To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Casie Janelle Fedukovich entitled "Living with Curious Pain." I have examined the final electronic 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.

Marilyn Kallet
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Anne Mayhew
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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Living with Curious Pain

A Thesis Presented
for the
Master's of Art Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Casie Janelle Fedukovich
May 2006

For Loretta Lynn and all my mothers

Abstract

"Living with Curious Pain" is a collection of poems written between August 2004 and March 2006. This collection largely focuses on the broad mining history of Southern West Virginia, and some of the pieces closely examine the lineage of the Vances, a mining family still living in the area. "Living with Curious Pain" is divided into two parts, which delineate the poems by their content. "Breathing Lessons" concerns itself with unearthing the hidden histories of mining families, kept silent by cultural constructions. "Body Lessons" shifts the focus away from history and looks deeply at the effects of such history on the contemporary female Appalachian body.

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Prosody and The Mother: A critical introduction to "Living with Curious Pain"

Process analysis twists poets into hard knots. It is not the prosaic nature of these documents that damn them, but their insistence on placing an apparatus underneath an often nebulous Process. My Process, that is to say, is such a mystery that I feel protective over its power. I hesitate to deconstruct The Process because I fear upsetting The Process, even stopping The Process in its tracks. Sharon Olds, my role model because of her daring subjects and startling imagery, best articulates my intentions for writing in her installation as the official Poet of the State of New York: "The arts are a place where people imagine each other, even come to identify a little with others whose experience may be very different from one's own." My work attempts to convey this imagining through historical narrative and lyrical balladry, a move that I find both discursive and recursive. I am joining a small intellectual community; very few Appalachian women are successfully publishing manuscripts of poetry specifically dealing with the coal culture. This sparseness of creation, however, does not translate to a sparse audience, since I find that others outside the culture are interested in learning more about "King Coal." My work on mining is timely in the wake of national debate on the safety of the profession, but as my speakers will vouch, coal mining has never—and possibly never could be—a job of physical security. Olds' "imagining" and my imagery allow these histories a voice and place among contemporary discussions on art and art's place in the world.

To craft these imaginings, I must first begin with solid images. I am a good noticer, and I think this ability to see and remember feeds my work. These noticings percolate for days—some are stubborn and take weeks—until the birth minute arrives, and they are ready to be delivered on the page. I then write—by type, never by hand—

furiously for twenty or thirty minutes, winded at the end like a sprinter. I find that I revise less frequently and less dramatically when I allow these mental edits to fill in the blanks and blank out the excesses before putting fingers to keys. I cannot handwrite any meaningful work, poetic or otherwise. The rough feel of a pencil in hand, the scratch against paper, smudged ink—each sensory experience curtains the mental movies I work to describe in my poems. Only by allowing my fingers to tap away at the always faithful keys (those letters have been in the very same positions since I learned to type in middle school) can I adequately and effectively describe my visions. These visions often center on my family, its muddied history, and my less-than-ideal childhood. I am able to play and rewind the scenes as a film editor would, skipping back and forth in time and space; I attribute this ability to vividly "daydream" to early childhood escapism through books and years studying with several accomplished yogis. Yogi Don and Yogi Abi taught me to meditate deeply—without falling asleep—and to project my "inner eye" through any number of spaces.

By first mentally constructing a narrative, and most of my work contains narrative elements, I can best plot actions, reactions, and landscape. I allow these films to play through until they complete. This final mental act is the equivalent of an intertitle in a silent film: Fin. The End. Then I commit the images to the page in an indescribable translation between scene, interpretation, and diction. Often, I feel like an eavesdropper on an old-fashioned party line. I can hear the conversation, maybe even feel elated or disappointed in the information transmitted, but I am helpless as to the direction of the dialogue. My primary intention as a poet is, as Olds suggests, to help others imagine, with clarity, the same mental movies that I see. To shape powerful poetry, I find that I

must quiet my ego and step out of the way of the poem. I ban my "editor" voice to the deep recesses of my consciousness as I dictate my images, often with my eyes closed.

Most of my manuscript contains this "received" narrative poetry. Many of the poems in this manuscript describe the role of the body as a vehicle for experience and higher consciousness. I unearth hidden histories and locate bodies among varying landscapes—topological, psychological, and physical. Like Russian nesting dolls, a number of these works dovetail neatly; I attempt to trace genetic behaviors through the matrons—my mother, her mother, my great-grandmother—to situation myself laterally among such colorful characters and such crushing tragedy in the coalfields of West Virginia.

In its best form, "Living with Curious Pain" is a thanatopic lament for the secreted stories of my family—a hearty collection of coal miners, addicts, foundlings, and factory workers. I divided the manuscript into two parts, perfect halves titled "Breathing Lessons" and "Body Lessons." The initial compilation of 20 poems both celebrates and grieves for the body—the female body in general, my body in particular—as a site of political warfare and personal contemplation.

In my reading of currently practicing female poets, I find few—with the exception of Sharon Olds—who face without blinking the realities of violence, both familial and governmental, so I seek to include these taboo topics in my collection. The poems of "Body Lessons" contend with weight, sexual abuse, abortion, and temptation. I find that these pieces have become timely in the wake of current debate surrounding abortion, its function in "civilized" society, and the possibility of a nationwide ban on the procedure in all of its forms. These poems in particular are risky in their subject matter and its

presentation, and my first inclination is to hide them deeply within a filing cabinet. I struggle both with self-preservation and the assumption that such topics saturate the media through "pop culture" examples. The national public has scooped up popular "memoir" genres with novels like Alice Sebold's Lucky and Kathryn Harrison's The Kiss. By remembering the Cold War struggles that met the mothers of confessional poetry, I am able to relax my self-preservation in the service of good writing.

The first and most articulated section, "Breathing Lessons," begins with a series of snapshots entitled "Coal Camp Education." Some of these four "lessons" speak through the voice of a child—I envision my mother, only smaller and more observant—whose schooling evolves through her life in a 1940s through 1950s coal camp in West Virginia. These poems center on my child-mother because I am finding, as I grow more aware of life patterns, that she is recreating her childhood in her old age. The dynamic between little girl and old woman never fades as I continue through "Breathing Lessons" to turn inward and contemplate my life patterns as a part of the larger quilt of history. These poems also serve to illustrate the legacy of Appalachian femininity, to both accept the veracity of genetic markers while rejecting the apathy that I have recognized in the women whose blood is the same as mine.

In the second section, "Body Lessons," I present work dealing with body image and acceptance. Admittedly, many female poets contend with this topic in their work; from Alice Walker to Mary Oliver, Anne Bradstreet to Joanne Kyger, women have long contemplated the use of their bodies and, for as long, have written poems praising and condemning thighs, breasts, noses, and stomachs. My work oscillates between hymnals and shame songs as I work to illustrate the precarious position of strong and substantial

femininity alongside cultural models of physical perfection. These poems on the body are not, by virtue of the subject matter, the most restrained in the collection, since my intention is to present femaleness as the dichotomy between creation and destruction; the woman's body, my body, emerges as the nesting ground of arguments both philosophical and political, nurturing and exclusionary.

"Living with Curious Pain" grew out of my relationships with the women in my writing life. Each suggested that, since my maternal care was "unsatisfying," I sought female direction through mentoring. My first experience with this pseudo-mothering came too late to save me from the most dramatic maternal failures, but still works as a milestone in my development as a writer and as a woman. I now define my writing life as either "pre-Morgan" or "post-Morgan." In the summer of 1995—the summer before my first year of high school—my parents left me for two weeks while they traversed Colonial Williamsburg where they panted over beeswax candles and stonemasonry. I devoted my mornings to Linda Sue Morgan and the Mercer County Summer Writing Camp. Reading already occupied my spare time, but I had never considered myself a real "writer," or even as a person who "writes." The theme that year was "Poetry Alive," and our orientation began with a married couple who traveled through West Virginia performing "local color" poets like Gregory Orr and Louise MacNeil with a few Shakespearean sonnets tossed in to satisfy the older, more "traditional" instructors. These "traditional" instructors viewed the younger, blonde, energetic Mrs. Morgan with a wary eye. She was a "loose cannon" who swung with the beats, baby, and would float through the San Francisco section of Sister's Bookstore and Coffee House, her bare feet slapping the linoleum. A Plath fan dressed in a Beatles "Revolver" shirt and

Birkenstocks, she clouded the parking lot every morning in her Volkswagen convertible. Her loud radio—Cher, that summer, popular British rock through my high school years—echoed off the staunch brick sides of Princeton High School. She shared her personal collection of poetry and immersed our small class in Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, and T.S. Eliot. The writing classes lasted all morning, from eight until noon, when we scattered for lunch. Some of us crossed the road to "burger alley" with its proliferation of red-and-yellow signs; others, all in the "high-schooler" class, those of us lucky enough to meet both the driving age and "safe transportation" rule, would congregate at a local park where we assembled vast picnic lunches under the heavy leaves of an old oak. Mrs. Morgan always ate lunch with the picnickers; she considered it her "peaceful ritual." The circle of teenagers always accepted her in its ranks, and she became just another "writer" in a group of hatchling writers.

