact, and so I utilize a more organic form. The movement I take from the sonnet and the ode originates in the strophes and antistrophes of ancient Greek theater, the doubling back of the song on itself. I attempt to get to the heart of the forms by going back to their primary function of preserving that turn, that complication. That moment is when poetry really happens.

I.
BINS OF PLUMS

Love Song

If she could write the perfect one,
she could stop. Instead,
she sifts through bins of plums,
looking for the one immaculately bruised,
its crushed pulp inside and skin
blooming beyond violet,
honeyed meat defending a ragged stone.

After all this, love

how can I tell you
I have lived these days
for the night you come back—
the soft settling into bed,
your eyelashes on my shoulder?

It's all I can do,
with the song falling out of me
and the rain coming fast.
It's all I can do, and still
it fails me.

Paradise Regained

The scent of warm bread and basil billows from our clothes,
and our faces are flushed with dancing and each other.
Behind us, they're still laughing, passing bottles of good, red wine
as we amble across the piazza to our room.

The old woman will have dressed the bed in bright linen,
and the wash basin will have fresh water for morning.
Until then, we can count a galaxy of windows on the hill
and marvel at moonlight (*so white*) in your hair.

Jealous Pantoum

The postcards fill my mailbox
with places you go without me.
The one that hurt was Virginia—
my goal, my finish line.

With places you go without me
there come triumphs we cannot share.
My goal, my finish line
is pointless now.

There are triumphs we cannot share,
but does that have to mean our promise
is pointless now?
There will never be a way to tell,

but does that have to mean our promise
is nothing more than words?
There will never be a way to tell
you how I can both love and resent you now.

Lament

-for David

You devastate my poetry.
With you, every line becomes
Merlot and down blankets,
breakfast on the patio,
painting our new home.

The best poets have always pined.
The troubadours went unrequited, and
it was want of her that Dante wrote.
They knew it is folly to try to sing
that which strikes us dumb.

I love and I hate

that my everything is you.

Love, because all the world is shades of you—

the birds you fed from my porch,

your cologne on a store clerk,

your brand of honey in the cupboard.

Hate, because they are always not you.

State of Grace

It is not our nature
to be content. That
is for the animal, the divine,
not this spirit strapped
to bones and hunger.

Without you here,
I am not enough.
I am Adam's rib
trying desperately
to get back home.

Sicyon Sonnet

What are the finest things we leave?
Five thousand everydays across tables,
apples and pears passed between—
those quiet moments that slip away first.

When I left you, we didn't have everyday,
no routine life to grieve, no custom to fall forgotten.
The loss was what we never got to, the things
I didn't know until I found you always not there.

It has been five hundred days since I traced your wrist,
saw the veins, the bones dancing beneath.
All those days, I have not forgotten
your chest on my cheek, your hands in my hair.

II.
BREAKING THE MULE

Picture Perfect

And so the arranging begins—
the roses and fondant,
veiling and rings.
Each piece placed in the tableau—
 the bride thus,
 the groom just so.
A whole life in still life.

Breaking the Mule

She knows it will be hard, the giving up
of one for together life. As a child,
she snatched independence
like a burglar. Later,
she came to wield it like a mace.

The stubborn child, the foot-planted mule,
has given way, softened for a sweet-voiced man.
Even he had to try twice, learned the second time
to let her struggle, let her fight her way back.

Pre-Cana

It all seems so redundant—
the surveys, retreats, and booklets, all asking
Are you ready? Do you love him? Is this forever?
I answered those questions, to God, myself, and you.

I pity people who need these chances
to turn back. For them, time
must seem a razored pendulum, not
a lover pacing below a window.

Accounts

I.

When the tour bus stopped at Harrod's,
my mother's eyes were gleaming.

Acres of food court, she said.

We herded through the makeup,
saw the attendants waiting
behind gleaming glass and gilt.
Past that, there were the cases
of Swarovski purses, 800 pounds
for the little one. Belts for two hundred,
scarves for five, and crisp clerks
wore tailored suits. In the food court,
Mom wondered I had no stomach
for Belgian ganache, each one worth
a ten-pound note. I had a fiver
in my Old Navy shorts.

II.

You proposed the jewelry store, and the name sunk
like a shot of hot ipecac. I know you stood there,

your hand to the door, bewildered at tears
on the other side. How could I tell

a college-prep boy, the son of a doctor, a man
whose mother has her grandmother's diamonds,

why a public school girl who lived in a rental
can't go into Tiffany's?

III.

I am glad we'll be poor. Resident salary's
still twice my wage, but the loans
will buy a shack.

Give me slow raises, premiums,
and an old, broken fridge. Give me a sense
of earning this life.

Mrs.

A plot in Virginia, a modest house
in his name, mortgaged on his wages.
She steps lightly through the rooms
as into the filmy dress she wore
the last day she was a daughter.

