To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sara Ann Baker entitled "Blood Kin: Poems." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that I 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:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

Thesis
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Blood Kin:
Poems

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

Sara Ann Baker
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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to my family, especially my mother, Roxanne Sampson, my father, Bill Baker, and my sister, Lauren Baker, all of whom have inspired or led me to many of these poems; also to my good friend Lisa Higginbotham, without whom most of these poems could not have been written.

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Abstract

This manuscript contains poems written and revised during my two years in the M.A. program in English. Themes include family, divorce, love, madness, religion, and nature. I wanted to develop a manuscript that truly reflected the past two years in terms of my life and in terms of my writing. The introduction details my journey to this point, explaining why certain I have been influenced by poets such as Sylvia Plath and Sappho. Overall, I see this manuscript as a reflection of life coming full circle, acting out part of the cycle of life. The journey from the first poem, "More than Blood," to the last, "On Laying Down My Sword," is imprinted on these pages.

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Introduction

I came to poetry in need of therapy. At eighteen years old, full of scorn for my family and many of my friends, certainly for the insular town I grew up in, desperately searching for a meaningful life, words were my only release, my only solace. I spent a summer lying around, depressed, longing for something to make me ache. In the midst of this melancholy meandering, I discovered Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, then *The Colossus*, then *Ariel*. I cannot imagine how far past that summer I could have wandered without those books. What I learned was that other people feel this way, and, more important, that I could survive. I breathed the words of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," immersing myself in their tongue. For years, I approached writing when desperate, when drowning.

As I wrote and lived more, I discovered that writing did not have to be about struggle. A few years ago, as a way of wishing me luck in my writing, a friend said, "I hope you're as depressed as I am." Indeed, I was, but his sentiment was jarring. I cowered at the idea of trading a life of suffering for a few decent poems. Since my life has become more peaceful, I have written more prolifically and more passionately than ever.

After reading all of Plath's published work, it seemed logical to move on to Anne Sexton's poetry. Thrilled by the idea that she had not begun her career until after marrying and having children, I marveled at Sexton's prowess. I particularly enjoyed *Transformations*, her collection of poems that turn fairy tales on their heads, putting a twentieth-century spin on the stories and emphasizing themes nearly buried by Disney. My favorite line from "Briar Rose" reads, "Each

night I am nailed into place / and I forget who I am." Like Sexton, I wanted to channel magic into my poetry, reclaiming witches and questioning happy endings. Eventually, I branched out and discovered other poets. I read Sandra Cisneros, Sappho, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman, Marge Piercy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Pablo Neruda, and Laurie Sheck. Later, friends and teachers led me to Brenda Hillman, Robert Hass, Sharon Olds, C.K. Williams, and Jane Hirshfield. By expanding my poetic world, I learned that writing about tragedy is certainly worthwhile, but writing about happiness and serenity are just as important. Equally significant to me as a poet has been the challenge of capturing the beauty of the mundane, of everyday sights, of chores.

My poetry combines many of these aspects. I confess. I protest. I rage, sigh, applaud, mourn, observe, laugh, and, most of all, as Polish poet Adam Zagajewski says in his poem of the same name, I "try to praise the mutilated world." The collection in hand includes themes I have been focusing on for the past two years: family and community; independence and solitude (including divorce); depression and madness; questions of religion and spirituality; and delight in nature.

My family is often central to my poetry. Nearly two years ago I got a divorce, and since then I have discovered that I've been living with a legacy passed down from generations. During my divorce, I sought therapy; one day my therapist drew for me a map of my family's divorces that truly astounded me. My family has been rife with bad marriages. My therapist said to me, plainly: It is time to break the cycle.

Writing about my family and my divorce has been, for me, a way to break that cycle. I had to understand my parents, my grandparents, even my great grandparents and extended family in order to make sense of all this unhappiness. I had to let them tell their stories, talk to them, see what they were willing to share. And then synthesize all I found through writing. I have long been interested in my family's genealogy, and I discovered that this aspect of my history is just as important as the rest. Heritage and ethnicity have often had a major impact on the way my ancestors and relatives have lived, what they have made out of their lives. My ethnic history includes a combination of British, French, and Cherokee ancestry, which often seem to me to be at odds. In trying to come to terms with my family history, I must try to reconcile whatever circumstances caused Native Americans to join with white Americans, I must forgive the abuses that, more than likely, my British and French ancestors inflicted upon my Cherokee ancestors, and I must recognize that my family is made up of both poor Kentucky coal miners and wealthy landowners—and perhaps slave-owners—who settled in North Carolina early enough to fight in the Revolutionary War.

What I find most unsettling about my family's history is that there are no records from the Cherokee sides and no stories. As I say in "More than Blood," "All that remains of my great grandfather: a black and white photograph / curling at the edges. / Really, that's it. No stories. No language." My grandfather's parents never spoke about their ethnicity, their traditions, which means that instead of a rich tradition, a wealth of myth and story, my grandfather had only

sadness and struggle to pass down to me. I can only assume that memories of their Cherokee lives were literally and metaphorically beaten out of my great grandparents. They left their heritage behind, but certainly not for a better tradition. This leaving behind, this trying to forget haunts me. As their descendant and as a writer, it is my job to remember.

It is also my job to understand why the women in my family have had such sorrowful lives. I have seen many women in my family confined by domesticity; they have attempted to find fulfillment in this role, and ultimately have failed. They either resign themselves to a life of unhappiness, or they leave (or are left) and repeat the cycle. It seems there are too many people telling women that they are not worthy enough alone. After my divorce, though I struggled emotionally and physically, I eventually managed to find happiness in myself instead of searching for it in another person, and to take charge of my life and enjoy the freedom that came along with such autonomy.

Writing has been a major part of that discovery. I have found that writing poetry is a way to understand what happens in my life as well as a way to connect with others. When I write I seek to connect my voice to my world, my world to the reader's world. And I cherish my ability to do that. Poetry allows me to understand and transcend pain and celebrate joy and peace while engaging in creativity—reveling in the thrill of finding the right word, of synthesizing an experience into one luminous phrase, of crafting a song of syllables.

I seek to situate myself in a long line of writers whose work, in many ways, falls under the category of Confessional poetry, a line of writers from

Sappho to Plath and beyond. The term "Confessional" has long been a bane for many writers, and it is undoubtedly an over-simplification. When I declare which are my favorite writers, the name "Plath" is often received with a grimace, a groan, a condescending raised eyebrow. I single out Sylvia Plath because attention to the intersection of her life and her writing has turned her into a mythic character. She has become a symbol for women's struggle to achieve intellectual and creative success while chasing toddlers around the house—or in this case around the frigid London flat. Indeed, the theme of trying to be both maternal and artistic creator grounds much of her writing.