One of these picnics became the foundation for my development as a poet. I had dabbled, somewhat unguided and half-heartedly, in short poetry, prose poetry, short fiction, and memoir. One afternoon in the summer in 1995, she read aloud Richard Brautigan's "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace" and challenged the six of us to write a pastiche that was not only socially relevant but also personally connected. Before this challenge, I had kept a healthy distance from autobiography in my writing, focusing instead on landscapes and vague sentimentality. I had touched—only briefly—on the phenomenon of "teen angst" poetry with work predictably, now laughably, titled "Coffin" and "Merry Christmas, Bulimia." While these anxiety-ridden pieces were more personal than my previous laments on summer wheat and counting tree rings, they did not exhibit the rawness of Olds, Plath, and Sexton. These women, and Mrs. Morgan,

formed a ring of femininity that taught me what it meant to be a female poet with a voice stifled by social constructs. Angelou followed Brautigan, and I experienced my first break-through poem with "Refrigerator Blues," a piece of writing that would usher me into publication when the small-press journal, Fledgling, printed it. After receiving my contributor's copy and seeing my bio line in print, I was hooked. The bio is regrettably youthful: "Casie Hurt is a high school student in West Virginia. She just bought a 1986 Nissan Sentra for $600." But it is immortalized, and Mrs. Morgan has her own copy (which she had me sign), and she said that she was proud of my accomplishment.

Through high school, then college, I wrote the same kind of poems. Only my subjects, not my form, changed as I aged. Topics spanned life in West Virginia, violence, inherited diseases, family interactions, and juvenile infatuation, all presented in the same two or three beat lines introduced, usually, by a prepositional phrase. At twenty-five, I realized that, ten years after my break-through poem, I still leaned on the cookie-cutter comfort of that original form; this startling discovery led me to question my range as a writer and my authority over my subjects. After all, if I couldn't master a form beyond two-beat lyrics, how could I possibly read Whitman, Williams, or Hass with any feeling other than humiliation and awe? A graduate writing workshop led by Dr. Marilyn Kallet at The University of Tennessee demanded that I expand my form, take control of the longer, narrative—thus more powerful—line. It was, she said, the line of Whitman and of patriarchal voice.

Assuming this longer line felt like playacting, but it freed my inner-storyteller and allowed authoritative control of history. The margin-to-margin lines loosened my notion of poetics by giving room for play and by introducing both the dialogic and prosaic to my

usually minimalist work. I now use the long line to reconstruct the subsumed histories of my family. To self-identify as a—with apologies to Loretta Lynn—coal-miner's granddaughter, I have experiences that are completely removed from the lives of many of my colleagues. My goal with the longer line is to unearth the lives buried under poverty and socially-constructed silence.

Morgan, Christensen, O'Haynes, and Kallet—the women of my writing life have many things in common. All have encouraged me to speak my truth as an Appalachian woman struggling with issues of purpose, goal-setting, and self-empowerment. All have taught me to craft beauty from pain. And it is the process of "craft" that reverberates so deeply. Each woman armed me with the tools necessary to speak my truth in the most effective way. My work arrives more fluidly now, with the craft built in. Before their gently guiding hands, I had no qualms about peppering weak "be" verbs and the dreadful "said" throughout work—even short lyrics. I learned to turn to my work as I would the work of another poet to read the poem objectively and revise with craft in mind. Though my process often subverts this last step in translation (what my poet-friend Lelia calls "replacing the body with the brain"), I find that I keep their instruction at my mind's proverbial elbow while I direct the imagistic narratives.

This interlude on maternal figures leaves out the only man in my writing life. Before graduate study, I had never worked with a male creative writing professor, workshop leader, revision partner, or writing friend. I could say that I have always ferreted out the female instructors to fulfill my urge for motherly guidance, but the truth is that no male creative writing teachers, workshop leaders, revision partners, or writing friends have crossed my path. In a workshop led by Dr. Arthur Smith (The University of

Tennessee) I learned to look to the early masters of Greek lyricism to find socially important work that I could then adapt and make my own. The relationship between my search for female guidance and my male writing instructor is less articulated than I would like, but I can gesture towards a dynamic between my subjects—less risky in his class, more risky when I knew a woman would lead discussion—and my products. It isn't fair to say that I chose less autobiographical topics with Dr. Smith, but I do feel that I concentrated more on form and less on content when I wrote for him. This shifting of priorities led to my rediscovery of the short lyric as a mode of political discourse and a greater understanding of prosody's work within contemporary poetry.

My most dramatic formal turn towards the long-line narrative uncovered a wealth of new material. I now consider myself an Appalachian poet capable of telling the stories of my mining lineage. I have earned the privilege of narrating these lives by experiencing my mother's retaliation against her impoverished childhood. Her retaliation led to my less-than-ideal childhood, which now produces therapeutic and authoritative poetry. For years, I struggled against the titles "Southern Poet," "Appalachian Feminist," and even "West Virginia Native" because of the cultural assumptions that surround that region. After learning that I am a storyteller with a purpose, I crave opportunities to narrate these lost lives.

Autobiography isn't everything, and I balk at the automatic association of trauma and art. To conflate pain and inspiration undersells both roles in the creative process. The process of craft must combine with a study of prosody to produce a fully articulated poem, but only in retrospect—or retro-metrics, as it is—can I apply the wide band of

prosody to my current work. To my surprise, I find that my editorial decisions and even my unconscious choices of diction echo patterns solidified by early masters of poetry.

Regardless of line length, I find that my work is heavily trochaic. Classically, the inverted first foot of a poem signaled unrest, foreshadowed confusion among predictable iambs. Donne's "Holy Sonnets" and Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella"—poems that could be oversimplified as "invitations"—and Spenser's wedding verse, "Epithalamion," all deploy trochees as markers of frustrated love and pensive introspection. Sidney, especially, calls on the initial stress of the trochee in Sonnet 41 of "Astrophil and Stella": "STELla looked ON, and from her HEAVENly FACE/sent FORTH the BEAMS which MADE so FAIR my RACE." The haphazard first line seems more vital when read just before the monotonous second line, and both reinforce—accentually—Stella's "heavenly face" and the "beams" that made the speaker's "race," or his joust for her hand, so "fair."

Donne used the trochee, as did Sidney, Spenser, Suckling, Jim Morrison, Neil Young, and Loretta Lynn. The Doors' "Light My Fire" is written almost completely in trochaic tetrameter, and some of history's greatest country ballads—"Coal Miner's Daughter" and "Walkin' After Midnight"—hinge on an initially stressed syllable. There's something inherently mournful and commanding about the trochee, and I argue that my work in "Living with Curious Pain" functions as a collection of dirges on a family steeped in extreme poverty and hard labor. I deepen some of these narrative works by turning inward and observing the impact of history on my life decisions. The manuscript also works on a micro-level, with the individual poems presenting discrete snippets of life stories; these stories pogo forward and back in time to praise of heartiness

and vigor and, more specifically, inquire into the roles and expectations of an Appalachian family.

I rarely pause to consider the metrical emphasis of my diction, at least in the first draft of a poem. To ask The Process for respite is the poetic equivalent of turning away from a glistening rainbow and expecting it to be there the next day. In my later revisions, I break lines so that a majority begins with trochees, but this move certainly depends on the subject matter of the poem. The emphasis of the first syllable of a line, perhaps, instead of an "easing into" provided by a quieter iamb allows subtle aggression with a subject while protecting, or even promoting, cohesion through repetition of stress. As mentioned, classical literature supports my choice to embrace the trochee in my Appalachian ballads. Sidney uses the name "Stella" in most of the sonnets of "Astrophil and Stella," both for its epigrammatic meaning (Astrophil, a star lover, and Stella, a star) and its initial metrical stress. I use the names "Wiley," "Oren," and "Maggie" to achieve the same effect. The love poets mentioned—Donne and Sidney—craft strings of trochees to gesture towards devotion and invitation. The calming heartbeat of iambs (daDA daDA daDA) gives way to speedier trochees (DAda DAda DAda) to reinforce the insistence in the unveiling of "secret" love. My poems—in addition to serving as ballads—often bewail lost love in the forms of parental neglect, feelings of incompleteness with regard to history, and self-doubt.

I will consider the title piece as representative of my work as a whole since it blends family history with personal revelation using the shorter line. The shorter-line poems I have recently produced carry the weight of introspection while the long line usually relates familial history. In these long lined poems, I manipulate the images of

family members and of other figures in West Virginia mining history as characters on a historical landscape. Often, these family members have been dead for many years, and only oral chronicles remain. In a few instances, I have engaged in historical research to ensure the veracity of my work. This ethnographic approach to verse allows the use of rich dialogue and jargon, and the inclusion of vivid personal accounts.

