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Mirror in the Dark: Poems

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Carolyn Rose Stice entitled "Mirror in the Dark: Poems." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

Mirror in the Dark: Poems

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Carolyn Rose Stice
May 2014

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DEDICATION

To my family:

You know what you did

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ABSTRACT

Sentiment in verse has a long and complicated history throughout which it has fluctuated in and out of vogue depending upon the tastes of the time. A poem that is too “sentimental” is one in which the author relies too heavily on emotion to incite a stereotypical response in the reader. In this type of writing emotion is emphasized at the expense of craft. Conversely, when sentiment is consciously used as a tool it can help to infuse writing with active and genuine emotion which help to broaden a reader’s understanding of a poem. The emotion is an active and important part of the poem, aiding the effect of the whole rather than dominating it. The use of sentiment is a problem that faces many contemporary poets. What this refers to is the choice contemporary poets often make concerning whether or not to include sentiment, and the degree to which they want their work and their identities associated with it. Contemporary female poets find themselves in a difficult position wherein they often write about topics that would logically benefit by being approached from the perspective of sentiment, but sometimes these poets actively choose to write without using sentiment because they have come of age in a poetry culture that devalues the use of sentiment and distrusts a poet who employs it. Some poets bridge this divide by embracing sentiment as tool. Sentiment provides poets with an outlet for truth in self-expression, and if used carefully and artfully, poets who incorporate it into their work can find a place for their poems in the wider world of poetry.

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CHAPTER I
Introduction and General Information

Contextualizing the Problem

In *Achievement in American Poetry* Modernist poet Louise Bogan discusses the inclusion of sentiment in poetry by women. She writes, “Women, it is true, contributed in large measure to the general leveling, dilution, and sentimentalization of verse, as well as prose, during the nineteenth century” (Bogan 20). When Bogan uses the term “sentimentalization” she refers to a writing in which the author relies too heavily on emotion to incite a stereotypical response in the reader. Sometimes in this writing emotion is emphasized at the expense of craft. Bogan is well aware that what she identifies as the “sentimentalization” of writing is frequently and negatively associated with women, and has been for some time. The stereotype of a woman as the more emotional gender has meant that should women choose to highlight emotional content within their work they run the risk of receiving harsh reviews from critics. This has been especially true throughout the twentieth century. Yet, even with the threat of backlash from critics women continued to and still use sentiment in the crafting of their verse.

Although Bogan does not appear to favor the “sentimentalization” of verse, in *Achievement in American Poetry* she goes on to praise women for the, “...the wave of poetic intensity which wavers and fades out and often completely fails in poetry written by men, on the feminine side, moves on unbroken” (19). The fact that Bogan criticizes women writers for being associated with “sentimentalization” but still praises them for producing more consistently strong writing than their male counterparts suggests that she recognizes a difference between the goals and quality of verse by women as opposed to that of men. We must ask ourselves, then, what accounts for the differing levels of poetic intensity in poetry written by some men versus that written by some women. I believe this difference is closely tied to the use of sentiment in the writing of poetry.

When I speak about sentiment I do not mean the “sentimentalization” to which Bogan was opposed. I am referring to it the way Joy Katz does in “When ‘Cold’ Poems Aren’t.” Katz says: “Sentiment is feeling, and we feel with our bodies in real time. Sentiment is sincere” (84). But sentiment is not just about bringing a level of sincerity to poems, it is also about helping poems to feel true. In “Call Me Sentimental” Jenny Browne writes:

If we define sentiment in poetry as the expression of emotion through image, music, and thought, the kind of sentiment I am most interested in makes a poem feel true. Not factually true, but true in how the poem reflects something of the complex ways humans actually experience their lives. Such sentiment—call it muscular, felt, authentic—creates the impression that there is a lived life behind a poem. (87)

The power of sentiment is that it can help infuse writing with active and genuine emotion which will in turn broaden a reader’s understanding of a poem and the complex human experience reflected therein. When sentiment is used appropriately and without excess the emotion present in the poem becomes an active and important part, aiding the effect of the whole rather than dominating it. Although sentiment can do a lot towards helping a poet create and maintain the type of poetic intensity to which Bogan refers, the use of sentiment is a controversial and complicated issue.

The use of sentiment is a problem that occupies me and other contemporary female poets, whether they know quite how to name it or not. What I mean by this preoccupation is the choice we all must make concerning whether or not to include sentiment, and the degree to which we want our work and ourselves associated with it. But choosing to use sentiment in poetry is not just a matter of individual choice. In her essay “Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame” contemporary

poet Sarah Vap meditates on this quandary of sentiment:

Yet if, in a poem, I use the language of my imagination that is connected with religious language, I risk being termed sentimental or—harder to my mind—religious. As a woman, if I speak about pregnancy and babies, I certainly risk being termed sentimental. If I speak about how I love the earth, I risk being termed sentimental.

The problem Vap faces is not exactly the topics she covers, her challenge is a reader's emotional associations with those topics, and the changing tides of reader opinions (and associations) go a long way toward dictating the acceptable level of "sentiment" in any particular poem.

The choice of whether or not to use sentiment is an active and fairly political decision because the use of sentiment in verse has a long and complicated history. Use of sentiment has fluctuated in and out of vogue depending upon the tastes of the time. Writers of the nineteenth century tended to embrace it, while Modernists, who were jaded by the harsh realities of World War I and other events of the early twentieth century, tended to be more distrustful of outpourings of emotion which they associated with propaganda. Contemporary female poets find themselves in a difficult position wherein they often write about topics that would logically benefit by being approached from the perspective of sentiment, but sometimes these poets actively choose to write without using sentiment because they have come of age in a poetry culture that devalues sentiment and distrusts a poet who employs it. In "Sentimentality, the Enemy?" Kevin Prufer writes:

Many successful poets of my generation rarely risk sentimentality, instead sliding easily into winking coyness, postmodern self-referentiality, wordplay, pop-cultural signification, series of fleeting impressions, artes poeticae, and

abstraction. Often a casualty of this avoidance is any engagement with the reader on emotional (as opposed to intellectual, comic, experimental, or discursive) levels. (78-79)

Part of the contemporary distrust for use of sentiment stems from the belief that sentimentality is what Pruffer calls “the enemy of emotional complexity” (79). What he means is that the presence of sentiment in poems encourages readers to feel basic and prescribed emotions, but does not call upon them to examine the complexities of those emotions.