When we talk about confessional poetry, Plath immediately emerges as the goddess of self-representation. Yet much of her poetry, as she points out in "Lady Lazarus," is as much about donning different masks, performing various roles for the sake of ultimate poem, as it is about "revising life."[1] In her last book alone Plath tries on the masks of Ariel, ever the shapeshifter; Gulliver; queen bee; gypsy; Holocaust Jew; Medusa; actress; stripper; and more. Yet, unlike T.S. Eliot who insisted that poetry must be impersonal, Plath does not take on these roles in order to distance herself from the reader. Instead, as critic Susan Van Dyne states, "Plath's performances are strategic narrative choices intended to refigure and verbally control gender relations."[2] Thus, the writer becomes each character and reminds us in "Edge" that she is "the same, identical woman," a product of combined historical experiences.

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[1] Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P) 7.
[2] Van Dyne 46-47.

For the most part, I see the confessional mode as a necessary response to, or progression from, modernism. In "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot states, "What happens is the continual surrender of [the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[3] Yet when one's life is a process of continual surrender, of persistently being poked and prodded and trapped as in Plath's "The Applicant," perhaps poetry emerges as the one aspect of life that such an individual can control. Indeed, for all her famed madness, Plath's writing is remarkably controlled and deliberate. Eliot also says, "[T]he more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."[4] Can we ever completely separate the two? If neither society nor the literary traditions that Eliot suggests should be the foundation for one's writing do not recognize one's suffering, does it not seem logical to infuse poetry with personal experience that people cannot ignore? A critical reading of Plath, or Allen Ginsberg, for example, reveals a logical progression in the history of poetry. To be fully accepted as writers, those in the margins would have to change poetry to reflect their lives even if that meant discussing taboo issues such as sexuality and politics.

Moreover, does the sneer at Plath's name go beyond her association with self-representation and disclose a tendency to link confessionalism and hysteria? In an anthology on women poets and tradition, Brenda Hillman defends women

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[3] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," *The Egoist* Sept. 1919: 54.
[4] Eliot 55.

writing about their own experiences. She says, "[O]ne of my favorite writers. . .says he dislikes Emily Dickinson and in general does not like the work of women because he hates 'subjective verse'."[5] Poet Suzanne Matson's essay "On Reclaiming 'The Universal'" presents a similar frustration. Matson discusses sharing her undergraduate poetry with a respected professor: "He talked about the importance of audience, how the writer should not narrow his range of address, but have before him the goal of being 'universal.' He was referring to a couple of poems in the stack that were about sexual violence."[6]

When my male students complain that they cannot "get into" a story because the main character is female, I point out that for centuries women have been expected to understand the stories of men and boys, that these stories, from *Tom Jones* to *Great Expectations* to *The Catcher in the Rye*, have been considered representative of the norm, of the universal. When Plath, Sexton, Kumin, and Rich began writing, women poets were largely ignored. Most likely, they found little poetry that spoke directly to their experience as women, particularly as women in the fifties, still very much confined to the domestic sphere. Their response then was to infuse their own experience into their writing. And they did so with panache, writing with breathtaking artistry of pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, sexuality, menstruation, masturbation, sexism, violence, mother-daughter relationships, and sheer misery over the strict gender roles to which they felt confined. We cannot forget that Robert Lowell was crucial to the launching

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[5] Brenda Hillman, "Dark Turtles and Bright Turtles," *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, ed. Sharon Bryan (New York: Norton, 1993) 89.
[6] Suzanne Matson, "On Reclaiming 'the Universal'," *Where We Stand* 119.

of the Confessional period, but even Lowell called Marianne Moore the "best *woman* poet in English."[7]

In "Breaking the Mold," Maxine Kumin writes, "Many of my own. . .poems—poems about family constellations, particularly the mother-daughter bond—evolved out of my personal experience. How could it be otherwise? Gender casts a long shadow. . . . I think even my animal poems betray, or perhaps loudly announce, my gender."[8] Much of my poetry reflects this same sentiment. Why mask gender if it defines so much of our life experience, if we cannot mask it in everyday life? Why mask our real selves? Playing different roles, pursuing various characters is fun in both fiction and poetry, but I think the best writing comes from experience. I write for myself first. Then I write for someone else, but that someone else is not always my ideal audience. As much as I write to comrades, people with shared experiences, I also write to those who attempt to ignore me or to attack me. My perceived audience is always changing: it can be loving, encouraging, curious, ignorant, or hostile. I write to make sense out of life, and then I share it in order to connect with others. I have no interest in donning a mask every time I sit down to write. I think the real point of poetry lies in connecting with people, with the world around us. In addition, many of today's most common leisure activities lead to emotional desensitization, so we cannot be impersonal when trying to reach people.

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[7] Maxine Kumin, "Breaking the Mold." *Where We Stand* 102.
[8] Kumin 104.

Plath and Sexton boldly called attention to women's suffering in terms of both gender roles and madness and questioned the way women have been treated, but they did not leave much in the way of solutions. Since then, and because of the Confessional mode, women writers—Sharon Olds, Sandra Cisneros, and Audre Lorde to name a few—have been able to approach creativity more freely although no less vitally. Through their own struggles, they have found more than a shred of contentment in life. Even when life continues to crash, they manage to walk away from the wreck and make something beautiful out of it. I seek to add on to that foundation. The poetry of Plath and Sexton convinced me that I could make poetry out of life, but more contemporary poets keep me writing.

Though all of my poetry tends toward the confessional, there are some lyrics that are far more personal than others. These poems follow the same form: they tend to be longer and consist of multi-lined stanzas. Often the lines themselves are longer than in other poems. These poems are dense because their stories have been with me awhile or because they encompass a major part of my life. And they reflect my own struggles with divorce, family, depression, sexuality. Examples include the title poem, "Blood Kin," as well as "When Dawn Rose Up" and "My Mother."

When I write poems about love and passion, I find that my writing is strongly influenced by Sappho and Sandra Cisneros. That we only have fragments of Sappho's poetry makes her work even more remarkable. In one line, she says more than most manage in a lifetime. One of my favorites of her fragments reads: "Do you remember / how a golden / broom grows on / the sea

beaches." I wrote the final poem in "Blood Kin," entitled "On Laying Down My Sword," with this fragment in mind. Additionally, I am intrigued by the spaces between Sappho's lines, and by the silence, the pieces that remain missing, unspoken. Brenda Hillman says, "I am. . .interested in what is stylistically experimental in women's writing: fragmentation, hesitations, interruption, secret singing, the nonlinear—what is at the edge (the inner edge of) our voices since Sappho."[9]

In my poems "In the Flesh" and "A Thing Open-Ended," I play with space as much as I do words. The space, the interruption or silence it represents, is just as important as the language. I think of these spaces as palpable, breathing moments juxtaposed against more direct expression. Furthermore, I wanted "In the Flesh" to look like a fragment. It ends with the line "getting somewhere" followed by a dash and then the bottom half of the page. This makes it seem as though it is only a piece of what I want to say, as though I have been interrupted by a thought, by a feeling, by circumstances beyond my control, and have let my pen drag. What comes after the dash, however, is up to the reader.