It is important to note that I use the term "trochee" to mean an accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable; I employ accentual verse schematics to demonstrate my use of prosody while employing terms that generally describe metrics. The use of accentual description centers on the number of accents—beats—contained within lines. The opening of the poem, "Living with Curious Pain," unfolds with staccato two-beat lines, with lines three and nine splitting beats around a caesura. All but lines 3, 4 and 7 begin with trochees[1]:

> MOTher SAID the
> PAIN was NECessARY
> FIRST PERIOD, FIRST SEX,
> SCRAPES THAT reVERBerATE from
> PUBis to SPINE. She
> BUILT her BOX with
> THREE CHILDREN,
> ALcoHOLic HUSband,
> EMphySEma, PILL HABIT.

Lines three, four, and seven employ spondees instead of trochees to create a series of heavily stressed openings with slight dips through polysyllabic diction amid the forceful beats: "necessary," "reverberate," "alcoholic," and "emphysema." The lilting created by these longer words, as they juxtapose the punchier diction, varies the tone from strictly didactic—"Mother said"—to introspective.

[1] See Appendix A for a full explication of the title poem, "Living with Curious Pain."

Spondaic constructions underpin the entire poem, with forty of sixty-four lines containing the double-stressed meter. Nine lines—3, 7, 14, 20, 28, 35, 45, 58, and 62—are almost fully stressed, presenting a mixture of spondees, extra stressed syllables, and caesuras. This driving rhythm helps pace the work, ensuring that each word is fully articulated and no ending morphemes trail away.

Of the one hundred metrical constructions contained in the sixty-four lines, only one quarter—or twenty-five syllables—are iambic. In submersing the iambic form in "Living with Curious Pain," I intend to dissuade a "heartbeat" rhythm to imply a spiritual move away from the maternal force presented in the narrative; my speaker, then, distances herself from the ideas of Appalachian motherhood while I articulate the "story" through primarily stressed lines. The intention to distance the work echoes through the few feminine endings; only twenty lines end in unstressed syllables. The remaining 44 lines break at stressed syllables to intensify the anxious and harsh diction of the work while speeding the pace. As noted, the inclusion of spondees and extra stressed syllables helps prevent elision as the poem quickens to its end. When spoken aloud, the words link together as discrete elements, separately voiced ideas that accelerate even as they divide into retrospection and reportage.

Heavily stressed verses saturate this manuscript. Even the individual titles lean on driving rhythms to carry authority: "Fat and Naked Angel," "Apollo Punishes the Muse," "Coal Camp Education," and "Lazarus on Shaky Legs" all hang on the peg of accentual force to develop tension and, in some examples like "Fat and Naked Angel" and "Reading the Guestbook," promote anxious humor. My intention is to develop my poems metrically without allowing my ego—or the interior editor who pops her head in

at the worst times during the creative process—to obscure my poetic attention. I feel that my language should be transparent, vivid enough to allow Olds' "imaginings," but not self-conscious.

My collection, "Living with Curious Pain," is a body of work about the body. I hope its contents raise questions akin to the blossoming field of subaltern studies, best exemplified in Gayatri Spivak's article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues for the construction of a monolithic third-world woman, yet her theory applies to Appalachian mining families, survivors of sexual abuse, and women with weight issues alike. She writes:

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization…There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. (Williams and Chrisman 102-03)[2]

The speakers in my poems are also caught between competing paradigms, much like Spivak's model. In the case of the "Body Lessons," these paradigms arise through the dynamics of self-hatred and the perpetuation of violence to the body. The implied argument in this section is that an abused body will often turn its abuse inward and attack the soul. In "Breathing Lessons," the dichotomy arises in the balance between history and action, conception and creation, to argue that the past always (and already) controls the future. I hope to convey the claim that adults either participate or reject what they learn as children to then fashion their lives as productive citizens. Like Spivak's "sexed" subaltern, social constructions silence my subjects, both male and female. The

[2] Willams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman. Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader. New York: Columbia UP. 1994.

manuscript is a survey of groups without a voice, groups that are not allowed to speak their truths in any realm.

I am a member of a unique generation that will reach intellectual maturity at a time when global and local politics mix with personal beliefs and rights. This temporal swatch of people is achieving greater educational, career, and familial goals than expected. They—we—are an articulate group with worldly experiences and a drive for activism. This move towards mixing the personal with the political calls into question the role of art in the public sphere. If artists are now also activists, where does that leave the *ars poetica*? The function of Olds' "imagining" binds to Spivak's subaltern studies to create a body of literature that leans on social awareness and calls for social change. Ginsberg did it, and now Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, and other poets are taking up the reins of personal protest through prosody.

I am especially proud of "Living with Curious Pain"; fictionalizing the lives of West Virginia coal miners became as absorbing as recounting personal experiences. This manuscript represents the first instance of my full embrace as an "Appalachian Poet." It is my truth and my best attempt at realizing my potential as a woman, feminist, and poet.

Part I: Breathing Lessons

Coal Camp Education
Lesson One: Synonyms

Fire boss tells mama,
“fatal power haulage accident.”
Haulage means a truck with a load,

two tons too much sloshes over the sides,
drags daddy’s uniform shirt fifty feet past
his feet. She recognizes daddy by the name

stitched on the breast, blue cotton caught
in the axle, pulled through mud, the shirt
she sewed the bottom button back on Sunday.

Power—kin to moving. The truck bumps
across daddy’s legs, shivers in the wet slag,
spills overfill on his face. Daddy’s eyes

shine bituminous, rocks push in
as his face swells with rigor, congested vessels.
Mama whispers
to the foreman, *Dig the damn things out*.

Fatal and accident, stand-in words for
raw turnips, mama’s bloody fingers,
breath short in the winter bed.

Coal Camp Education
Lesson Two: Ecology

Lucky rats scatter,
fragments of brown
glass drag whiplash
tails through limestone
slush, skitter up sides
of steel-toed boots and
under the Continuous Miner—
grinds rock, bones of
men under chewing corkscrew,
spits bloody fur in a 40-inch circle.

One ton for the checkweighman
measuring rock against the
company's scale.
One ton for a sharp pick.
Two tons for the doctor
who cinched Maggie's foot
with a belt, cut black toes
crosswise after she slept
under snow in shade of
overhung porch.

Spit-tobacco in the dark, rats
break like warm brown water over
sharp face of rock. An avalanche
of rats, noses pointed to light,
untainted air,
and men duckwalk
slowly, outpacing growling
earth, stiff arms extended with
pick heads driven into the dirt.

Coal Camp Education
Lesson Three: Reproduction

She sweeps the house
while he's gone,
hangs up crumpled Nicewander shirts,
Her skin, too yellow, threaded blue country roadmaps.
Bones too close to the air
poke at angles.
Her hands are small gray birds, outlined in
coal dirt that's malignant, hidden in
cuffs and bent floorboards.
Her sharp body hides a piece of her man,
kicking and, if her mother's God
has a hand in it, healthy.
She sweeps the mudroom, around the
cedar bed, under the potbellied belching
stove and out into the courtyard's bright
light, sweeps the rock
away from the turbulence
twisting over her pelvis.
She sweeps the house and he is underground,
a tight ball of arms, legs, breath,
like the boy inside of her,
but dirty, cold and coughing.

Coal Camp Education
Lesson Four: Family History

Wynonna, 1964

Four years since
John F. Kennedy toured
Route 52 on his way to Keystone
to bring meat to cold New Deal tables
decayed three-room houses washed in used
bathwater white squares against mountains
wiped down like the children's faces, for the New
England millionaire with his pressed suits incredulous photographers.

My mother, pregnant in her Sears-and-Roebuck
catalogue shift protected by burlap apron, stirs
powdered milk into water yellow with iron. Her belly
bumps against counters of two-by-fours, shrinks under
hands of Robinette, midwife who works for canned
beans. Milk, laced with iron, curdles in the damp air.

Lilly Grove, 1968

The rest of the world
spins daisy chains—my mother
pummels boiled carrots for the
second child, a girl whose black
hair gave eighth-month indigestion,
whose strawberry birthmark splashed
across forehead presages pain. Her breasts
swell with spoiled milk. Nipples gray, baby will
not eat this rank juice. Black hair falls away, a trail
like spider webs across flagstones. Unfiltered Herbert
Tarryton's replace anthracite dust kicked up by touring limos.

Dark Bedroom, 1980

Doctor in Charleston hospital
says cerebral palsy, placental
previa, incompetent uterus. She's
too old, five stillbirths, two tadpoles
swimming in Thalidomide, and the doctor
cuts the last child from her belly like beef
on white china. Her breasts fold inward, useless

as food, so the nurse lies the girl on her mother's
stomach, distended now that the amniotic hardness has drained.
The girl's pink bow of a mouth pushes to pancaked breasts, finds
only powdery dryness. I learn that mother is not food, nor warmth,
nor satisfaction.