However, this lack of consensus concerning the use of sentiment in poetry does not mean we are not using it, or should not. Female poets in particular often face a double-edged sword. On one side, poets must conform to conventions of what is “acceptable” in terms of style, often while perhaps not speaking from their own inner truths, in order to be published. On the other side, poets who choose to write what they feel needs to be written, to satisfy their sense self, risk anonymity. In *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich recounts her experience as a poet and mother of young children. She writes: “Once in a while someone used to ask me, ‘Don’t you ever write poems about your children?’ The male poets of my generation did write poems about their children—especially their daughters. For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself” (31). Rich goes on to describe how she avoided writing about her children, although they were a major and important part of her life, because the emotions connected with motherhood were too heightened, and she was not sure how to explore them in a way that would allow her poems to still be taken seriously by critics and readers. Rich is not alone in her experience.

I believe that the way that some poets bridge this divide between what they need to say and producing a poem that is likely to be published is by embracing the use of sentiment.

Sentiment provides poets with an outlet for truth in self-expression, and ultimately that is perhaps more important than writing poems that are applauded by critics. In her essay “Terribly Sentimental” Rachel Zucker says:

I want a poetry that can say how it feels to be told to shut up and a poetry that will not shut up and will not even let the reader ‘identify’ with me or even really feel sorry for me because that’s too much distance...I write *about* things and am revealed as a person “excessively prone to feeling” (as Webster’s says) and as someone who wants to make others feel things too. (72)

I am approaching the problem of sentiment not only as a critic and reader of poetry, but also as a poet attempting to understand the implications of being a woman who writes about women’s issues in contemporary America. At the same time I am also like Zucker in that I have chosen to use sentiment because I want my poetry to have a power all its own, and to be a tool to “make others feel things too” (72).

In my manuscript, *Mirror in the Dark: Poems*, which follows this introduction, I have tried to find a balance between what I feel needs to be said and the manner in which I say it. Although sentiment has been my most effective tool for achieving this goal, I would not say that I have employed it successfully in all of my poems. As a consequence I have found it very helpful to read the work of other contemporary female poets who write about traditionally female issues and who also attempt to incorporate sentiment into their work. In her book *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker explores the emergence of women’s poetry in America. In this text she identifies five categories of writing by women. These include: “Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity,” “Body Language: The Release of Anatomy,” “Herr God, Herr Lucifer: Anger, Violence, and Polarization,” “The Imperative of Intimacy: Female Erotics, Female Poetics,” and

“Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology.” My manuscript has been purposefully organized to reflect and explore four of these categories, which I have adapted for the purpose of applying them to my writing. These categories include: “The Self,” “The Body,” “Anger/Violence/Politics,” and “The Erotic Woman.” It has been my aim to use sentiment as a way to address these themes in a manner that authentically reflects my identity as an individual and as a woman in contemporary America. In so doing, I have made some deliberate and calculated choices concerning word choice, formal appearance on the page, and cadence of language. These choices are strongly influenced by the work of a variety of contemporary poets, many of whom are female. In this introduction I provide examples of specific poems from my manuscript. I have paired each of my own examples with a poem that helped to influence it. I also explain the connection between works, paying particular attention to the use of sentiment.

Background: How to Define Sentiment

Recently when I was reading through a creative writing listserv I happened upon a new literary journal issuing a call for submissions. The announcement was similar to those made by many other small to mid-sized journals advertising on this same listserv, but this particular one stood out because they state explicitly in their description that they will not publish work that is “sentimental” in nature. Over the last ten years I have also had the experience on multiple occasions of hearing professors and fellow students complain in a derogatory fashion about a poem’s or poet’s use of sentiment. These events are noteworthy for two main reasons: first, because no one in any of these situations has ever offered a definitive definition of sentiment, and secondly because the general consensus seems to be that any poem that consciously makes use of sentiment is in some way of lesser quality than those who do not.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the word “sentiment” back to the fourteenth

century to Chaucer, who over the course of his writing career uses the term in at least four different ways. His uses span from “personal experience, one’s own feelings” to “sensation, physical feeling” to “intellectual or emotional perception” (“sentiment”). Between Chaucer’s time and the present day, approximately eleven additional definitions for sentiment have come into use. Some of these include “Abilities,” “An opinion, view,” and “A thought or reflection coloured by or proceeding from emotion” (“sentiment”). Part of what makes sentiment so tricky to pin down is that every coined definition of sentiment since the fourteenth century is currently still in circulation. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sentiment in relation to literature was often positively associated with “Refined and tender emotion,” but by the start of the twentieth century opinions about sentiment began to change and sentiment in literature became associated with “insincerity or mawkishness” (“sentiment”).

In his 1956 text *Practical Companion* I.A. Richards says that writing that incorporates sentiment tends to trigger what he calls “stock responses” in the reader. These responses stem from knee-jerk reactions that are already present in the reader’s mind, and so the emotion felt by the reader is a result of the reader’s own experience rather than work done by the author. In other words, in writing that incorporates sentiment weddings are always happy and deaths are always sad; readers’ reactions to life are always black or white (Richards). I find Richards’s assessment to be a little too narrow in focus because the use of sentiment in poetry is not really an issue of poems in which it is incorporated being either good or bad, but rather an issue of taste, cultural pressures, and finesse. Many contemporary writers, namely those writing from 1970 to present day, have struggled with their own ideas about sentiment and still seem uncertain about how best to work with a singular and authoritative definition. Some remain stoutly loyal to the Modernist opinion of sentiment, while others are beginning to reconsider sentiment as a positive element to

incorporate into their poetry. A part of the problem is that the words “sentimental” and “sentiment” are frequently used interchangeably by contemporary critics and writers, when in truth each word has its own significant connotations and effects in poetry too.