I remember the first time I read Sandra Cisneros's collection *Loose Woman*. I was eighteen or nineteen, exploding with desire. I think she was the first Latina poet I had ever come across, and I was deeply moved by her fire, her undulations, her mangoes. I wanted my poetry to dance. Cisneros's writing is full of pride and excitement even when she chronicles loss. Her writing is thrilling and risky. In some of her most beautiful love poems, short lines give

[9] Hillman 91.

way to enjambment with no punctuation and just an extra space or two here and there, sometimes forcing the reader to discern when she must pause. Here, form not only fits content, it enhances it. This method is reminiscent of two bodies, two spirits meeting and melting into each other. My favorite is "Love Poem for a Non-Believer," the final lines of which read: ". . .like silk / flag or the prayer call / of a Mohammed we won't / have a word for this except / perhaps religion." My poems "Vow to Familiar and "I Want to Go with You to India, My Love" are modeled after Cisneros's style.

Poets have often compared love to religion, and themes of religion and spirituality are also common in my poetry. I studied religion in college, in addition to English, and, as a semi-scholar of religion and as a writer, I continue to be fascinated by the way entire cultures build their lives around ancient stories. By incorporating these religious myths—and I use the term in an academic sense, referring to their allegorical nature, rather than simply implying that they are fiction—into my poetry, I question their authority, while trying to find meaning that resonates with my life. Often I focus this aspect of my poetry on summoning Greek or Hindu goddesses and on resisting traditional interpretations of women such as Eve and Mary Magdalene. "O Artemis," "Encased in Silver She Poses, One Foot on A Bloody Head," and "Antediluvian" are examples of poems that beckon or revise these figures.

Religion and spirituality enter my poetry through images of nature as well. "Early Summer" describes the transition from being a child playing in nature to an adolescent fearing it, and, finally, to an adult in awe of its beauty. Likewise,

"Berry Farm on 321" portrays a person interacting with nature in a way that is like worship. I'm as passionate about nature as I am about poetry. One does not exist without the other. In high school, I came across William Cullen Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis," and his musings on the cycles of life have never left me. At nineteen, I got a Celtic knot tattooed on my inner arm, a knot with no beginning and no end. In addition to being part of my heritage, the tattoo also represents, to me, Bryant's poem and the never-ending cycle of life. It also reminds me why I write poetry.

Poetry is about understanding. The poet gains an awareness of herself in the world, as part of the cycle of life; the reader comprehends that there are others out there, that there is a place for each person in, as Black Elk calls it, the "nation's hoop."[10] Poetry is about connection and synchronicity: uniting people whose divides seem like distant continents; linking the fragments of life—bitter cold, sweet sunlight, slumbering and waking dreams—into a brilliant garden that sows the oak, the watermelon, the wild violet. Poetry is like compost. It is rich, dark hummus, filthy and full of worms. It is the heat of the sun, its glare, its drapery. The ocean, the raincloud. Poetry is the blood that beats through our veins.

[10] Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, ed. and trans. John G. Neihardt (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) 230.

1. More than Blood

More Than Blood

Whiskey breath, threadbare shoes,
fingernails so black with grime they buried him that way,
not bothering to scrub them, scent them with lavender.
All that remains of my great grandfather: a black and white photograph
curling at the edges.
Really, that's it. No stories. No language.
If they spoke their own language, they'd go home with bruises.
No talk of Great Mother, nothing you'd expect.
Just dust, turtle soup,
a slice of orange at Christmas.
My grandfather smoked his first cigarette at age ten.
Took him forty years and a quintuple bypass to quit.
He left school in sixth grade. His father a drunk, a family to feed.

My mother remembers a visit to their house, her father mortally embarrassed,
trying to hide the stains, laugh off the missing teeth.
She remembers the dirt, the one-room shack.

My high school health teacher said anyone with Native American
blood has a higher chance of alcoholism.
She never said why.
I remember feeling confused, telling my mother,
whose face burned with fury,
then tears.

Now she wears a tiny feather
tattooed on her shoulder,
all anyone can see of her Cherokee blood.
Except her skin,
her lovely skin not passed down to me.

School Pictures

Remember when you were a natural blond?
When we could find no roots
and people asked me if you bleached your hair?
You were five. Your hair became you.
On poster board your fellow students wrote
around a photo of you:
Lauren is so pretty.
I like her hair and necklaces.
I am happy to look at her.
In the photo, you smile
into a clear blue sky,
a life free of clouds.
Who taught you to beam that way?
All I could allow myself was a crooked smile,
mournful eyes. Dark hair in my face.
Remember the one where my shoulders slumped
and Dad teased me until I spun erect?
He took me to get my hair styled
because I looked like a boy.
You were all girl
and even that wasn't enough.
Somehow those pictures lied,
showing us who we were to be.
All lies, all shadow and light.

Body of Water

light, a land
sanddriven. . .

sometimes her body is swept out to sea
sometimes her body is the sea. . .

. . .the burnished tip
of the umbilical cord
clings like a barnacle to her child's belly.
soon it will drop off,
he will no longer crave her.

his ruddy cheeks will burn
for the silk of the shore,
the hard crunch of a boot on asphalt.

she will not bury him, she will appease,
salt running down her thighs,

for there are other tides to keep her blood churning
when he has gone.

In High School We Cut Ourselves

I stood over the kitchen sink,
sliced my thumb like a soft baby carrot.
My mother walked in, screamed,
dropped the groceries.

But she didn't. I didn't.

I only scraped at my hand with a needle,
tried to scratch memories onto my inner thigh
like fingernail cuts in an apple peel,
but I could never break the skin.

You said your cat scratched you.
We all knew better
but said nothing.

Catching Up

He drives five hours early in the morning, says he'll drive back later that night. She's surprised by the knock at the door. Of course he would be early.

She opens it, feels his eyes searching the spot where her hair used to be. In the play tonight, she will don a long red wig. She thought he'd never see her shaved head.

She cuts choir practice to join him for dinner. Szechuan vegetables, fortune cookies.
Here where everything smells fried he tells her he is thinking of leaving his wife.

She has been through this before, remembers her mother's face as he pulled the old blue Nova out of the driveway one last time.

Will you and your sister be angry with me, he asks. So few times has she looked at his eyes, blue, spotted with age, hunger, regret.

Of course not, she says, having long ago understood that his life is his own. Grasping the real reason he came down for her birthday. Good excuse for a break.

She does not tell him that she is twenty and hating life. That she sleeps around, drinks herself sick, chain smokes, contemplates the lure of a clean blade drawn across her wrist.