Pocahontas Seam via Norfolk and Western
Vance Family Album

Oren first, hot German blood splashed on rock
as pick slips, chews into thick upper thigh.
A bit of index finger in a cart packed
for Scranton. His lungs stay in West Virginia where
they shrivel with dust, lush flowers planted in sand.
Tall Paul next. The foreman sings his reach to other mines,
"Feller don't need no ladder, born with a ladder of bones."
One leg to Hershey in Load 96. His son, Dennis, cauterizes
the artery with a blowtorch, digs his father's room until
two moons spiral overhead, a silver fall rinsing
mountains with light, shadowboxing the trees
as Dennis slouches home, elbows to knees, spine of tender glass,
finds his father freebleeding in the narrow bed.
Dennis undercuts a face thirty years later, twitches under
half a ton of rock for three days, body shrinks enough
to slide away,
half an ear sandwiched between anthracite humps.

The only part of Dennis to leave the mountains
blackens a steel vat in Pittsburgh.

Breathable Dust

Red-eye shift,
Black Rock mine,
specters slink
between poplars
swinging dinner buckets.
Cigarette flame
winks up the
mountain in red
chains. They climb
rock, descend two
miles into earth.

Room-and-pillar blasts
wash Wylie Edmund's
face in orange.
His son's hands
push through fissures
to dig slate bands,
pour tiny palmfuls,
a half cup at a time
filling buckets with flat
skipping rocks. Overalls
sag with champion
jumpers, and the boy
dreams away from the dark.

Fire boss in Sunday best, walks Wylie's
son to Wylie's hole curtained with day lilies.

Away to College

Mother dreams of hot milk, clean feet waving in triumph, ten-toed banners from
second-hand cradle; landscape of small shoulder,
cup of skull chills her throat, primitive howling clenches nipples, and she jerks
awake in the hot bedroom, barricaded behind mounds
of sagging luggage, tattered bags that bleed at seams, jaunty airline fodder
that collapses the second-hand cradle. And she cries for
her daughter in the torn jacket, the tall girl who gathers bags before breaking into parts:
egg and slick baby and infant and child. The daughters
roam the room, peer into drawers, climb Mother's wide bed, finger feathery
hair, kiss concave chest. Baby clambers to the floor, hoists
red plane tickets, and each daughter files behind, dragging rough baggage through
dark oak doors.

Gathering Breath at High Camp

Hiking teaches you
tink tink of
sliding pebbles
means speed,
shifting earth
means danger.

I call my mother from
the mountain's rise to
tell her that the Sierra Nevadas
are huge rock teeth and
to wish her luck with her biopsy.
Kept silent in a valley of
breathing tubes, plastic oxygen
masks, mother answers
through Darvocet vapors.

The forest won't
engulf if you
keep eyes
fastened to
terrain no more
than a foot
beyond your step.
Navigating dense
undergrowth teaches
focus.

Words, throaty vowels.
I hear quick mechanical
exhale, she moves the
mask to whisper through
lesions. Metronome tick
of pressurized tank travels
from one mountain range,
3000 miles, to another.
Trees she'll die without
seeing bend as I pull
sticky evergreen branches
to the ground, just to
disturb life teeming
at the trunk.

Feet turned horizontally
gain surface
area, allow for
safe descent through
scrabbly rock.

Sleep steals her twice
before she fumbles the
phone, drops it, disconnects
the call with shattering
buzz. Rocks she'll die
without seeing bear me down.

Timeline—My Father's Life

My father chews the line
between breath & drowning.

Handsome, James Dean handsome,
patrician nose, plebian dreams,

yanking engines for cigarette money
in the southern corner of West Virginia.

Thick grease from rich men's machines
settles into black spit, yellow eyes.

Virile, red-chapped hands guide three
children with hesitation, teach

satisfaction in helplessness, prone
under bulldozer tracks, squinting into smoke.

His handsome nose breaks,
empty belly folds inward.

Striking before the collapse of body
& will, the slow scratching of dry skin,

my mother's sleeping pills, debt like
long night roads without headlights.

Lazarus on Shaky Legs

For weeks, he girds the rotten boards and paints black wood and all along my mother,
standing behind,
shakes her head at the homeplace that burns my father's mind, drains his wallet
and resurrects the ghosts
of dead parents, puppets them around the dirty courtyard before they collapse into mud
beside the bones of dead children.
The house rises on legs of beams, stomps around the lot, drops wood flesh in trails of
offal, mud, and bone, harsh
against the sky. Sharp roof cuts swaths between clouds, contrails bloody the blue, and
this executioner won't sit down.
Doesn't heed my mother's panting cry to *lie down, just lie down*. The ground shakes
as it vomits up its dead,
dark with stony mountain dirt, the folded bodies of greened infants, bound not in black
mourning satin, but thick clumps—
If I fix it, they will be proud, he chokes. Glancing hammer stroke, sharp smash,
his blood, steaming in the sun,
soaks into the wood, seeks out other cells. They commingle into smoke, and the house,
satisfied, settles to tell its stories.
It weeps of 1932 and no food except what grows from the gravels, screams about 1954
and a new car crouches in the driveway,
paid for in blacklung and broken knees, whispers of 1985 and mother and daddy paddle
under dark water, malignant dirt fighting oxygen.
It's 1990 and he dies first, the huge frame reducing to a child's, and he's just another
dead baby, only he is old
and dried-up and yellow, and in 1998 she dies in the back of a sedan on her way to
Michigan to breathe Great Lakes air
and clear the balls of tar that line her throat, and my father's youngest sister drives her
back without having her embalmed,
her body taking the shape of the car's seat and her eyes blind to green road signs
pointing south, smiles of white reflectors.
The house, an old man, groans as my father nails in the "No Trespassing" sign,
and my mother asks him
if the decomposed cedars could reduce any further, could distill to ash after a backwoods
fire, and he gathers his breath,
thick with the smoke of blood, history, and hidden bodies, to push air into the house's
buckled boards and dirty lungs.

.

Lament: Emphysema

Neither mending dreams nor restored
sight will make this time easy:

Parents die too

*

Triangled arms, touching each
        forehead as blue bodies drain spirit,
                considerately beeping machines,
miles of black wire strung between
        two steel-barred beds,
                tenuous bridge my child self
crawls to cross in wind, because
        when we are old, we are still infant,
                still pubescent and blushing, still dusty and bent.

My selves file through yellow
corridors, breaking antiseptic
clouds, one-year-old soul leads
parade of mourners with swagging
Buddha belly, plump hand drags
stucco wall for support; wife self
carries the final banner

        to the end of East Wing B, Room 235.
        Whoosh whoosh of respirators keep
        time with steps heavy as God, peer at dead
        parents like revelers, deep diaphragm shouts,
        clapping like birds' wings; baby crouches
                                under I.V. stand and howls.

Old husband old wife riding
        updrafts birds that climb to thin
                atmosphere tangle talons
                        spiral gather velocity ground rushes
                                like wet open mouth to accept knotted hands
                                enmeshed feathers collapsed lungs.

Mending dreams, and I take my spirit parents to the base of Mount Monongalea: *See, there is something bigger than grief,* I say.

All wooden seats, pews, even this bench in the sun.
All open spaces, pulpits. Especially this drenched meadow in shadows of glacier rock.

*

We could never breathe, my father says, *even before the cancer*.

*

I sign the certificate: witness.
These are my parents, Charles and Louise, I tell the beetle-headed doctor,
neck dripping cords like lichen, black moss.
And they smothered,
and I couldn't stop it with
my words,
my hands,
my back.
They believed no prophetic eye but their own.

Sinners Gather at Paint Lake

Praying Indian friends tug at heavy
denim, hands soundtracked by noseeum
hum, mosquito whirl. Sharp slaps against stoic
faces punctuate splashes against mountain rock.

Thirty men and women, up to knees
in snow runoff, rope the new bride
and groom, twining verses circle young
heads like garlands. Sister Bertha's

best dress gathers silt in lace. Body long
against six pair of outstretched hands, she
relaxes into water, white dress reflected in the Reverend's
pupils. Holy coal-stained fingers pinch too hard her small nostrils.

His palm slaps belly too big for fresh marriage,
tongue lolling, tasting metallic lake
pooling in Sister Bertha's temples. Brother Dennis
follows her interrupted swirls, small German teeth grind,

heavy boots stir hellgrammites from mud.
Mine soot behind ears exchanges with lake
bed sediment, lungs pull Holy Ghost water, bumps breath
from lungs, same smother of coal caves, low ceilings,

skin dark with rock. Brother Dennis drinks God, gathers
elements with blurred eyes that flash once, sublime
heat gathering under still-lake mirror, before congregation hands
lift gaping fish-mouth to air.

Tangential Love Song

Strophe: Materna

Mama's feet tucked under pink-and-yellow quilt, patchwork girls holding scrap umbrellas in four-by-four patterns. *This was granddaddy's Nicewander shirt, fold of my teething blanket, blood from Denny's nose, missing square to patch your pants that summer in Matewan—the coal dust blew so thick it looked like fog.*

bleep bleep Three
o'clock morphine
—God sent the lambs
away, dirty rams,
oily wool—Catheter
drips overlay
bubbling throat, frayed
breath, collapsed lungs.

Antistrophe: A Chant

Tiny needle in the neck
blows hippocampus red,
sucks in, tucks away
nasty habits, lazy mother
sleeps in late afternoon,
dozes through days,
sucked in, tucked away
peeks through smoke—pills,
tucked in, sucked away
pieces of mother
blown down the mineshaft.