In her writing guide *Method and Madness*, Alice LaPlante distinguishes between the terms “sentimental” and “sentiment.” Concerning the term “sentimental” she writes: “We tend to associate the word ‘sentimental’ with things that are precious, mawkish: squishy, ‘soft’ subjects such as babies and kittens...But that’s only a small part...Something is sentimental if it attempts to induce an emotional response in a reader that exceeds what the situation warrants” (LaPlante 6). She qualifies these descriptions by suggesting that this type of excess can happen as readily with “hard” subjects such as war as it can with “softer” subjects such as love. For LaPlante the problem with this excess of emotion is not the presence of emotion itself. Rather, there is a danger with writing that relies too heavily on emotion to create effect. The danger is that by relying on emotion the writer will tend to shy away from complexity of content or craft. In short, a writer who is perceived as being too “sentimental” may be considered lazy. Perhaps the most significant point LaPlante makes is when she describes sentimental writing as what happens when an author “attempts to induce an emotional response in a reader that exceeds what the situation warrants” (6).

Many contemporary poets misunderstand the fine distinction between sentiment and sentimental. Discussing the sentimental poem Pruffer writes:

Humans feel conflicting emotions, but the sentimental poem doesn’t allow for them. Sentimentality...reduces our complex responses to the world; a poem ideally ought to expand those responses. Art, including poetry, is uniquely suited to expressing the complexity of a universe whose truths clash and compete. (79)

Because of the negative connotations associated with the term “sentimental,” I prefer to use the term “sentiment,” which LaPlante says is “variously defined as a ‘refined feeling’; a ‘delicate sensing of emotion’; ‘an idea colored by emotion’” (6). It is a lack of understanding of this distinction that causes many to either use sentiment to excess, creating a primarily emotion driven and sentimental work, or to eschew sentiment entirely. I think this trend reflects both a lack of education about the use of sentiment and an inability to fully understand those qualities that help an individual poem withstand the ever-changing climate of literary trends. Works that endure do so because of a mastery of poetic intensity that focuses on truths about the human condition, and one way this can be expressed is through sentiment.

Sentiment and the Contemporary Poem

Richards and LaPlante both touch on the fact that humans are biologically wired to have particular emotional reactions to certain stimuli, even above and beyond our own preferences. In poetry this phenomenon is further compounded by cultural influences that pressure the poem and its author. If an author writes about one of these trigger items, such as a baby, the expectation exists that the author will write about that baby in such a way as to validate the cultural influence, in this case feelings of awe and love.

Poems whose topic is one of these potential trigger items can be tricky to handle, especially for female writers who must likewise deal with gender bias. On one hand it makes perfect sense that a poet should employ sentiment when writing about his or her baby, whether or not the poet intends to validate cultural and biological expectations in the course of the poem (which women are often assumed to be inclined to do). On the other hand the risk of crossing the line from using sentiment to creating a sentimental work that manipulates the reader becomes all too apparent. Joy Katz discusses this problem in her essay “Baby Poetics.” She writes:

Where once I would simply be at work on a poem, not thinking about the reader, now that a baby has appeared, you are in the room. Half the trouble is the baby's creeping sentimentality, half the trouble is the way I hold this baby up to be kissed (this is not what I am doing). Fear loss of credibility. (13)

Even when Katz chooses not to fall in line with cultural and biological expectations of her as a mother writing about her baby, she must remain hyper-sensitive to the judgment of potential readers who are likely already disposed to judge her based on his or her gut reactions to babies rather than based on the quality of her writing. Normally a poet has the choice to acknowledge or not acknowledge the potential reader, who sits like an elephant in the room, peering over the poet's shoulder as she or he writes. Many poets opt for the latter choice, but if the poet is a woman writing about something that could be considered a "woman's issue," whether it be babies, the poet's own body, or politics, the poet will always have to pay attention to that reader because as Katz points out, female poets are traditionally held to a different standard than their male counterparts.

In the context of this double standard between the writing of men and women is where Richards and those who share his opinion of sentiment fall short. They fail to recognize or acknowledge that the act of disparaging the term sentiment is deeply connected to disparaging the feminine. A man and a woman can each write a poem of equal gravitas about their child, and the man will likely be applauded for the formal success of the piece and even for his bravery in writing it, while a woman will be judged first and foremost by how well she walks that tightrope between sentiment and sentimentality. In "Baby Poetics" Katz touches on this inequality of expectations: "If I fail at this poem with a baby in it, I make a personal mistake. The poem has that soft place in its head like ripe fruit, a spoiling spread over to me. A mistake of intellect is

understandable. A mistake of sentiment is just embarrassing” (13). The fact that *Practical Criticism* was published in 1956 and “Baby Poetics” in 2013 tells us that this imbalance between poetic standards for men and women is an ongoing and long debated issue with no easy answer.

I have chosen to write about sentiment and to attempt to utilize it to improve my own writing because I see it as something that can be used to embrace and highlight the shades of difference in the human experience, especially the female experience. LePlante argues that while writers should avoid including “excess” emotion, they should not avoid emotion all together because authors who avoid emotion in their writing, “...shut them down and fail to push them to their limit,” but also “avoid the reason most of us write to begin with: to put complex, urgent emotion down on the page” (8). Writing for me has almost always been about putting that complex, urgent emotion down on the page. My challenge is to make sure that emotion functions as an essential piece of a poem rather than as a dominant element across the whole.