After the play, he says he is proud of her. He has never said this before.
She will think of it each time she senses the seductive call of destruction.

My Mother

I remember my mother
breastfeeding her baby boy.
I was ten when he was born.
A dark soft being, he sucked,
pulled his mouth away with a pop,
bit down, my mother yelled out,
"Don't bite!"
He understood, complied,
like a puppy punished for chewing shoes.

We would all walk across the parking lot,
six bare feet hopping across
simmering tar, dive headfirst
into the lapping tongue of the delicious
pool even though no diving was allowed
in the shallow end.
Mother and babe would follow,
he, again, suckling
from beneath a worn yellow
blanket draped over her shoulder.

I never thought of myself in his place,
couldn't imagine being that small.
Although I recall the puckered pink lips
of my sisters who are now golden and long-limbed.

Then, my mother at the table,
the boy at her breast, trying to hide
fear in her eyes as she looked over bills,
yearning to make the math work better this time.
She has since admitted that there were days
she did not know how we would eat,
and I think of how my stomach turns even now
at the sight of large jars full of great northern beans
in a soupy sauce the color of a child's vomit,
the smell of them when
drenched in ketchup. My brother
always had enough, smiling as streams
of milk slid down his chin.

I know someone, a girl my age,
who does not have much of a mother,
who was more the mother than the child,
who will not have any reason to notify
the woman who bore her
when she moves across the country.

It's not until I call mine to find out
how long does it take for syrup to go bad?
or think of the sudden panic attacks
in bars with friends who knew
my divorce was not as easy as I claimed,
relieved I had no children to hide things from,
that I understand,

Mother, how I appreciate
the luxury of you.

Ere Ibeji (Twin Figures)*

My twin was my all—
I float like milkweed without her,
and Mama says, *Please be seated.*
Do your arithmetic, your reading.
I write, *Two minus one equals nothing.*
She scratches it out with red ink,
goes to the window,
looks out at the brown lawn.
I know what she is thinking,
what she always thinks now.
So I pretend to read *Little Women*
while Mama decorates cupcakes
with pink icing and sprinkles.
She places one beside the photograph
on the mantel, the other on the counter.
If I am a good girl, I will get mine too.
Instead of eating it with relish,
I will bury it in the backyard
and wait until spring comes.

*The Yoruba peoples believe that twins share a soul. When one dies, the parents recreate the image of the dead twin and care for it as they would the living one in order to keep them both happy.

Bleeding (or Not Bleeding)

Sixteen years old.
I remember the pregnancy test.
The blue line that wasn't supposed to be there
in a park bathroom
less than a mile from my house.
I'd gone with a friend to a drugstore in the next town over.
She was older, and we hoped that no one would recognize me.
She was a friend of his. He was in college, in another state.

I think I forgot how to breathe, how to live,
but still managed it, as if a strange man held a knife to my back
and I pretended he was just a friend holding me.

That night I told him. He freaked. He was so far away
and stood in the same body as before.
As if he still had control over the situation.
As if my body had not changed,
had not become something else, something foreign,
a person with a choice that did not seem like much of a choice.

A week later, six-thirty a.m.
I went downstairs to shower before school
and glimpsed it in the toilet.
A tiny mass.
The size of an olive, a walnut.
I paused. Flushed the toilet.

The next day I stayed home from school,
told my mom I was sick.
The worst pain I've ever known.
Claws scratching my uterus.
Claws.

My mother was a nurse, so she didn't worry about much.
She checked in. Then began to worry.
Was it my appendix?
No, I assured her. Just stomach pain. A virus.
Nothing a day or two of rest won't cure.

He broke up with me soon after.
Though not before sleeping with half a dozen others.

He will never know what it is like to hold life inside,

to lose it like a dropped penny,
feel it slide from you like rain,
then know a tiger's grasp.

My mother never knew.
I am still afraid to tell her.
I would have a child of nine now.
Or the heartbreak of nine years mourning.

The Weight of Milkmaids

They say—what do they say?
That we look just alike or nothing
alike. They cannot agree.
Always shouting though,
no matter how unsure they are,
trading us like firecrackers,
inspecting us like freckles.
I know what you think, dear—
that I am the great one, the one who is
destined, and you are
alone in the hollow of your heart
with wet hair and a slick sole.
Let me tell you, there is nothing
glamorous about the empty page,
nothing bold or brave.
I am not all I seem, don't you think?
Not the neck of the swan,
the simple turn of a haiku wrist.
When night leaks in like
the thread of a dark sea,
I am still you, sister, still me.
We two, with eyes like dew,
we are dark, dark girls.
We do not walk on air,
we carry lead deep down,
down in our heart of hearts.
We carry it like no one else can.

On Being Poor and Skinny in 1988

The smell of gingko trees
reminds me of sixth grade.
Warm days, we lined up outside the school door,
blond, tousled kids in hot pink Polos,
untied Eastlands. A few not so blond.
A few in ripped jeans and black t-shirts
who would soon paint their faces like the Cure.
Me in secondhand soccer shorts, a red tank top,
worn at least two days out of the week.

Sarah Mueser, always loud, brash,
announcing, "Sara's wearing a bra! You don't need a bra."
Me hating her for never showing kindness,
hating me for immediately folding my arms
across the bumps beneath my shirt,
glaring at the boys who laughed
and the ones who averted their eyes.

In winter we would congregate
in the basement cafeteria,
damp, reeking of that peculiar smell of institutional food.
The kitchen ovens spewed too much heat,
but I would not remove my coat,
stood quietly, hugging myself.

Woman in Black

In the early evening, she walks like a widow.
Her body breaks at the call of each cooing dove,

her tears sing like ruffled owls.
I begged her not to walk down that hill,

its bends so sudden headlights might miss her.
I know I have often mistaken her for a lion,

mistress of all around her. Singer of tidal waves.
Yes, she could be a widow,

but that would be too easy. She could be a faker,
but I've known her too long.

It is only that she grows tired of being
herself, her brilliant blue self, never crippled, never shunned.

She has started leaving things behind. When I remind her,
she pretends she does not hear.

Her light is fading like an opera,
her buttons undone.

Season of the Infirmary

O sisters of glee, gentle, merciful babies—
silk blanket, pacifier,
training wheel, hand-me-down.
All these things come tumbling out now,
spilling memories, spinning, spinning. Sticky threads.
Staccato, fandango.

Two on the table:
one in the psych ward, one on the cutting board.
Where do I fit in and why do I dare think of myself at a time like this?

"Yes, we heard they were in the hospital."
(The nodding heads, red, hairsprayed.)
My sweet sisters, so much younger and smoother than I.
And I have no sword, no moves I can think of.

I am no hero,
no person of letters or island of stone.
You are things of light.
I am dark, timid, afraid of myself and what I could be.