Epode: Sympathy Cards

Snowdrifts of wilted lilies-of-the-valley. My father cries at quick prettiness. The snowdrift folds under his hand. His children tuck him away, draw a pink-and-yellow quilt across the wheels, over his legs, push him out of sticky grass. *At this time, your thoughts are appreciated.* Three casseroles no one can eat, fourteen jars of fox grapes. Two whole chickens. *The family is grateful for your prayers.* Widower twenty years before his wife died; orange bottles: blue and yellow sleep, mouth open, limbs limp. *He folded his hands, watched her sleep for fifty years. Sent a call down the shaft—his voice flew back a wilted bird.*

Red Jacket, West Virginia

The broken man lifts each leg with his hands,
clomping up wooden stairs, a horse bloody
from traces and carts groaning with black blocks.

Dead eyes of dirty windows, no curtain for modesty,
glare in two cold rooms whose wood throbs with
coal dust, streaked like papery skin in rain,

water cutting tracks through masks of dirt.
Grimy feet bend inward, yellow toenails catch
on splinters as they never lift from the ground,

bones shortened by fifty years of packing charges
in Turkey Run Number 20, air fighting light for room
in three-foot crawls where fire blasted hot rock back

into his face, darkening until jaundiced eyes,
square teeth shone in greasy black. Twenty hours
for fifteen minutes of too-fat hamburger, four children

whose puffed bellies scream while he fights sleep
with numbed pain. Gray hair slides from his head
like water. His wife can't warm his twitching, stiff body,

she shivers on folded blankets beside the youngest,
curled like a cat under the porch in summer,
the cat who ran from dogs bloody with that night's kill.

The Keeping Tree

Early November,
outlined by blackbirds,
bony, creased feet
scores the bark
even in walls of cold wind,
thin, ball-knuckled, dirty
like the back of Granddaddy's left hand,
the one palsy had frozen in
yellow bird-claw.
Twenty years of bent shuffling,
packing charges in Turkey Run
Number 20, clawing then,
too soon,
the earth slowed him,
burned him from the inside out.

Six is too young to memorize
the harsh script, so
we played like it was summer and
pain wasn't gnawing.
Too long under low ceilings.
so far under earth, light
jostled oxygen for room.
Broken height, his muscles shorter,
tight against glass-filled
joints and strawbones,
He was my size,
bigger steps and hopping.

He would race to the old
oak in the south field,
breath coming in reedy squeaks.
He was never meant to be underground.
Never meant to be clipped and clawed.
Resting, regaining, rebreathing
on the roots of the Keeping Tree.

Requiem: Night Watch

My father’s body
bows under coughs.

And somewhere between
blue-circle eyes,

fist-clench lungs,
shake-struggle gasp,

rest three childhoods
blistered with time,

three delicate bodies grown
tall, six hands strong to hold

tubes that feed sleep
into his withered arm.

Chores

A poor child born of poor parents bore me.
My mother, bulbous and obscure, wears
rings of yellow nicotine on her flimsy nylon housedress.
They climb in long ropes up her hanging skin,
a cloud of jaundice.
She's barefoot because in McDowell coalfields
the scrip ran too low to buy canned food, cheap shoes.
Churchgoing was rare.
God wasn't picky in 1946 West Virginia.

My child-mother washed dishes
until blood sweated from her palms,
mixed with lye in swirls, pink-tinged water
that would be pretty but for murk and sting.
She rinsed blood from plates,
carried water to dirt yard, poured herself into
sterile rocky ground. Fingerprints on laundry,
crisp white shirts for my grandmother who worked
days in the Maidenform factory, sewed seams in panties
she couldn't afford to buy. If mother-as-child smudged
whiteness, transference from the greasy
stove she cleaned for hours, concrete floor she swept
so long that her spine still droops,
then grandmother trampled mother-as-child
until more of her insides came out, streaming hot on the chilly floor
she'd later wipe with dirty rags.
Long nights listening to Grandfather drown in his own lungs.
Small hands drew phlegm from his chest with long
plastic tubes, sucking on one end to give breath,
bringing bits of his work to air, dust discharge so thickly black
you could collect it, sell it, burn it for heat against December wind.
Everything came from the company store, even the tubing.

Dirty-soled feet now,
though the money isn't small and useless,
father earns it on his back in oil puddles,
crouches in the engine compartments of behemoth machinery.
His fingers shrivel on themselves, wither like apples cut
and left in the sun. He can't stand erect anymore.
My mother retreats into the child she should have been,
escorted into sun by my shuffling father—
only when great need makes exposure to air unavoidable.
Food requires a trek, oxygen and attachment.

Church shoes aren't necessary for those who worship at the shrine of sleep,
sit like dirty caterpillars for twenty-four years on
the same grimy couch with cigarette burns in arms,
cushions that began life pale pink discolor to match her body.

Crafty camouflage, lumps mix with lumps.
Her stomach collects long tubes of ash.
She breathes through water, face purpling with strain,
blue of suffocation under yellow of face,
and grey swallows most of her feminine features.
My mother is not beautiful.

I am six, in the bathroom, only Borax whitens what
my father's body makes black.
Thick acid replaces breath, hangs in clouds over the tub.
My chest reddens inside, hot incisions,
cutting air fighting oxygen for space.
Heat behind my eyes pushes out and down,
inherited blindness.
I can't see her dying from behind waves.
My fingernails bleed under beds,
tears numb fired sting and stain good towels.
I did not scrape my knees playing, but on hardwood floors.
They purple and swell for days, flesh pushing up angrily,
child-as-scapegoat tidying piles of wet laundry.

Emphysema Dream

Dark hair braided with grass,
the woman who should have
been my mother, but more
beautiful, prostrate on an
expansive lawn.
“Where are you shot?”
“The back, blood in my lungs.
Hands pull at my throat.” Air whistles,
a too-small steam valve pushing vapor
through a hole in her white sweater.
There’s no number for this field,
no street with walks to guide firemen,
so I dial against the buzzing
phone line. She bleeds into dirt.
Oxygen and dust drape her tongue,
whistle through her back.

Living with Curious Pain

Mother said the
pain was necessary,
first period, first sex,
scrapes that reverberate
from pubis to spine. She
built her box
with three children,
alcoholic husband,
emphysema, pill habit.
Generous Grandfather,
red German cheeks,
teeth like tiny rocks.
Small and dirty,
bent double, back broken
on slabs of coal.
Grandmother, broad shoulders,
split nails, sagging lips,
burned Mother with
hot forks when
the dishes sat,
kicked her squarely
with hard-soled
feet, curious spot
between bellybutton
and rib bottoms.
Grandmother's mother
rotted in a shack
in Bluewell, West Virginia.
She oiled the dirt
floor to keep bugs down,
then she was down,
face in dank ground,
masked by coal dust
hidden in corners of yellow eyes.
The census taker found her
when six months of wet
mountain air and rigor
distended her fat pillow
body into ropes of white muscle
pulled taut between bones.
Cats had gnawed on the delicate
pouch between bellybutton and pubic bone,
baby spot stretched with

six live births, three dead ones.
She built her box from
bodies of dead children,
man whose fists met kidneys until
she gave them up;
two drowned like
stray kittens in Glenview pond,
the rest shuttled
between spinster sisters in Ohio.
Grandmother's box, built
of large, hard hands,
dirty, sneering face of *daddy*,
rising bubbles in nasty green water.
Her box hid her like the
oxygen tent when she died,
covered her like Mother's blanket
hides her swollen face, slack from
too many narcotics,
empty sleep, crying the night.

Mother Sees Me Off

My mother slept the day I left
for college, cocktailed Narcodan,
Lithium, Hydrocodone,
snored as the taxi driver
lifted each tattered bag carefully;
seams erupted.

My mother's fingers
against the wall of her
bedroom, traces outlines
of packed photos like scars

along my legs, remembering
that this was the year of jaundice,
the year of scarletina,
stitches, pins through bones,
tinnia versacolor like patches
of red grass, rubella,
abraded child palms,
appendicitis with blood poisoning,
long white messages
that play through her hand.

Part II: Body Lessons

Fat and Naked Angel

She snowflakes across my
lap as I drape over the brass
vanity chair, measuring thigh
inches, calculating hourglass ratios.
She kisses cold across knees,
up the dark Y of legs, around
round hips, tightens stomach
skin and licks ice along nipples.
Breath like bread baking, she flops
moons of breasts onto the makeup
table, wiggles high parabolas of buttocks
across my shoulders, light ruffing
of skin; bones cry for blankets,
poke toward the air with blue angles.

She bites my earlobes at dinner,
tongues each keratin curve,
tasting what is tasteless. I flinch
and drop lettuce leaves, imagine
thick gravy, heady meat; she grins
over sprawled thighs, wide and dusky,
burying the kitchen chair under skin.
I oodle mysterious sauces, syrupy inside
glass bottles, down my throat. Beveled
sides blow her face convex, cheeks gain
glass diamonds from bottle cap to table;
In this telescope she tells me to eat my fill,
fill my mouth, mouth her breast.