CHAPTER II
Uses of Sentiment in the Contemporary Poem

“The Self”

In *Stealing the Language*, Ostriker tells us that one of the main ways contemporary female poets attempt to define themselves is to focus on the mother-daughter bond. She cites the speculations of psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow who claims in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that “mothers treat sons as differentiated beings but daughters as extensions of themselves; daughters persist in their pre-oedipal attachment to their mothers. One consequence is that females tend to experience themselves not as autonomous selves but as enmeshed in, and defined by, their relations with others” (70). This results in women who define themselves in terms of their relationships to others, and especially see themselves as extensions of their mothers. Lucille Clifton illustrates this mother-daughter bond in her poem “oh antic God.” In her poem Clifton’s speaker invokes the memory of her mother, and in doing so completes an act of self-definition:

I am almost the dead woman’s age times two.

I can barely recall her song
the scent of her hands
though her wild hair scratches my dreams
at night. return to me, oh Lord of then
and now, my mother’s calling,
her young voice humming my name. (15)

Clifton’s poetry appeals to me for several reasons. The main reason is that she maintains a distinct cross-generational dialogue in her work. In her poems we see Clifton’s speaker span time and space as she addresses both long dead relatives and her children, with poetry as the conduit for linking the experiences of these generations with those of one another and with her own. In this poem Clifton brings not only the memory of the mother to life, but also her mother’s tactile body, which is similar to the speaker’s own. Descriptions such as “the huge pillow of her breasts” and “her wild hair” help to ground the mother in the present of the speaker’s memory. This poem is not intended to resurrect the mother, but rather is a poem intended to showcase the

experience of the speaker and to give her the opportunity to reflect on her own life, since she is, “...almost the dead woman’s age times two” (8). I have tried to make a similar move in my poem “Mama at Thirty,” but I also take the additional step of connecting my experience with my own mother with my experience having a daughter:

Halfway between birth and now she drove east
put fifteen hundred miles between us, and my father
moved us into a shabby white

house with an empty kitchen, a basement, full of rats.
We heard them in the night, their scrapping
and squeaks, while Mama worked downtown

hustling her tables on the night shift. She and my sister
battled daily over nothing it seemed
and afterward my sister would slam our bedroom door

blasting music to drown my cries. I’d crawl in bed
with Mama, and she would curl her body around
my toddler self, hand on my stomach, her words

be still now humming in my ears.
She was thirty and I was two. Now I have slipped, into her
skin as my daughter calls in the night, saying cuddle me

and I wrap my limbs, around hers, pull
her close until her chest is tucked, against mine.
Some days there is space for nothing else but this:

the mother in me alone, with her child in the dark.
This is a space too small for fathers, or the slam
of doors echoing, through a windy old house.

There is only the deepening of our bodies
into breath, and the slackening
of the cord between us that has grown

ever more taut as our separate lives
pull us apart. Tonight the wind
whispers and the cicadas hum, the trees vibrate

with the terrible and beautiful weight of generations
and I can feel the dark sky heavy above the house

pregnant with rain, coming down on us all.

My purpose in making a cross-generational leap as I do in “Mama at Thirty” is to try to represent the multi-layered nature of experience and memory. My speaker is directly situated between her mother and her daughter, and for that reason the intimate moments she relates would seem incomplete if one of the participants in the narrative were missing. As in Clifton’s poem, “Mama at Thirty” contains a first person speaker who defines herself in relation to her mother. However, my poem takes the legacy of the mother-daughter dynamic a step further by having it stretch across three generations. The first half of the poem is concerned with the telling of the story of the speaker’s mother, and with explaining that woman’s own complicated relationships with her daughters. The second half of the poem shifts to focus on the speaker and her relationship with her own daughter, and we see the ways their dynamic mirrors that of the speaker and her own mother:

I’d crawl in bed
with Mama, and she would curl her body around
my toddler self, hand on my stomach, her words

be still now humming in my ears.
She was thirty and I was two. Now I have slipped, into her
skin as my daughter calls in the night, saying cuddle me

and I wrap my limbs, around hers, pull
her close until her chest is tucked, against mine. (10-17)

The relationships further echo one another because of the absence of the father figures, the literal physical absence of the speaker’s father and her implied desire for the absence of her daughter’s father. She says, “This is a space too small for fathers” (20), and though she does not go into further detail, we are lead to believe that this space is too small for fathers because something special and sacred exists in the mother-daughter dynamic.

Although human fathers are likewise excluded from Clifton’s “oh antic God,” the poem

is crafted as a sort of invocation of an “antic God,” whose gender is never given. The speaker directly addresses this God, asking that the lost mother be returned to her. What is not clear, however, is whether or not the God and the mother are actually intended to be seen as two separate entities. Clifton uses the term “God,” but that is undercut by the term “antic,” which suggests an element of the bizarre or grotesque. Clifton then reinforces this idea by describing the mother’s body, “the huge pillow of her breasts” (5), and “her wild hair” (11), which echo classical images of a goddess figure and which are in direct conflict with the stereotype of a dominant male god-figure.

The fact that she does not just narrate her story, but instead uses a direct address gives us some important clues about this speaker and her relationship to her mother. We know for one that the mother is dead. When the speaker tells us that she is, “...almost the dead woman’s age times two” (8) we are left with an understanding that she is all that her mother was, or at least encompasses many of her qualities, and has surpassed or doubled her. The speaker’s mother has already named her, but it is now up to the speaker to continue to define herself. Thus we gain an understanding of the importance of the mother in the speaker’s life and can directly see her influence. The speaker also works toward defining herself by the grief she experiences over the loss of her mother. The weight of her grief is especially noticeable in the second half of the poem when she says, “return to me, oh Lord of then/ and now, my mother’s calling, /her young voice humming my name” (12-14). In these lines her longing is a visceral thing, cluing us into both her grief over her mother and her nostalgia for her youth and all that time represents.