She dusts the pictures of a girl
she struggles to recall, like a song
half-heard in the grocery.
She remembers the girl's mother—
surrounded by night and an empty house, crying
she was only fit for this.

The girl was going to be Ambassador, Judge.
Two degrees, and all Mrs. wants
is an herb garden in the window, hardwood
to sweep, and duties that end at the mailbox.

Sacrament

Love, you are the ostensible Grace, but we come to see
the beloved is not the gift, humility is—

the daily knowing that we are not first, learning
we cannot help it, do not want to.

III.
BODIES IN THE SWEET CORN

Fireflies

In Iowa dusk we were happiest—
rhubarbed lips, sticky hands clapping
lids on lightning bugs. Come bedtime,
we left our lanterns full of drifting fire
to light the angels' way.

Morning, we'd wake to empty jars,
and I thought magic seeped out
through tiny holes. I was six
before I first caught Grandma
scattering bodies in the sweet corn.

Nesting

They think us dumb, these humans,
that we're content to scratch and strut.
What do they know of life,
of the certainty of sharp, heavy death?
What do they know of joy?—
 water, corn, and a box of warm straw.
Each night my chicks chirrup beside me,
and the murmuring of family lulls me to sleep.

Miscarriage

Blocked by miles of telephone wire,
my sister-in-law couldn't see
the sadness in mother's eyes.
Mom took the news

with her usual grace,
washed it down with
comforting words
and a swig of Diet Coke.

After dinner, I found her
scrubbing a clean plate,
as if reality was a spot of sauce
she couldn't quite get.

I hugged her, felt her heart
beat low in my chest.
In a breath, I knew
the warm, dark world,

and I felt the weight
of what had happened
open inside my belly,
empty but heavy.

Meals Ready to Eat

Deployed,
 my brother eats
 astronaut pears and
boot camp stews,
 vacuum-packed in
 matte, black plastic.

He has desert dreams of
 real food, Mom's food—
 hot chicken, corn,
mashed potatoes
 with the skins on, sweet tea
 and a wedge of lemon.

Wartime's measured in MREs—
 38 dinners to go.
 Each tastes a little
less like food,
 little less
 like home.

Habits

A man opens a cupboard,
counts out three white plates.
The woman beside him shuffles pots
and frets into puffs of steam. He draws
three napkins from the counter, and his hand
finds three forks in the drawer. He sets the table,
takes a basket of bread from the woman's hand,
lays down butter and a knife. She has her back to him
when he frowns, moves to scoop up the plate,
and stops. He stares at the back of her head
as he puts down the plate, adjusts the napkin and fork.

Crippling

Out west in Pomona, Nana is crippled, this time
by a shattered knee instead of a dead husband.
When my uncle comes to help her, she thanks
instead of cursing crumbling bones.

She cannot hate the knee, cannot admit
to hating herself, though her hair tangles,
and she forgets to change clothes.

Nana's heart has been breaking
since that hospital bed, since the monitor
started wailing, screaming until the nurses
switched it off.

When her body heals, my parents will take her,
though for years she wouldn't leave
the home he made with post office wages.

I know now she was denying him,
refusing his debris in every drawer.
She will not put him in a box again.

Shop Window
-for Clara

She would have chuckled if I'd bought her
this delicate cup and saucer, frilling
with flowers that don't grow in Iowa.

She would have studied it,
grazing the luminous bone
with fingers more used to the slip of flour
and the razor of cornhusks.

She would have frowned at the roundness
of *indulgence* in her mouth, after years
of gulping *need* and *function*,

it's a relic of a younger time
that glittered with Avon beads
and cut-glass brooches, that put
rhinestones in her black, cat frames.

In leaving, there is always leaving behind

At twenty-one, I was getting out,
in faded jeans and broken flip-flops.
Told my sister I'd come home every chance.
She just sipped her Lipton.

When we were younger,
she told me how she'd run,
how she'd be carried off
by a husband and a job in the Rockies.

She got the husband
but not the job,
found herself tied
to the only place she hated.

She never said I was wrong to leave,
only smiled with sad envy, knew
that when I said goodbye, I meant
I'm not coming back.

Other

I.

The Puritans were lucky.
Coarse cloth and clapboard
kept the devil at bay. On the edge
of wild vines and chaos, God's cities
were bastions of order—
modest facades and straight, humble roads.
Prayers hung in the air
around children in counterpaned beds.
he is what I am not. I am created in His image.
The wicked raised hell around fires,
wrapped their shadows
around ruddy tree trunks.

II.

My street was the last outpost. Beyond it,
the world ended in sycamores and hazard signs.
Little by little, the trees gave up.
The sweet gums were cut, snakes escaped creeks,
and the city built roads that felt smooth under skates.
Hawthorne became obsolete in the face
of slick, gray culverts and storm drains and tar.

III.