Warm tonguing along jaw as I drip
chocolate from dirty fingers; she and I
tangle in sheets like skin and stick
leg to leg with sugar. Wide nostrils
pull in balloon strings of smells: hot rising
yeast, damp closeness, tart citrus just
under, mounds of delicacies floor to door
jamb, bricking up the room into one
mouth hungry for one breast.

Telescope

The old black man
casts a line into Lake Erie,
hands and head
sliced by Canadian wind;
unburned semi
fuel drifts 14-storeys to my
balcony crusted
with pigeon shit. The dung
atomizes, flours my
hands and hair.

He pulls undersized carp with milky
eyes, flops jackknifing
bodies into a plastic grocery bag. His yellow
skin echoes yellow
accordion gills; both sparkle in Cleveland
November, the only
shine under vaulted snow-heavy clouds.

Cannan's Elegy

Walgreen's, on what should be
your third birthday, collects old men
buying cigarettes and young mothers

with bagged eyes, dirty tee-shirts.
I cross the aisles slowly, check for
you shaded under magazine racks,

search for you under the display
of outdated Easter candy, expect
shrieks of anticipation by the snacks.

Fallopian tubes contract as I round
a pyramid of film and point my milkless
breasts to the pharmacy where sentinels

of prophalytics shove haughty sharpness through
my cervix and into the collapsing room of my uterus.
Like breadcrumbs, the drip splash of blood runs into

cracks of tile, making rivulets that seep under wire
shelves, embarrassed at their bawdy redness. I lift the skirts
of gray women who crouch over spring seeds, sort azaleas;

You do not gape back, only blue lines of angry varicose veins
on plump calves, swollen ankles. I bulldoze the tower of soda
cans so they will not crush you, only your shadow plays.

Along yellow walls of cosmetics, up to the water-stained
ceiling, I chase you, snicker of falling boxes punctuates
stumbled breath, reddened thighs. You dash along

corners of sight, away from my hand.
Rivulets to rivers now, you drag
through them, first behind me,

then inside where you had rooted
so briefly, dissolving from
shade to water to air.

Apollo Punishes the Muse
What Erato Saw

My sister's mouth
split from delicate corner,
tiny tear that opened white.

Polyhymnia, tugging on
plait-ends, prayer under
her breath, eyes roving from

Thalia's dark lashes
to roses bloomed in
white cheeks, resting on the gash,

jagged extension from
Thalia's wet lips like
a drawn-in half-smile. I watched

from under a tree, covered
myself with heavy Halcyon
branches and shivered with the impossibility

of Apollo's booming voice,
large hand that circled
Thalia's wrist, flames from his hair

ignited dry leaves, scorched
Callopie's best robe flung over
the door. Thalia's quick mouth, a line like

a scar as he pulled
pestilence arrows with free
hand to thrust under her nose; I felt the points,

bled as Thalia bled, whooshed
air as Apollo twisted her
to the floor, broke the arrow over her

white shoulder to stand, full
weight, on thin, caving chest.
Melpomene wept into her books, but wrote

as she cried. Terpsichore stood
rooted. Urania dug a pit, pulled
dirt over her head. Euterpe laid down in cold

brook water; in a breath,
clouds settled with heavy
silence, his anger lassoed in bridling horses.

I stood over Thalia in
the quiet room, Apollo's
swath cutting across day skies. I drew

pale hands over her
crushed face, caressed
lovely shoulders, kissed closed eyes,

pulled dark hair back
to tie with red ribbons.

Produce

My stomach, like fruit,
is smoothly round,
soft only in places.
The heavy girl always hides
deep in the woman.
I used to walk like a watermelon rolls,
swaying from right to left,
hips rotating in long circles,
thighs asking one another for passage.
Men marveled, drank in the
softly waving legs, overfull breasts,
too-big arms and the mounds of skin.
Now, the heavy girl tucked away, deep under
a tight, round stomach, I don't roll. I mince.
The men do not marvel, but smile politely.
My sharply visible hipbones bite
at the sky, my diminished breasts and thighs
growl at the floor, wanting the coat of warm flesh
and the look of men in wonder.

List to Hunt

The ease of her body's truss, taken
aboard, stored among casks of olive oil

another saleable, retrieved like a useful
spice—coriander, paprika. The skin

market booms with blondes of high
repute. How Paris covets her white

thighs, closed like the gates of Troy,
his dark hand a wooden horse, rough-hewn

block that pinches red; beautiful
whore! Back to some wet stone room,

yellow sheets, goat's skin across windows
filters moon through capillaries, residue of fat,

pink-veined membrane under dirty fur,
unwashed pelt that scents her like a trembling

doe, delicate shanks bloody. Heavy Trojans with
slobbering eyes, breath wet on her pulsing neck,

fist of streaming gold twisted, yanked as a relic,
a piece to pray with and fondle, bent over thick fingers.

But this afternoon: sails crack as Iphigenia
bleeds. Helen's flamed hair hides her face while

shipmen cleave rope from her waist,
slit her gown, conquer Sparta for all of Troy.

Delivering Mothers

America!
Creeping cold behind
trashcans in Sarasota, Trenton, Olympia.
Gnawing bloody chicken
bones, feathers scattered
stuck to dripping chin,
San Antonio, Oklahoma City, Tacoma.

Stalk women, America, nose
their bellies, make them red.
Force searching fingers through
small spaces; hijack
uterus; farm ova.

America!
Women cry you down
in Nashville, Flint, Cleveland;
pale domes, stone wombs protect
you, circles of men with leather
gloves, laser-guided guns, long
strings of documents marked
OFFICIAL marked LAW.

Blunt fingers clutch cervix,
break labia,
twist baby girls
into grown embryos
with chains of legislation
roping bellies,
stiff lines of bodies
at attention.

They're breaking form, America, gathering in waves of strong-armed women, building and building behind.

Double Helix

for Jason

The cypress stand shuddered when Sedor, towing eight children, gnawed through six
oaks with flaked axe;
bits of woody trunk mounded like Siberian snow over villages, and Sedor groaned behind
olive skin, shrunk into
the mountains he had hidden away for, folded forward in the prow of a whaling hull,
distended stomachs of two
babies exploded before three months, London to Nantucket, landed them on springy
Appalachian grass.
From Belarus like thick driftwood, to hide in steamy dark behind stinking casks of oil,
then crouched in coal crawls
so dense that muscles atrophied and lungs lost grip, Sedor's smallness made him
essential; eight children filled
with blue air, caressed between the rolling thumbs of furred mountains, daughters thick-
trunked like magnolia,
sons broad and dark as the Kanawha, spiked along shoulders and backs with knots
like stones that froth water.
Children from those children, and bloodlines fanned from steely Akron, along ridgelines
to sandy hills in South Carolina.
Skin pulled heat from earth, fed it through blood to fill bassinets with dark-eyed
titans, fingers splayed
into clear water, necks tight, carrying on strong backs three months in darkness.
Imprint of Belarus in his profile,
hard angle of nose meeting lush upward play of lip, the tattoo of cypress dapples cheeks
made brown by sun, faded
to muddy olive in winter, when it remembers jagged teeth of steppe, birth of blood,
humped backs of snow

Aftershock of an Early Termination

She was a spider in morning light,
hooked to thoughtfully beeping machines,
long clear tubes feeding sleep,
armies of platelets into arm.

The chair was a living thing,
cords pumping sterile heat into imitation leather.
It peered at her with eight black eyes.
Where the cushions met, an open mouth
screaming across brown carpet.
One flaking window let in enough
June light to show uneven wall color,
not enough to highlight
purpling IV pokes.

She met eight eyes with two red—
six weeks of no dreams without waking and
no sleep without dreaming.
The chair, waited, grinned with its awful mouth,
warmed the room, shifted only a little when she ran,
away from the window, into the rest of the day.

Dichotomy of Fur and Feather

When the children play circus parade,
they choose me elephant. Dinner-plate feet crack hospital green-and-yellow tile as I stare at discount shoes
that extend only a breath beyond flap of stomach. When I exhale, shoes disappear, shoulders round forward,
doughy pain and protection in white skin under knockoff clothes, pants with elastic because button-and-zip denim scars in red rings.
How much shame before yelps, collapsed face, before hands of classmates raise high to answer? Sandy the giraffe,
tall and slender as ash trees, examines her fingernails to hide in the cuticles, millimeters from forty eyes calling for pain.
Only the lion, tiger, and horse-boys puff their thin chests. They step lightly to clapping while my round feet shuffle,
whispers travel over knees, pocked thighs, drooping chest, into ears shut against sharp faces, gasping.
Circling and circling, mind begs body to collapse to a pile of clothes.