In “Mama at Thirty” the voice of the speaker is depicted with a decidedly different tone. This speaker appears to overtly speak, but does not at the same time. In other words she relates the events to the reader, but does not use the poem as an opportunity to speak for herself, or to

make a pronouncement about the condition of her person. Instead our understanding of this speaker comes from her interactions with others, in this case her mother and daughter. She does not tell us, but we understand when she says, “I wrap my limbs, around hers, pull/ her close until her chest is tucked, against mine” (16-17), that she is repeating a ritual learned from her mother meant to impart a feeling of security. By the second to last stanza, however, this speaker moves away from the action of the poem to meditate upon this experience of finding herself falling into her mother’s skin. She says:

Tonight the wind
whispers and the cicadas hum, the trees vibrate

with the terrible and beautiful weight of generations
and I can feel the dark sky heavy above the house
pregnant with rain, coming down on us all. (26-30)

It is as if the environment itself is echoing her understanding of the cyclical nature of the mother-daughter bond.

Both Clifton’s poem and mine attempt to construct what Nancy Schnog calls an “emotional landscape” that maps the internal female world. Schnog values the use of sentiment in work by women because it helps to “ameliorate women’s psychological needs” by providing a model for mother-daughter and woman-woman relationships (Schnog 25). The connection between a mother and daughter is complex and emotionally charged. It is also rife with cultural and historical precedents that all work to inform our understanding of this bond. When we read a poem that contains a mother and daughter we are apt to think of literary figures such as Persephone and Demeter, and of strong emotion running the gamut from love to hate. A poet might be inclined to rely on one of the stereotypical situations, but this approach does not produce particularly dynamic verse. It is clear that Clifton’s speaker misses her mother, and we are not surprised by that emotion. What surprises us, however, is the diction of her speaker and

the audience for the poem. Although “oh antic God” is clearly a poem to celebrate the life of a dead loved one, it is not a traditional ode. Instead, by addressing the “antic God” this poem becomes something more of a mythical evocation. The term “antic God” is not one we traditionally equate with the Judeo-Christian theology that is predominant in American culture and thus influences our understanding and expectations of the world. This speaker likewise does more than meditate upon feelings of loss or suffering. Instead she directly addresses the “antic God” in a tone that implies action, not lamentation.

In “Mama at Thirty” I attempt to subvert the traditional emotions connected with scenes of mothers and daughters in a few different ways. First, I am careful never to use emotional words such as “love” or “hate.” To do so would mean putting too simple a label on a rather complex dynamic. Secondly, by crafting a poem that spans generations, I am able to emphasize the intensity of the emotion between mother and daughter and the importance of the space they occupy together without having to state it implicitly. Third, by depicting an everyday gesture directly and concretely, and by showing this gesture without providing commentary about it, I am able to lay a groundwork which gives the reader a sense of the authentic, rather than exaggerated emotion present in these relationships. Finally, at the end of the poem I am able to re-emphasize the emotion of the relationship without being too overt because I shift the focus of the poem away from the speaker/mother/daughter to the natural world. Consequently, in the last line when the speaker says, “coming down on us all” (30) the “us” is no longer just the speaker/mother/daughter, but is also any possible reader who may also have experienced “the terrible and beautiful weight of generations” (28), in a variety of contexts.

“The Body”

When a woman writes about her body, she is not writing to please every reader. Rather, she is writing for herself. The fact she is writing for herself is especially true when the poem speaks in specifics rather than generalities, or when it focuses on those parts of the body or subjects that are not fit for discussion in polite society. It is important for a woman to write about her body because to do so is to gain ownership over it by the act of self-naming and self-defining. Audre Lorde reminds us, in an interview published in 1980, that, “If we don’t name ourselves, we are nothing.” She says, “I can’t depend on the world to name me kindly because it never will. If the world defines you it will define you to your disadvantage” (19). Defining one’s body through poetry is a bold, but necessary act because we live in a society which dictates that a woman feel shame over her own body and its natural functions.

Adrienne Rich champions writing about the body as a source of transformative power for the poet. In *Of Woman Born* she says, “In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies...we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence” (62). Poems that women write about their bodies, or the female body in general, cover a variety of topics. Some focus on the victimization and vulnerability of the body, others bemoan or embrace its changes, while still others champion and celebrate its strength. Sharon Olds’s poem “Language of the Brag,” falls into the latter category. In this poem she puts herself into conversation with Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, two of the biggest “brags” from the American poetry canon. At first glance this poem is big on the page, with its long lines occasionally punctuated by short statements. By playing with the appearance of her poem Olds is able to immediately evoke Whitman and Ginsberg who both write expansive, long-lined verse. “The Language of the Brag” is undoubtedly about Olds’s body, but unlike some of her more intimately-minded poems, this one is broader in its scope and almost masculine in its

language:

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms
and my straight posture and quick electric muscles
to achieve something at the center of a crowd,
the blade piercing the bark deep,
the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.
I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,
some heroism, some American achievement
beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,
magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot
and watched the boys play. (44)

The sounds in the opening lines are sharp and hard, with consonant-heavy words like “accurate” (2), “electric” (3), and “bark” (5) evoking the image of a sharp knife cutting into the tree. These are not words that make a reader think of softness; there is no tenderness here. As the poem continues Olds goes on to catalog other traditionally masculine achievements she once hoped to master. She speaks of wanting an “epic use” (7) for her “excellent body” (7), and of wanting “heroism” (8). At the end of the third stanza the tone of the poem begins to shift from a poem about past wants to one about achievement:

I have dragged around
my belly big with cowardice and safety,
my stool black with iron pills,
my huge breasts oozing mucus,
my legs swelling, my hands swelling,
my face swelling and darkening, my hair
falling out, my inner sex
stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife.
I have lain down. (13-21)