Some intercession then, some communion,
blessing, miracle,
Virgin bleeding tears, hallowed face in clouds.
I will drink all the wine offered, tend all the blistered feet.

Two lying in wait:
Where is my footing?
My earth, my sky?

Forgiving

She came in the autumn, my child.

But she did not come.

I meant her no harm,
but she wrapped her arms around
her red-gowned body and threw herself into the river.

She clawed at my eyes,
my insides,
raged like a banshee for days.

I have not forgotten the sad-eyed girl whose body called her forth.

How dare you think otherwise.

Blood Kin

Now my sister finds life manageable for a change.
Paying rent, cooking dinner,
singing her daughter to sleep.
A job she loves keeps extra money in her pocket
and a humming glow on her face.

It seems, though, that my family must keep its balance.
While my sister finds peace, my father loses it,
fears going back to work after the weekend,
discovers that his body can cheat him and not with cancer
or heart disease as we had expected. With panic, anxiety.

He lies on the floor to calm himself,
presses his body against the cool kitchen tiles.
I remember the summer I spent lying on the floor,
staring at the blades of a ceiling fan as they sliced through the thick heat.
They did not slice through my numbness any more than my pocketknife.

When my sister calls to tell me of his recent trip to the hospital,
I am surprised and not surprised.
Afraid to call him.
Because I know what it's like to watch your own body fail you
when you need it most. To feel your mind slipping from you,
to feel that your body does not belong to you,
that the air is too thick, gravity too inviting.

We've been in that emergency room, all three of us.
Lain back on that sterile bed with doctors leaning over to peer into our eyes
with lights that would normally burn the pupils.
Waited for blankets and medication.
Only my mother has not been there. There were mouths to feed.

I do call though. I must.
He sounds groggy and exhausted. Tells me not to worry,
he won't do anything stupid. He'll retire early.
We compare notes on attacks. He tells me he couldn't stop crying.
I tell him how my stomach ached like death had moved in there.
No, that is wrong. I do not say that word, death.
One knows not to say things like that.

Old Summer

And in my madness—
or what I took to be madness—
I felt the air peculiarly,
each molecule heavy with dampness,
a mantel pressed against my shoulders,
forcing me to lie on the floor
and watch the world from that new angle.

Which did not feel new, only old,
stagnant like morning breath.
I sat up, plunked on piano keys,
sloppily, like a child in her father's shoes.
I named the kitchen table my homebase,
fearing summer, sticking to artificial light.
Days when I could open a notebook,
I wrote strictly in red ink,
obliging the words to scream bloody murder,
to threaten me, spit, slay.
They flipped over and lay dead,
crows dropping from a branch
to decompose in the gutter.

What seemed brave was to stand trembling
on the front porch of suicide,
rest my hand on the cold brass doorknob,
peak into the window
to find a reflection of myself in my eyes,
and then the sparrow,
and then the day stretched out behind me like a lover
beckoning me back to bed.

2. In the Flesh

In the Flesh

delicious
to stretch through my

anger

dangle
in languor

how precipitous of you

to fall here

during my year
yes

i've named it my year

the year of the horse and

all the nights beforehand i thought of them forward
horses

getting somewhere—

What Comes from the Earth

When you kiss the top of my head twice in a row
or catch my eye and beam at me,
I know my blood is hot for something more
than words and rhyme,
I need not spend my life creating alone.
The way tomato plants know to sprout yellow buds,
to stretch out their petals and welcome bees,
the way thousands of fireflies meet in the mountains each spring
to mate, their lights flashing sexy hints
like Mae West in an evening gown, one leg hitched over the sofa arm.
That's not to say that love relies on different sexes;
even my cats know that much.
Think, dear, of the nest of twigs in the darkest corner of the porch
and how the baby birds learned to fly.
Their mother flew beneath them
before we buried her in the backyard.

Mornings

Frowning, she pulls the sheet from the bed,
tumbles it into a ball, tosses it aside.

I say she
but there is no pretending here.

It is easier though
to say she, to hold you out at a distance.

I do not want to remember your eyes,
your polite hands.

Your desire to look at me afterwards,
to explore what no one else cares to.

To slide me open
and smile, say I smell like roses.

There is little in you
that I want now.

But someone who will notice the angle of her shoulders,
the way she smoothes her hair.

That one eye is greener than the other.

An Offering

My dear, I've turned you into metaphors.
Sorry, so banal. I've no alternative;
you must indulge me:

Let me wrap my hands around your wrist
feel the bone inside you,
the scaffold supporting the canvas of you,

skin stretched over ribs like curved drumsticks.
Song courses through you even in dream.
Your hands flamenco on my hips
while I pretend to sleep.

Scent like a warm herb,
sometimes cool and sweet. Your breathing: silk ribbons,
smeared berry, polished sandalwood.

I imagine when I am near,
your blood deepens like burning sugar,
a smell like heat.

I Want to Go with You to India, My Love

where ribbons of
azure scarlet
sienna fall from sky
onto frescoes of dyed
rice
against floors
of Jain temples
you must walk barefoot
in the mosques
the cold marble
a blessing
against your feet

on Elephanta
the carvings
are not like stone sweat
drips
from their pores
they wink
as you trace the curves
of their lips their bended knees

but for you my finest
the bangles of a maharani
batik robes
from the pink city
sandalwood heat jasmine
smell of dusk in Jaipur

candles and prayers
in tiny leaf
boats drifting
toward the horizon

the sky like crushed cardamom
over the Ganges
at dawn when
you have forgotten
where you are where you came from.

At Dawn

Fingers strum ribs like water rippling,
even the calluses are sweet,
shy against the heels of my feet.

I've never known you to open your mouth that way,
never seen you gasping.
I remember myself as water serpent,
as sea that could churn and tumble even the hottest rocks.

How triumphant to be that way again,
to be born laughing and sweating
instead of just longing,
instead of eyes closed mouth pursed.

We press ourselves against the waves,
return to dignity
and beholding.

When She Loved Me and I Could Not Love Her Back

I remember the soft beat of wings
against my palm, she says. Lightning bugs at dusk.
Your face lit blue from the moon in its dark corner.

I am ashamed to say that I do not recall any of this.

Your fingernails rimmed with dirt
from picking carrots in the neighbor's yard.
Mosquito bites swelling red on your ankle.

I avert my eyes. Consider a tear in the sofa.

She touches my chin: I shivered when you said my name.
Do you remember? The air was sweet with the heady scent
of honeysuckle. Remember?

A Thing Open-Ended

god, you are ripe,

stunning even
in your

absence.

I cannot pretend that you do no placate my desire.

You hide jewels

lava summer beneath the ground,

you slide in through my force field,

no need of fruit or candy.

I am a wave in the atmosphere,
I spin like something stellar.