Same body, crying in satin on my mother's dirty couch indented with her heft. The rose on my wrist folds dryly,
flakes falling across the wideness of my lap. Pliable arms hang naked, interrupt illusions of sleekness with lumps, rashy skin
folds. Helpless and broken, my father's silence counterpoints my mother's backfiring squawks, resentment builds blue waves to crash over
some boy's head. No love ends with body talk. No slight body walks out because of tight waistbands, bulky face
like a pale planet. Young bodies stiff with lust blow away when stocky shame stands by the bed,
peeks over the driver's seat, tucks under hotel pillows, spits on my heaved shoulders.

Same body, hard with time. It spreads like dolloped cream when I sit, thighs and backside obscure hard corners
that mark white skin red. In denim now, I trace raised tracks across swollen bellybutton, smiling at their regularity,
relief maps of mountains painted red. My shape is clear through any fabric. I drape over tiny seats, not like
willowy girls with auburn hair, wet almond eyes. They perch perfectly, feathers shine, beaks prune delicately.
My body drapes across sofas, stretches from tail to tongue, belly pouch hangs ceremoniously. I rub my back against legs
of men who admire long lines of arm and rumbling in throat. Smugness rises like cream. I crouch on wide thighs,
eye glittering feathers with deep hunger, allow gray skin to fall away.

Short Chains

Barbara Stanwyck just wanted
a little glamour;
In *Babyface,* thrown across white divans,
sweating emeralds, sprouting mink,
she conjured a life

away from gray-brown
cloud of Philadelphia , hard hands of fat men
in speakeasies. Cat-eyed, she slunk
through pearl and onyx
penthouses, Mr. Carter
(*President, Bank of New York*)
scuffing up rich oriental rugs in her frothy wake,

begging for absolution from
age, high blood pressure, flaccidity.

Please Babyface, please.

But not Babyface,
not Barbara Stanwyck.

The power of her body draped in satin,
razor jaw,
pyramids of cheekbones,

no apologies from shoulders
or breasts.

Elegy for my Maiden Name

They're in the living room
of the small duplex,
hunched like scientists over
an experiment to meld
woman and dog.
The old one says that
Dale was the best man
he knew, booming laugh
and quick to pay a tab.
The young one nods,
solidifies his father's deified stature
(whose height of six inches,
a box of cremated Dale,
sits in our coat closet).

How easily they forget the
man's rough red face,
prostitutes roving
the ramshackle home with
the massive mortgage he left
in his son's name:
inheritance. Debts ignored
like ill-mannered children,
for tiny red pills,
yellow, white, gray
unconsciousness.
Women were whores:
sex, marriage, or drugs.
Wife or daughter,
each begged on dirty
back paws.

A melding of families, poor
West Virginia roots
blanketed by the
intrigue of European heritage.
Legacy—unpaid debts,
diseases, and
overdrawn accounts—
follow on a short leash.

Sex in Geometry

Hard angles do not
fit against my body.
Hostile 30-degree sections
where thin femurs meet thin calves,
the reproachful point at the
intersection of lines,
jutting and awkward pelvic bones,
a triangle of rigid design,
jagged and abrupt.
They are beat
into arcs by hips, thighs,
the long column of the spine,
the parabola of stomach
and sine waves of shoulders, neck.
Semicircles over soft legs,
unterminating strings of numbers
march up either breast,
swirl factors are calculated.
The nipple is the epicenter.

Hard angles cannot intersect, interrupt
two humped curves,
but your parabola is amplified and high,
strongly arched, a form of thoughtful architecture.
It meets mine with quick addition,
rapid computation and a satisfying sum.
Lines of numbers are nibbled off by single digits
until the sprint totals the friction between,
the dynamics of heat maximize
and arches collapse into long
wet contours.

Hooding

Omer gathers stars on the open-air patio in hot Kirkut when men in black suits fast rope among him, sleek drops
of water down stone walls. Electrical grid sizzles, pops, Omer's eyes mix man and air, and the night drops over
his small face, a heavy blanket that dilates pupil and thieves breath. Men in dungarees box mother from child, and Nasareen
stands naked because her husband won't strip off his dishdasha; three jugs of cold water filter through Nasareen's
dark hair before Ammar, pounding his fists on unrelenting rock, father of four, grandfather of two, respected physician,
gingerly undresses, rolls rich fabric under his feet, grinds in powdery rock, and breaks his chain with faith.

Weighty heat, Tennessee summer, I lay my son to bed under thin sheets shimmering pink with his fantastic skin, clear lunar light
on unlined hands. Thunderstorms like planes over mountains, three trees down, dying limbs leaking into apologetic
grass, blue sparkle and air conditioner grinds a sputtering halt, night breaks through windows without light
forcing it aside. Dead dark settles around the bed; he wakes crying that someone has pulled blankets over his face.
Young mother chanting away night: *Hushabye and hush, rabbit's in the hayfield, rabbit says to hush.*

Young mother's cool hand locked away at Camp Vigilant, C-130s distress concrete buildings parsed into detention units, *Whatever it takes*
spray painted in jaunty script on cellblock hallway. Guards fold Nasareen into a wooden crate, cuff small wrists to steel
ground bar, kick screaming calves with issue boots, slip blacked-out ski goggles and a burlap hood over wet eyes, close box
top with a clang, shuffle to chow, sleep heavy with rape dreams, and for six months Nasareen bites back
prayerful wail, laments bruised body, amputated hands, hanging breasts naked, breath caught between mouth and hood.

She sings lost faith to a God silent in hallway closets; he hides after the death of parents, ducks away during forced sex under dirty soccer
bleachers, turns his back behind gleaming abortion clinic. My son's laborious wheeze against thick mucus, breathing cut by fever,
and I click through glossy photos of myself at six, thirteen, first communion, Halloween. Persistent news ticker feeds
images of jubilation half a world away. Overpainted face of dimly pretty anchor woman tells me that man believes in beauty,

that milky kindness flows, even in sand. Head ducks with sleep, covered by chatter, good
news abroad. Chenille throw
my sister sent from West Virginia makes soft skin against my nose. Through looped
fabric, television diffuses
to waves, blotted darkness, cool strokes down face like water.

In this hush, Nasareen bleeds. Infection makes
camp in glands, hair pulls from ears to dust concrete, clotted veins from squatting, lumps
rise like pond bubbles, arms twist
on themselves, limbs blown from high trees; she cannot extend her spine. Trotted to
round showers, she shivers in cold
blasts, itches in heavy blanket, blinks all around at first sunlight since summer. Wire
issue glasses, broad-Midwestern face,
unfurls a document in English that she can't read, and he signs for her, tells her that this
is an IMPORTANT PAPER, it gives
amnesty and fifty American dollars, for inconvenience. Nasareen's throat pulls with
sand, she cannot mouth her son's name,
so open with vowels. *Darkness,* she thinks, shuffling barefoot through hardpack,
is a uniquely American thing.

East Side—Euclid, Ohio

Ruined tribes ring
low-income Cleveland:
Blackfoot, Lost Nation,
Kewanee, Chickasaw.
Dirty streets pulled from
broken faces of men: red first,
burned under false promises
signed with hot barrels.
Now, black sneers at white from
dark homes with broken doors.
Trails chalked by green stink of fear,
cars that veer through rubbled streets,
creep then burst with exhaust,
pause only to avoid collision,
like silent mothers
who clutched papooses to swollen breasts.
Black hair shaded eyes as they
shuffled around white men,
broke to trees in deep dark:
each a trespass.
Stolen child or stolen life,
purse straps clutched, nervous
glances over pale shoulders.
Into asphalt or mountain clay,
blood feeds the roots to spring
with anger, a ring of tribes,
ghostdancing under
arc sodiums, rises above
tenement homes.

Excavating Woman
To Delilah

They cut off her breasts
to save the rest of her body.
Flayed and red, white skin pulls tight
against long bones, she writes an elegy
for her femininity, that attachment
of spirit ballooned into pink nipples
pulsing in a medical bin where
malignant breeding cells
can't get her. Head bald, streaked with rows
of stalks where she once
tended a vibrant auburn garden, curls that
cascaded like ruby falls from
patrician brow down slender back,
another signature of womanness kissed
and gone down shower drains and plastic refuse bags.
Pale scars, little lanterns
shining from ribs, push beauty out like swift water.
Graceful hand, dainty foot,
greater than before the rush to excise those dark
parts of her body, the lumps
perched smugly beside sternum, pulled blue
from eyes, pushed blood from arms.
No ships set rough oceans by her drawn face,
no wars for sharp femurs,
jutting collarbones. Paris doesn't
cry in a stone room for her washed skin;
her beacon is too hot, lines of light from her chest
blind thieves and captains,
blacken to ash thick bodies of men, hard hands to ground
in supplication.
Time barricades her diminished body:
in her basket of fingers glint twines of red curls.

When the garden drowns

Not all of us desire
an imitation,
squat noses, bony feet, slow metabolism
in replicate.

How do you reconcile
woman with mother with lover with wife?
Can you stop the pulse of
rain by turning on the shower?

Not all of us,
breasts and estrogen,
long, warm tubes that shuttle ova,
yearn for suckling, self-made devotion.

Can you slow the scatter of pebbles by
gathering stones?