Initially this fourth stanza seems almost like a catalog of Olds’ shame at the fact that she has a feminine body that can be subjected to these changes against her will. The language here is noticeably different from the sharp, confident sounds of the preceding stanza. Words like “oozing” (16), “swelling” (17), and “cowardice” (14) all have soft sounds, such as the long “o”

sounds in “oozing” and “cowardice,” and are positioned within the stanza so that they lead up to the line, “stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife” (20), which is followed by “I have lain down” (21), leaving readers with the impression that this body has been victimized. At this point Olds has established in readers the expectation that the female body is somehow worth less than the male body. In the next stanza she completely reverses her position on the body:

I have lain down and sweated and shaken
and passed blood and feces and water and
slowly alone in the center of a circle I have
passed the new person out
and they have lifted the new person free of the act
and wiped the new person free of that
language of blood like praise all over the body. (22-28)

In this fifth stanza we are given echoes of the start of the poem when the speaker says that she would like “to achieve something at the center of a crowd” (4). This stanza has a tone that is situated somewhere between that of the first and the fourth. There is some softer sounding language evident in words like “passed” (23) and “slowly” (24), but there is also harder language that we hear in words like “sweated” (22) and “blood” (23). It seems the conclusion Olds wants readers to draw here is that while birth is a wholly feminine act, there is nothing weak about it. Thus in the last stanza when she writes:

I have done this thing,
I and the other women this exceptional
act with the exceptional heroic body
this giving birth (30-33)

we are left with the impression that she and her female body are powerful in a way Whitman and Ginsberg could never understand.

After reading Olds’ poem I began to think about my own birth experience, and ended up writing a poem called “Labor” which is also concerned with the power and strength of the female body:

When she was born, and they took her across the room
to measure the depth and breadth of her tiny frame,
my work, was not quite done. To push
after thirty-six hours of bending, prone
to the tightness of muscle and skin that rippled and ached, left my body
ready to buckle in on itself.
Such work as this, is not
what they teach you, in stories
where the baby, slippery and new, as the climax
of a good book, marks the denouement.
I think of old time Inuit women hiking
onto the tundra, in the deep
of their labors, perhaps lingering
to kneel, on a small hill, pausing between contractions
to watch for bears. I think
of the blood smell of labor drifting
over the fields of blueberries,
and the mother bear stopping, to push out
her tongue, to taste the breeze. No one
knows, what the body remembers
when labor has run its course
and the sharp keening of your infant, echoing in the deep
of arctic chill, blocks out all sounds,
urging you, toward the warmth of home.
To stop then, to pause and push
the bloody lotus out of the womb
pressing again, and again, with the hard heel
of your hand into the triple ache, of hunger
and pain and fear. How can we not call that work?

I initially grounded this poem in my own experience, but then turn it outwards in an attempt to make connections with the larger world. While I value the work done by Olds in “Language of the Brag,” I did not feel it necessary to exactly mimic her handling of this subject exactly (for example our tones are very different). However, I do appreciate and try to emulate the way she creates a rhetorical appeal to argue that the physical act of labor is an undervalued and underestimated activity. I also share her goals of celebrating the female body and of taking ownership over one’s personal labor experience.

It is universally acknowledged that birth is an emotional event, but we tend to associate it

with the tender love a mother feels for her child after suffering through the ordeal of labor. It is almost as if we expect the mother to be cowed by the experience, but Olds's narrator in "Language of the Brag" is proud of what she has achieved. In this way she is able to dwell upon the emotional nature of birth without crossing the line into sentimentality. She also subverts our expectations by presenting ideas and images that may be contrary to those we imagine a birth poem containing. We might expect the infant, and all of the emotions we associate with meeting one's child for the first time, to be a main focus of the poem, but the infant is in fact present only in the periphery of the narrative. We know she is born during the course of the poem, but she is by no means a central figure, and she does not necessarily define the narrator. By directing our attention away from the infant Olds is able to skirt around our normative cultural associations, and instead redirect our focus to the power of the act itself and to the speaker as actor. The center of this poem is the speaker's triumphant body, which has done this "exceptional/ act" (31-32). While this is a poem that clearly champions women, motherhood, and birth, it is hardly drowning in sentiment, and for good reason: No one has ever accused Whitman or Ginsberg of using emotion to excess in their poems, no matter their topic or what kind of language they used, and if Olds wishes to compete with them, she must play on the same field so to speak. It is clear from this poem that Olds is aware of a poetic standard to which her work is being compared, yet she does not choose to imitate them exactly. Instead she walks a line in this poem between what is conventionally accepted from a formal standpoint and her desire to write about issues that are important to her as a woman.

In American culture we often associate childbirth with emotions such as happiness or intense love. Although it is true that women do feel those things after giving birth, I felt that falling back on a clichéd expectation would cheapen the effect of my poem on the reader. I also

did not want to focus just on my own experience because I consider the act of giving birth to be an important, yet undervalued act. In “Labor” I consciously try to subvert the reader’s emotional expectations in several ways. First, like Olds I consciously choose to redirect the focus of my poem from the infant and back to the act itself. Although I initially ground the poem in my own labor, I do not dwell on the emotional side of that experience, choosing instead to focus on the physicality of the moment:

When she was born, and they took her across the room
to measure the depth and breadth of her tiny frame,
my work, was not quite done. To push
after thirty-six hours of bending, prone
to the tightness of muscle and skin that rippled and ached, left my body
ready to buckle in on itself.
Such work as this, is not
what they teach you, in stories
where the baby, slippery and new, as the climax
of a good book, marks the denouement. (1-10)

From the beginning of the poem the reader immediately understands that this is a poem about birth. The opening words, “When she was born” (1) suggest that it will be a poem about the love of a mother for her daughter, but I am able to subvert that expectation and any associated emotions by redirecting the reader’s attention back to the mother’s body and the act of labor. Because the image of a body, “ready to buckle in on itself” (6) is not something we commonly associate with the clichéd image of a mother with her newborn, I am able to catch the reader emotionally off-guard by subverting their expectations.