When did we happen? What lipmark hiplark
thighsmear led here?

There was, I think, not much before this—
a slice of pear maybe, a light not quite dawn,
a pencil drawing of a girl like a stick.

And now
these streams are thick and congruent

(old thoughts and misses laughable)

I think you are something not like the rest.

Sowing

Now. I am a seedling, a darling,
catalyst for something.

You are a ranger
of oceans and minor chords.

You walk heavily on cracked sidewalks
and admit your hair needs washing.

Your eyes always shine the same blue,
beads of a European river I saw as a child.

Mine clamor for you
and your hip-walk, your cool-as-day smile.

When you press your lips against mine and shudder,
it's not the soft quake of china rocking in a storm that I picture,

but the swelling roots of an oak, the strum
and cradling of its branches.

Keepsake

Dream poured from a vase
like old orchid water,
sweet, scented, full of floating leaves—

I woke just in time to hear you leaving, blowing

a kiss from the front door,

ran to the window: "I dreamed of Shakespeare!"

Your laugh rich, tingling my wrists.

Later we steamed artichokes, dragged our teeth across the leaves,
licked the meat like love.

"Also, I dreamed of John and Yoko"—written on a scrap of paper.

Lying awake, I tried to divide the moments,
what was dream, what memory.

Your breathing from the pillow, lavender of your eyelids.

Vow to Familiar

i lift you
up to moons
break the bones
of sickness
and silence
leaking light
i fall
into mountains
parting water
to return
to
return

3. Dust

The First Moment

I live in a region that remembers Andrew Jackson fondly,
names schools, towns, roads after straight-backed
gentlemen with white hair.
I married a local boy,
told him what I'd read: these men slaughtered my ancestors,
banished them from their homes, sent them to bed
with smallpox blankets. He shrugged,
said, well, they did good things too, those guys.
Then I feared the smiling blue of his irises.
When we visited Ireland, his motherland,
he cried over famine, Bloody Sunday, gray skies.
When the Tennessee Department of Transportation
decided to widen the road through his neighborhood
and Cherokee came out to protest
the demolition
of sacred burial sites,
he mocked them,
said nigger.

Dust

I had my first panic attack at the corner
of E. Jackson and Central
in a building said to be haunted
by the ghosts of black men slaughtered a century ago.
I imagine the dust of their bones
seeping into my lungs as I collapsed,
but there is no comparison here:
I could get back up.
Outside sits a bench across the street
where I overcame my last panic attack,
more than a year ago now.
I felt that deep wave rush over me,
my face too hot, head too light,
and I lay down on the bench,
listened to my breathing
as cars rattled and honked in the street.
Straight ahead the three stories of an old saloon
cut through the burning sky
like a dagger trailing blood.
I gazed at the dancing ladies painted
along the brick wall of the uppermost floor,
once a brothel.
I named them: Antoinette, Dominique, Brigitte,
Simone, a French accent for can-can girls.
I read in the paper that the city
plans to build an overpass above this intersection,
an iron curtain between the old buildings
and even older sky.
I worry that I won't be able to breathe again,
wonder how many more souls
will be trapped here
when there is no room for them to rise.

Judas Descending

What musings lie in this heart?
What murderous incantations?
I saw him once,
a fair-haired lad,
underneath he is not skin and bones.
Does he dare speak my name,
glance at my younger sister?
I would raise up my arms and send birds flying,
I'd call on the earth to open beneath him.
Or maybe fall for him out of habit.

The Rites

Morning is up—
She has delivered a dozen eggs
with the open eyelid of her sun.
What does she want me to do with them?
Fry them up like hands and eat?
Throw them coolly at doves?
The things we must do for the woman.
Is she a demon, I wonder with relief.
A jealous dream with holes for eyes
and a crooked mouth. Toothless ingrate. Yes.
I am tired of this.
Empty, not like you.
Leave me and my speckled shins—
I am a sexless thing from now on.
Orlando, principio. Fini.

Cold Turkey

That cool summer:
I had a lager and a bottle of scotch.
Drank too heavily
as I am wont to do.
Swore I'd never do it again,
banned headaches, retching,
thick mascara morning eyes.
As you know, I didn't last long.
Terrible at promises and resolutions,
and that sweet liquor, my murderous lover,
stuck to my ribs like an infant,
a significant terror.
What things had we wrought?
What notions did we suggest and then play out
like giddy children on the sidewalk,
screaming thrushes below heavy clouds?
I sucked on peppermints and switched to vodka
so no one would smell it on my breath,
because someone said, "Stick with the clear stuff,
it goes down easier."
I scorched my lining, broke glasses like candy,
instruments of torture.
What a bitter thought it is now, what a thing I was then!
A broken down musket,
nothing left to squeeze through the hole,
rusty trigger.
Damn the ones who knew when to stop,
I never knew when,
never could.
I recall that bottle now, the red lines of your hands,
your eyes blurred beetles through the glass.

From the One who Left to the One who Stayed

I was never sure I was doing the right thing.

When you are young someone tells you when you've done wrong.
You resent it, scream, tell your mother you hate her.

Then you grow up and there is no one to keep an eye on you.
You rely on the windshield sticker to find out when the oil needs changing,
start calling your mother on Sundays.

When you plan a career, a marriage, a life, when you buy a car,
get a mortgage, it's your signature on the papers.

You cannot erase it. You can scratch it out,
but always the thick black mark on the sheet, the ink on your fingers.

Get Going

The sun smirks at my eyes,
and I remember a habañero pepper
that made me cry.

I can still make myself cry whenever I want.
Too much time spent practicing in the mirror as a child,
ready for my close up.

Today white heat creeps down my dress.
Outside, with laughing trees, spiraling robins, looks like happiness.
If I can make myself cry, surely I can smile.

My Companion, A Damned Thing

Every night is like the death of a planet:
snakes rustle, melt inside me,
I spit them up like lava, their bones
chalk dust on my chin.
You are the heir of my dreams,
my penance.

The saints slide in, dainty toes and all,
and I refuse them.
They are cobwebs; I seek the moon.
One day soon it will rise from my belly,
fat and pulsing,
I will spit it out.
Frothing at the mouth, shimmering on the floor,
soft and slippery, a babe's tongue.

Why do I hold to the thing that sickens me,
that screams like a clawed paw inside?
The body is an ocean.
Swallow, choke, throw it up,
die trying.

like a predator, she knew she had gone too far. She had made her decision. There was no dallying, just a quick goodbye, on her way home. And the realization of *which way is home?* She unlocked the door, noticed all the lights were on, saw him lying drunk in twisted sheets. A bottle of Benadryl stood like an alarm on the bedside table, an empty whiskey bottle on the floor. She dropped her things and shook him, begged him to tell her how many he'd taken. He was always full of games even when death hovered like a butler at the door, he only found her worthy of cryptic phrases. Then gained some momentum, hurled threats, garbled and heady. Bent bullets, sad birds trying to prance in their red feathers.