At night, I close my eyes and breathe,
blocking the stories from textbooks
and front-page columns. *he is*
what I am not. I am made
in His image. In Jasper,
they dragged a man so hard,
the road took his head off.

Bluff City

Yellow Fever killed everything, except the block on Auction Street. You can hear it humming hate along the river, in the old women slapping mosquitoes, in the metronome flash of church pew fans. On Beale, the creased, old men rasp the blues to rooms of nodding crowds and smoke. Cigar boxes, hoodoo, and troubles.

A few blocks away: a flophouse sightline, and Mahalia singing King's hymn in 306. It's always been a city of dreams turned nightmare— wasps in the cotton and burlap strapped tight. They keep the bullet in a big, glass case, suspended and racing still.

Phthonos

Hell was a place, a dot on a map
with a doorway and a guard dog.
Love was a beautiful archer, Desire,
contained as the mother of Love.
Death and Envy had bodies that the
sharp-eyed could know, avoid.
Welcome strangers, pour ablutions,
and if they pitied you, you became
stars, intertwined trees, a swallow.

IV.
MEETING THE MASTERS

Meeting the Masters

It's when the emissaries come
that the world seems so far away,
that life I try to write myself to
becoming remote as moon rocks, Atlantis.

The old ones drew pictures in books according
to descriptions from others, never leaving England,
never knowing the size of panthers' eyes, the length
of white incisors. They were all contented dust
when the real beasts arrived. They never
had to admit the rudeness of imitation.

Preservation

I will never look at the inscription the master wrote,
a birthday present I promised myself, the chance
to prove that I met history and took a piece away.

I imagine what it looks like—
sweeping strokes of a furious pen or
concentrated etching of minute craft. Not this,
the trembling hand of a small, bent man.

In the pictures, his hands are still, cradling the pen, not
struggling with a waning grip. In the pictures,
you only see his eyes, pinning you through the wall.

The Recluse

Even he traveled closer to God, found Him
among rocks and silence, refused
Him over a plate of fish, like a boy
who snubs a crush, then watches
through a gap in the bookshelf.

We all adore the awesome, but fools
draw near, dare to stand barefaced
and human. The poet remembers Semele,
inspects the terrible obliquely,
like a child with a pinhole projector.

Further Dispraise

If poetry is vengeance,
then words are lashes, dashes whips.
Poets know what it is to weep blood
for all its paltry worth.

I sit with my white elephant bewildered,
I have never been to Siam, yet
I labor in ritual, caring and lavishing
on this cantankerous thing.

Evanescence

There are poems about hurricanes and gods,
packed with symphonies and blasting cannons.

This one is plump with dreams—
the sugared pearl under a sleeper's tongue

dissolves by morning,
leaves the taste, soft impression,

of sweetness, gone.

Conceit

After Orpheus left, Tantalus began trying.
He posed above the water, his outstretched arm
a black branch in lightning.
He clawed, he curtseyed,
He told the pond about his father,
threw riddles at the fruit.

When the head came back, still singing,
they set it on the water's edge.
Ripples lapped at its chin, and the tree dropped golden
pears beside its red, round mouth.

Complaint

I blame you, Ovid. If not for you,
no lovesick ass would cheat the gods,
cross leagues and death for women lost.

For all your song, no sound of hers
was in your lines, save faint goodbye.
Neither of you understood.

She knew the asp was no mistake,
and when he came past doom for her,
she whispered under every note:

*I have put all of hell between us,
yet still you come, and wailing.*

Avoiding

Everyday, write something that would kill your mother.

-Marie Howe

When I wore pigtails, I kangaroo hopped
over sidewalks and tar-lines in asphalt.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Step on a line, break your father's spine.

Avoidance was protection.

When mother was mad, denial was her weapon.

Nothing is wrong. The nothing
went unsaid, until it lurched out,
a sputter of invective, stewed
in vinegar and Donna Reed repression.

I know I'm a lucky one, a suburban kid,
no abuse, no madness. I'm not Olds or Sexton.
I could raze a whole house, for the sake of one wall.
When the dust cleared, I'd see the other side,
but all around there'd be rubble.

Interstices

Seven weeks until the wedding,
the trees blossom, and David
house hunts in Virginia. The world
drowns as rain rolls along porch boards.

Give me these intervals. Give me
memories of daily things that make
life stretch long, like a cat
lazing in sunlight. The highlights
are logged in photos and diaries, but
who records these quiet moments? Who
will write down the times I relished hot coffee,
watched my breath fog the window, was content?

Unbound

It is true. In the end there is nothing
but a Voice and terrible Light.
When He opened my body, it was full
of songs and luminous poems.
How strange it was to find them reeling
in the spaces between ribs, behind lungs.
He gathered them, and I felt myself
become lighter by increments. I realize now
I never owned any of them, merely wrote down
Graces spinning inside the cavern of this form.

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Vita

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