A second way I work against the sentimental impulse is by extending the poem out from the telling of a private moment to a meditation on a larger scale. I do this by bringing in the concept of labor as it was practiced in a time, place, and culture very different from my own:

I think of old time Inuit women hiking
onto the tundra, in the deep
of their labors, perhaps lingering

to kneel, on a small hill, pausing between contractions
to watch for bears. (11-15)

This introduction of a new perspective is an effective means of working against the cultural associations an American reader might make with labor or the presence of an infant in a poem. I do not mean to say that an Inuit person might not associate the image of an infant with love, but rather that for the average American reader the ancient Inuit practice of sending a woman out on the tundra to give birth alone is foreign enough to cause them to think critically rather than instinctively about the subject of my poem.

From this image, I then expand to the animal world, by introducing the image of the sow bear who exists as both another mother and a potential threat. The bear represents the real life threat an ancient Inuit woman might have encountered and represents as well the shadow of death that haunts all birthing rooms around the world. Although in our age of modern technology we do not necessarily care to think of death and birth as existing on the same plane, women die in labor every day. The presence and image of death is unexpected and also helps our reliance on stereotypical emotional reactions. Finally, I shift the tone near the end of the poem so that the language becomes more of an address to the reader, revealing the rhetorical purpose of my poem.

“Anger/Violence/Politics”

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf writes: “It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman...for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized” (104). Given the content of the rest of Woolf’s treatise, I have a hard time believing that she suggests that women avoid speaking consciously about issues they find important. On the contrary, I think she reminds us of the potential pitfalls for a woman who chooses to use the

printed page as a pulpit. We are now nearly 90 years removed from the time when Woolf was writing, and yet some things have not changed for the female poet. Any woman who writes verse that is deliberately intended to make commentary about social issues or politics runs the risk of having her work ignored, cast aside, or undervalued. Nevertheless, this kind of work is some of the most important being done by contemporary women because of the mere fact they are embracing and utilizing the power that can be exercised with the pen, and because they are saying what *needs* to be said. Audre Lorde speaks about the importance and uses of anger in her essay “Uses of Anger”:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppression, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives. (127)

Anger is not only a source of energy within women, it is also a powerful force that can be used to enact change on a personal, national, and global scale

Some women choose to use their poems to catalog horrors and injustices or to give a voice to victims. This type of poem may also have political overtones, touting opinions that may not be especially popular with mainstream readers. One such poem is Susan Griffin’s “An Answer to a Man’s Question, ‘What Can I do About Women’s Liberation?’”:

Wear a dress.
Wear a dress that you made yourself, or bought in a dress store.
Wear a dress and underneath the dress wear elastic, around your hips, and underneath your nipples.

Wear a dress and underneath the dress wear a sanitary napkin.
Wear a dress and wear sling-back, high heeled shoes.
Wear a dress, with elastic and a sanitary napkin underneath, and sling-back shoes
on your feet and walk down Telegraph Avenue.
Wear a dress, with elastic and a sanitary napkin and sling-back shoes on
Telegraph Avenue and try to run. (Griffin 363)

As the title suggests, the speaker of this poem is addressing an unnamed man who has asked what he should do about women's liberation. Although the man's question may have been innocent, it is naïve, which infuriates the speaker. We can surmise that the man is under the impression that he can just complete some simple task and help to make leaps toward equalizing the genders. What he fails to realize is that the rampant gender inequalities that fuel the women's liberation movement are not just about personal choices; they are in fact symptomatic of a deeper, viral sort of problem by which every part and everything in a woman's life is designed to potentially place her in a position of inequality.

The poem opens with the simple line, "Wear a dress" (1), which may seem like a mundane enough request, but as the poem progresses we witness all of the problems that arise with dress-wearing: "Wear a dress, with elastic and a sanitary napkin and sling-back shoes on Telegraph/ Avenue and try to run" (9-10). In subsequent stanzas our speaker instructs the unnamed man to "Find a man" (11) and "Find a job" (22). Like wearing a dress these activities seem simple enough, but in reality they are rife with pitfalls to be avoided. You must find a nice man and attempt to keep him, but you must keep your dress on in the process. You should interview for a job, but if you want to keep it you must convince your boss that you will not get pregnant. Griffin's poem may be presented under the guise of a tongue-in-cheek response to a seemingly simple question, but we should not be fooled by that exterior. Each of the basic suggestions she makes echo complicated and unspoken rules that govern the lives of women. Griffin also speaks to the double standard between the lives of men and women. A man would

not have to convince a potential boss that he will not have children, nor is he expected to wear impractical and uncomfortable outfits like dresses. Griffin does not need to come right out and make this comparison; she only needs to remind us of the secret lives of women because we see the truth of inequality every day.