I've always hated you, you horror. What could she say but *yes, I know.* He growled: *Why don't you go? You have places to go.* Then the shaking and crawling on his knees and *please oh please.* She wanted to puke or scream, but she had to be a giant. Beyond feeling. Jackie Kennedy in her pink suit, holding brains in her lap like a bouquet of flowers.

Somehow she managed to extract herself, to grow wings and rise above the scene like out-of-body vapor. She headed back to the car. *Yes, I've places to go.*

It was the drive of a lifetime.

The stomachache came the next day. Weeks later, the panic attacks, hyperventilating, passing out in front of her friends, in the middle of the street, alone in bathroom stalls. That awful desire to go back, to resign herself to the safety of him. She wasn't eating, had lost twenty pounds. The doctor gave her medication to get her through the day. And then one day, posing in front of the mirror, she said it aloud:

Free.

Couplets

I could not stand my waking life
so invented a new one.

Buttercream mornings, evenings full of tilting stars.
Named myself dancer, poet, songstress.

Priestess. Heirloom rose gardener.
Married to no one, sometimes to a painter.

Happy with a room of blue and orange,
thrilled to Paris, Rome.

Then the clouds brushed against the moon,
which was half-asleep,

preparing to reinvent itself.
And with it, the knowledge that I could change

my mind about what I wanted,
undress from my life, let it slip to the floor.

Walk naked or adorn myself like the sky.

In Flux

Anxious for the delivery of new words,
rhymes, boxes of love
sweet inconsistencies—
the tassel of forgiveness
the drawing, dawning, day I believed

When the ring is sanded and supple, free of itself
the shouting a sleeping babe
a thought left on a shelf

I will return to the gold I might have been
I will swim that delicious ocean
away from my pantry, away from my sin

4. Handling the Minotaur

O Artemis

Your scent rains down on this campground,
sleeping embers quicken like pulse

A wolf in me,
eyes bright in darkness—

Heat these bones,
shivering at the fire

Take the ashes,
scatter them like seeds

Feast on skylight,
windblown, violet-laden

Remember me brilliance.

Deep Dirt

The sun paints
the dying rosebush
lovely.

Fawn and devil mock me
from their bed of weeds.

I hoe around their porcelain.

My mother had a garden once,
lost it 20 years ago when she had to get three jobs
and move into a trailer full of mouse shit.

That Halloween she forgot to buy candy,
and I came home (sleepy ballerina in drooping tutu)
to find she'd given out all the pennies I'd saved.

20 years is a good while though.

I stole the devil from a yard in Ohio,
never looked back.

Good Sister

they pulled a thread
of your golden hair
and you never stopped spinning
though the world (the word) came to an end
this was the beginning

more than a skipped beat
not just a shudder, a pin prick,
but a lifeline—

then the butchers hunted you,
the bakers crammed you full,
saying, "here, a bottle of love,
a soup tureen, have another go"

and the cradle was cooking
while the day buckled in

o, what are you doing, my dollface, my kin,
as you cry to the night, *let me in, let me in*

Antediluvian

Rain melts into her skin
and you'd never know she's from the Midwest
she looks stunning

as if she planned it

Her stars unravel,
mines explode

a tree uprooted (raised eyebrow,
panting lip)

her grasses shiver,
a swift ponytail

She doesn't need a good side

her bellish smile calls horses

Yes, one may have whittled a ribcage
but not hers

Beyond time,
beyond vanity,
crime.

Encased in Silver She Poses, One Foot on a Bloody Head

The night I met Kali
a boy I knew pulled me into the bushes,
tried to unzip my pants.
He said he'd always wanted to kiss me,
I was so beautiful he couldn't stand it.
Afraid of being forced, I did not fight him,
but lay on the damp, needle-covered ground
staring at the slice of moon
that peaked through clouds like a shy dove.
I inhaled the kind scent of pine that could not quite
conquer the rancid beer and smoke on his breath.
Then the moon tore through the night like a goddess
ripping the bushes from the ground with her many arms,
biceps tattooed with names I knew,
names like mine.

Heavy

in here
there are swarms
i am used to them

i know their posture
i know my place

the air i have to breathe
at just the right time
or drown

not so easy

but you are a fast one
you think you can cut it

with the sharp corners of your cheeks
your mouth a slippery crescent

god, your skin

how i would love to hate you
but in here
it is not so easy

my garden is heavy
the knowing, the weight

Elements

You stand like iron,
waving your sex,
your glimmer.
How are you so cool?

I huddle like ice in the chest,
a crushed cigarette.
I leave myself bare and am worse for it.

You holler and warm wind on the earlobe, you
breathe and we melt with the hush,
the caress of the leaf, falling back into each other like waves.

When I am most sure of myself, pulling
myself up like the spine of a mountain,
you come to me and speak—speak!—
softest lark, lamb in mirror—
and I falter like someone who could falter,
like someone who had not
built herself up to run with wolves.

When I dream, I lose my teeth.
Do you? Do you ever lose?
Do you count the days?

I do not want to go on sighing.
Fire outside.
Why am I not in it?

Handling the Minotaur

Triptych
thoughts so multisyllabic
breathing in rhyme

Three swords:
gutless
and proven to swash, gash, lash—

A cough of birds
descends from the high wire,
gemini and dominion

plunging into dreams
and thieves like circus
cannons

Your sibilance deafening.

Mantra for Keeps

hot orange sun
China grace in the pan
flash
attack
I muttered words like *deliverance*
held the knife steady:
begin:

(you are riding on an ocean
you are feeling oceanic
wings or fins wings or fins—

pitter-patter
vintage heels, red-
sequined heart attacks: how *do* you decide?)

Over the Rainbow
and Over Again.
yet no gold never any gold no
nor misty crystal ball to say where what who next.

Like cruise control and cigarettes,
the golden shepherd
and his fly-by-night pack,
it was not all just a whisper. . .

will happen.

highball glass kick
Hot Lemon
supersonic—
we follow the blowing wind or wilt like yearning unheard:
Choose

Ever After

Always you and sunbright in you
feathers like tassles of light wind
goodies for the hag
who wears her breath too tight
sweets for the meat
kissing a sin a blemish

when you have died
will brightness consume
will space feel loaded overloaded

will your laughter still tickle her feet

and what of mine
with cold toes
and a pinched nerve
like twitching cellophane

who will calm my irises
my waves

when your grave smacks
against the sky
who will raise the poppies

5. The Nature of Me Now

A Visit, Long Awaited

An old woman forages in the fridge,
shuffling ham wrapped in tin foil,
jars of mayonnaise, yellow mustard, a potato.
The open door bumps
against a dark china cabinet
more than a century old,
springs back, bouncing off the woman's head.
This happens three or four times,
and each time her great-granddaughter winces
as if her head, ninety-four years old,
wrapped in spongy gray hair,
is soft as a ripe plum.