I want to throw open my body without women
circling, crying “Produce, for your sake and your child’s.”
I want to douse the garden with hard water,
let the minerals sink to the tuberous roots—
shrivel them.

Will the meshing of gene ladders quiet the bellow?
Can you cross the ocean by covering your feet in wet sand?

I swallow the rage of
women, turn it to soil,
body throbs with a secret growing that is mine,
not shared. My mind, my heart.
Fiddleheads poke through the wetness, creation without life.
This will be my work, lusty rose and dandelion, sharing a stem.

Reading the Guestbook

The December wedding shoved together
snapshots of growth;
spikes and valleys in the continuum
of my sexuality populated the pews,
long lines of lovers from stained glass wall
to choir room.

Like butterflies, at twelve, the
first girl I kissed deeply, long
tube of mouth uncurling down
her throat, up through her body.
Our bodies more like boys
than women, buds of breasts full
by the summer when her boyfriend
watched slobbering. That girl, who once
begged me to bite her thighs,
sits primly with banker husband,
tow-head children, black collar
choking color from her lips.

Like sparrows, at fifteen, the boy who
presented the corsage like a ring,
on one knee with round eyes, bitten tongue.
Slow dances with hearts pounding
through clothes our mothers had
picked out, hands locked in appropriate
sweaty grips, on hips and shoulders,
leaving wet prints on silk. Careful plunge
of first sex, stretched warmness, crying afterward.
Four years of hand-in-hand until tall buildings
seduced him away.
That boy, who once cried at my blood
on his sheets, now slinks through the back door
before the candle lighting to push hot
forgetfulness through his veins, sitting
in the driver's seat of the same Dodge, face
draining color like swirling water.

Like dragonflies, at twenty one, the boy
who tiptoed away from his mother in Bristol.
Her hands stretched far into our room where
we played with mouths open and wet.
Long days that darkened before we did. Nights that

saw blue clouds, one long line of body.
Sex erased our feet and hands,
drew in place erect penises, open vaginas.
Sex for weeks, biting, bound and gagged.
Heads buzzing with lust and drinks,
red streams to wipe up in the day.
No heart, no warmth of worship,
but bodies and bodies
and bodies, writhing like cats in rain.
His mother’s hands tightened, drew
forward, pulled until his heels dragged through
Tennessee dirt, locked away in a Catholic college.
That boy, who once screamed with the intensity
of ejaculation, stands at the base of the pulpit,
gathering clouds to gather speech, covenant of
the December wedding, delivered by a man who
faints in handcuffs.

Another Eve

Three seconds of quickening,
and she begins with her hands.
Deep plundering grasps in the
slice under her breasts,
up to the wrists
in still warming bodyworks.
She lies on her back,
the steamy cloud of invention pulses
under her fingers,
pushes up through her ears.
A mother's heartbeat,
all her Father's.
Thoughtfully, daintily,
she draws it out.

Her labia redden,
Ovaries clinch and crumble,
long red tubes stop their path making.
Her lips quiver, sipping in air
stinking of sex, indignant anger, burning.
Her face contracts,
play of light on water, not the sun.

The long, white bone lay across
her stomach, forced birth,
the rib that binds her to man.
Her silence with no source explodes.
The marching lines stop.
Fashioned as a companion,
groomed as a master,
he falls away without
softness against his hard hand.
With him retreats the
bright and unpronounceable spirit of making,
leaving a coverlet of quiet understanding,
knowledge of beginnings and endings.
She's alone with her warm
body, not kept by history,
not hushed and pushed underground.
Hands still numb and slick,
she reaches inside her sex,
that secret place of unmaking,
small throbbing reminder

of doubling self production,
she buries it in the dust from her body.
The flakes of her creation interrupted
now hold this New Woman,
pulsing silently beside the one
who collapses to ash.

State Sanctioned
Darfur/Dallas

Marquee light arrows off Manjula's
silver hoop earring as four men
ground her shoulders into Texas asphalt,

ring bloodflowers along brown stomach,
swallow pink mouth, blink out
all poems unwritten, all songs silenced

in cut throat, washing hot tar with interrupted
potential. Before medical blankets cover broken
body, wafting stale popcorn, traffic honks,

garbled radio junk intercepts last eyes
clearing away water. Roving boys on steel
motorcycles pluck girls waiting on

bus benches, rip them from backseats
of stopped cars, sever them from
arms of boyfriends, parents,

from hard squares of school desks
and dressed in soft cotton pajamas
in bunk beds; birthday sleepovers,

a cache to hungry hands dipping
deep into bodies, seeking distinctive
almond eyes, wheatish skin, mix

of Eastern blood that signals *interloper*.
To fill cribs with lightened babies,
breaking histories with harsh

motor revolutions, these boys cry *pride*,
teeth dripping with red of daughters,
wives, shatter of womb, turning outward

of blue Western eyes to see lined armies
of blinding white growling under
flag unfolded. Proclamation?

The silence of a thousand holy books
whispering along page numbers
to shelter the small, tired, multi-toned,

vibrating peace of body and mind,
but the muddled transmission loses
force between towers, drops to a hum

between dusty spines. Static like roiling
water along rocks, heads dipped
in saving grace of oversoul father,

crying his name while hooking
into tender backs, circling completely
—one glittering hand—around tan

swan necks. The official statement marches
along pixilated screens: National Crisis.
Terror Level Red. Purge all Eastern

women from homes to give to God.
Lines of slumped bodies spiral from airports,
whites of eyes like rabbits under

hedgerows pushed to paralyze
by whirling blades, oily hair hanging
over hollow eyes, bird bones, gray spec

official uniform dragging cuffs along bleached
linoleum, swept clean at night by faithful MPs
with gun collections and rape fantasies.

Flashing digital signs chase along wall tops: ALL
NON-AMERICAN WOMEN STAND BEHIND
YELLOW LINE FOR INSPECTION. A clutch

of women, hospital bands drooping from thin wrists,
eyes dried by morphine, hands lax, shuffle willingly
into hangars where doctors with death needles

open black bags, wait. Others crouch under
ticket kiosks, shivering at heavy-soled boots,
chanting lines of prayer into God's ear.

Appendix

Full Explication of “Living with Curious Pain”

MOTher SAID the (2)
PAIN was NECessARY (3)
FIRST PERIOD, FIRST SEX, (2/2)
SCRAPES THAT reVERBerATE from (4)
PUBis to SPINE. She (2)
BUILT her BOX with (2)
THREE CHILDREN, (2)
alcoHOLic HUSband, (3)
EMphySEma, PILL HABIT. (2/2)
GENerROUS GRANDfather, (2)
RED GERMAN CHEEKS, (3)
TEETH like TINY ROCKS. (3)
SMALL and DIRty, (2)
BENT DOUBLE, BACK BROKEN (2/2)
on SLABS of COAL. (2)
GRANDmother, BROAD SHOULDERS (2/2)
SPLIT NAILS, SAGging LIPS, (2/2)
BURNed MOTher with (2)
HOT FORKS when (2)
DISHES SAT, (2)
KICKED her SQUAREly (2)
with HARD-SOLED (2)
FEET, CURious SPOT (1/2)
betWEEN BELLYbutton (3)
and RIB BOTTOMS.(2)
GRANDmother’s MOTHer (2)
ROTTed in a SHACK (2)
in BLUE WELL, WEST VIRGINIA. (2/2)
She OILED the DIRT (2)
FLOOR to KEEP BUGS DOWN, (4)
then SHE was DOWN, (2)
FACE in DANK GROUND, (3)
MASKED by COAL DUST (3)
HIDDEN in CORNERS of YELLOW EYES. (4)
CENSUS TAKER FOUND HER (4)
SIX MONTHS of WET (3)
MOUNTAIN AIR and RIGOR (3)
disTENDed her FAT PILLOW (3)
BODY—ROPES of WHITE MUSCLE (1/3)
PULLED TAUT betWEEN BONES. (4)
CATS had GNAWed on the DELIcate (3)
POUCH betWEEN BELLYbutton (3)
and PUBIC BONE, (2)

BABY SPOT STRETCHed with (3)
SIX LIVE BIRTHS, THREE DEAD ONES. (3/3)
She BUILT her BOX from (2)
BODIES of DEAD CHILDREN, (3)
MAN whose FISTS met KIDNEYS until (3)
she GAVE them UP; (2)
TWO DROWNED like (2)
STRAY KITTENS in (2)
GLENview POND, (2)
the REST SHUTTLED (2)
between SPINSTER SISTERS in OHIO. (3)
GRANDmother's BOX, BUILT (2/1)
of LARGE, HARD HANDS, (1/2)
SNEERING FACE of *DADDY*, (3)
RISING BUBBLES in GREEN WATER. (4)
HER box HID her LIKE the (3)
OXYgen TENT when she DIED, (3)
COVERed her LIKE MOTHER'S BLANKET (4)
HIDES her SWOLLEN FACE, SLACK FROM (3/2)
TOO MANY narCOTics, (3)
EMPTY SLEEP, CRYing the NIGHT. (2/2)

Vita

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