The girl moves as if to help,
then falls back, thinking that a woman
who has lived this long on her own
can handle kitchen appliances.
The woman pulls out a plate of jam cake
and slices a thick piece for the girl,
a smaller piece for herself.
Raspberry seeds stick in their teeth.

Early Summer

In Ohio
we waited for the school bus
beneath sturdy maples, elms,
a buckeye,
fat cicadas dropping from the branches
with a thud against our shoulders.
As children we popped off their heads
by plucking off their legs,
delighted by the way
they rolled around on the pavement.
Later we darted
from the plump, zooming bodies,
fearing their insect touch.

Here in Tennessee
we sit near the waxy leaves
of a magnolia,
gaze at the pink buds
of the mimosas lining the hill,
the melancholy sag of a weeping willow,
and let the growing hum of cicadas
drown out our conversation.

In Hunger

I gave my leftovers
to him on the street whose wife had not eaten,
sat waiting in the liquor store.

He thanked me,
began to cry.

I had not wanted to,
it was my birthday dinner
and a good one,
looking forward to tomorrow's lunch.

But he ate my eyes,
my memory of the night.

The Nature of Me Now

what with these battlements
and prostrating gentlemen
I could be some Queen of Assisi

a golden Narcissus

branching off from Cleopatra's line. I slept, unsuspecting, until
light broke in, shattering
my slumber with heat and science,
like wheat scent rising
from a warm oven.

this is where some lines cross,
some lines like rivers
or seasons, lines I cannot claim,
that claim me like a shining

wet oyster, lips gripping shut.

in this scene, I spy a pond that suits me, yes, dew
from a daffodil,
circle of silken quartz.

how Piscean of me to hold
my breath at such a sight—
though not like before,
so young and thirsting for a thought
to seize me and bring me down shuddering.

this water calls me, true,
—its Eden, its terror, apparent—
here I draw my bath
content to dip my feet

in waves of my own birthing.

Child Drawing the Sea

Her waves
are inverted birds.

Her birds
flap long wings.

Her wings
graze my shoulder.

My shoulder
remembers her itch.

Why I'm a Feminist

Because all we did in Girl Scouts
was bake and fiddle with beads
while the boys slept outside
and learned how to start fires

Because in sixth grade Kevin Zinke did ten pull-ups,
the most in the class,
and I stopped at seven so he wouldn't be embarrassed

Because in junior high some boys made a list
of body parts from different girls at school
to make the perfect woman

Because in high school a bathroom stall
told me in crude black ink
that I was a slut

Because when I waited tables in college
a customer squeezed my upper thigh
and laughed about it

Because when I was desperate for a job
the woman at the produce market
laughed in my face,
said they needed a man
to lift boxes

Because I can't walk down the street without being harassed

Because I keep my hands curled into fists
when walking alone at night,
check my breasts for lumps in the shower,
worry about my fertility daily

Because I have three sisters,
a niece, two mothers,
four grandmothers, and a ninety-four-year-old great-grandmother
who was hit by a car and still cuts her own grass,
her mother dead before she could vote.

The Open Invitation

Moth wings on a dish.
Breakable. More fragile than china,
porcelain, any manufactured substance.

I've no idea how long they've been there,
but I know I haven't used this dish
since I returned to cooking for one.

The wings have become skeletons of themselves but still stick hard.
I have to scratch them off.

Moth wings.
The sounds rising in the air
together, beating: *thw*
mo thw ings.

The dire need for a right answer,
a wrong one.

Flap the wings of it.
Flap the dove free.

Berry Farm on 321

If there is a trick
to picking blueberries quickly,
I do not know it.
I know only one way, the hottest day.
I pull on an old pair of shorts,
a bikini top, and head for the bushes.
I like to imagine the first bush
has called out to me,
placed its weathered hand on my shoulder
and pulled me into its bosom.
Sometimes I have to crawl deep inside,
hold branches out of the way,
find the plumpest berries
in the quiet heart of their home.
I am not interested in trapping them,
snapping them off like plastic beads.
I hug them with forefinger and thumb,
believing I can feel the coolness,
the sharp tongue
of indigo on my skin.
Most do not make it into my basket—
rush of sweet guts against my tongue,
against the brackish heat of my own sweat,
a kind of communion.

While Chopping Carrots

Blood tides
and a hole in my pocket recedes.

Blood is good
because it gives us form,
meaning.

Style.

Blood pools
and we call it yours
though you're sure you've never seen it before.

Things change colors when they leave you.

Holes are angels.
Sometimes we need to lose things.
We don't like to let things go, don't give up easily.

Blood ringlets.
Pulsing digits. I hold my finger over the sink,
suck on it, taste metal, bitterness.

Blood angels need wings.
But we do not. Only bandages,
ointment, hope.

Not Always Like This

Today her body is the enemy.
She picks at her flesh, pinches her belly,
her calves.
Feels moorish at the sight of herself.

Yesterday it was conservative Christians.
Cockroaches, hornets.
Bladder infections. Poverty.

There are no lines to follow when it comes
to self-remorse, no rules to hang by.
Her body is angry with her. She does not know how to fight it.

Maybe tomorrow it will be imperialism again.
Or aging.
Or men.

A New Year's Eve Conversation from Dinosaurs to Constellations

Stars are hip things to worship
or know about.
Planetary alignments. Earth rumblings.

When asked why geology
a friend said because of the Bible.

Do you know about white holes, he asked.
Black holes suck things in,
white holes expel them.

Yes, I've known both, I said, biblically.

He said, the Bible tells us that God is what holds things together.
God gives us shape.
God is in this plastic cup making it what it is.

God is plastic, I replied
and thought of grocery bags floating down the street,
through ocean waves, through space,
their logos, bulls eyes, smiley faces, riding happily through eternity.

He told me how hard it is to get away from gravity.
I asked, how do you get away from getting away?

He said faith.

I left with my umbrella
but stopped in the street,
considered the sun
long before it had risen.

On Laying Down My Sword

—and then there were no words

only light streaming

echo of burning stars

the approaching continent

of fullness

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Vita

Sara Baker was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she graduated with honors from Madeira High School in 1995. She received her Bachelor of Arts, cum laude, in English and religion from Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee, in 1999. From there, she moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to work as an Americorps*VISTA for a nonprofit devoted to literacy and civic education. Upon finishing her service, she returned to Maryville and worked as an Assistant Reference Librarian at the Blount County Public Library, while actively participating in the Maryville Branch of the American Association of University Women. In 2004, she received her Master of Arts in English with Writing Concentration from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She plans on teaching English in Eastern Europe, continuing her writing, and reclaiming her interests in other arts

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