I also use my poetry as an opportunity to meditate and speak upon political and social issues I find important. One of my poems in which I focus on women's reproductive rights is called "Capitol Hill":

today the fight comes down to reproduction and the voices of women
the rustle of 8 billion bodies
elbowing for space. I envy the elephant who can shut her womb down, any
time she chooses. We are not so carefully
designed our bodies do not hear, the echo of the empty bank
vault or pay heed to bills, arriving without end.
I read how women interned in concentration camps still bled
monthly until their bodies were almost starved.
We are taught about killings and torture, but somehow the image of blood
running unchecked, down thin and dirty thighs
feels especially cruel. Not the wasted potential life but the animal savagery
of nature pressing its agenda with a blind eye.
There are people in this country just as blind calling every fetus a miracle
I am
here to tell you, there is no truth
to that claim or the one that pretends a woman is not a woman without
a child or that any woman who would choose to exercise
choice about what grows or does not grow, in her womb
is somehow wrong. I am eight
months pregnant, while nursing a toddler and every day my body
becomes a little more hollow. Making milk
while growing, a fetus means, my own body, is pulling calcium from my bones
for the good of two other bodies
who in fairness I have chosen to have but what if
I had not made that choice
did not, have the power to choose and what I felt, after
my labor, that long and tortuous cramping
one body suffers to expel another, what I felt when seeing
the person I had endured it all for, what if it was not love
but something more akin to anger hatred and grief which you
cannot call a myth because
in the last six months, at least twenty-three

women have thrown, their newborns into dumpsters.
I am not talking about China or India or some place you might call
third world.
I mean 2012 and the girls of small
town and big city America giving birth on the toilet and trying
to flush their babies for reasons, I cannot begin
to explain except to say we live in a culture where public faces and private
lives do not intersect where comprehensive learning
must be some person's idea of the devil incarnate. But we
have to ask ourselves, who is suffering
here and who, is setting up the laws that put women into
a position where killing becomes, the best and only
option.

My poem is similar to Griffin's in that it also focuses on inequality between women and men. Like Griffin's poem, mine does not need to overtly explain the man's point of view because readers know, without being told, the way the dominant gender lives. They know, for instance, that a disproportionate majority of lawmakers in Washington are male and that these men have a great deal of control over policy regarding women's reproductive rights. I also emulate the way that Griffin focuses upon revealing the private lives of women as a way to make her case. The average man is familiar with the image of a woman in a dress, and they might have a rough understanding of the problems that come with having to endure cutting "elastic" (3) and the "sanitary napkin" (5), but these latter elements of a woman's life are tiresome and ugly, and are not considered appropriate for public display. They are kept hidden beneath the dress. The average man would likewise have some concept of pregnancy, but it is likely in the sense of having knowledge that the baby grows inside the woman and then one day comes out. What they choose not to discuss openly is the physical havoc pregnancy and labor wreck on a woman's body, and the fact that while most women have a fairly similar labor experience, within a range of normal, there are many social and cultural factors that influence a woman's social capital once she has given birth. A wife is regarded one way, while an unwed teenage girl is thought of in an

entirely different light.

One main issue that separates our two poems is the way we each handle sentiment. Griffin's speaker takes a tongue in cheek tone when responding to the man's question. This is true for much of the poem, even as a mundane comment like "Find a job" (11) builds up over the stanza almost to the point of absurdity. But still we want to laugh, almost. Griffin maintains this strategy until the end of the poem when the speaker says:

Borrow a child and stay in the house all day with the child, or go to the public park with the child, and take the child to the welfare office and cry and say your man left you and be humble and wear you dress and your smile, don't talk back, keep your dress on, cook more nice dinners, stay away from Telegraph Avenue, and still, you wouldn't know the half of it, not in a million years. (28-34)

We know in this moment that she is no longer joking, that these lines are striking to the heart of the situation in which many women find themselves. We may laugh as the poem unfolds, perhaps imagining the unnamed man trying to run down Telegraph Ave in a dress, but it is a bitter sort of humor because it is based in truth. Griffin is successful at incorporating sentiment in this poem because the layered nature of the emotion expressed therein. We expect her to be angry because she is a woman supposedly having a "rant," but she disarms us with her humor, effectively undercutting our stereotypes about a woman who takes a stance on a political issue. The undercurrent of anger which shows itself by the end of the poem helps to lend authenticity to Griffin's speaker because she reminds us that women's liberation is a complex and difficult problem with no easy solution.

My poem handles sentiment a bit differently. A large part of the difference lies with the fact that while Griffin's poem addresses another person, while mine is in first person. The first person point of view is always tricky because no matter how much we are told to imagine that the speaker of the poem is a character rather than the author, the voice of that speaker is very

often associated with the author herself. Herein lies a potential problem with the use of sentiment. We live in a culture in which women are expected to complain, and where that complaining is not viewed in a particularly favorable light. Women who complain are often called “shrews or “nags,” regardless of the seriousness or importance of their message. So, if I write a poem in the first person that makes any kind of complaint I run the risk of my work being categorized as just another woman running her mouth rather than as an educated person making an informed debate. My problem is further compounded by the fact that I make free use of images that I know will elicit a visceral response in the reader. I know that images such as women in concentration camps and babies thrown into dumpsters will cause readers to feel emotions such as disgust and sadness.

However, I do not make these choices casually. Although I believe that sentiment must be used with finesse in poetry if it is to be accepted by contemporary readers, I also believe there has to be a place in poetry for the telling of truths. I know too that some poems are crafted with the intention of making a statement, and that in some cases the statement must come before craft. Prioritizing message over basic craft does not mean that I disregard surface or rhythmic issues, but it does mean that I can imagine a situation in which shock will make a greater impact than finesse. For me, a politically driven poem like “Capitol Hill” is one of those instances. I think it is important to remember what Woolf says near the conclusion of *A Room of One’s Own*:

So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to

be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison. (110)

Woolf speaks here of the importance of writing primarily for oneself, rather than allowing the content or style of a work to be dictated by some outside force or by adhering to conventions and rules that may not adequately apply to the life of the author. Her sentiments are echoed by Lorde in “Uses of Anger” who writes: “...anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies” (127). Woolf and Lorde remind us that if we are to truly write for ourselves we must be open to writing what we need to write, even if that topic is gruesome or ugly.

“The Erotic Woman”

In her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” Audre Lorde defines the erotic as, “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). She goes on to clarify the term, writing, “On one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women, have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence” (53). What Lorde says here is that women have long been asked to change, deny, or cover-up their true natures. Lorde’s essay on the erotic is significant for several reasons, but perhaps most importantly because she addresses a topic that has been made taboo, but should not be: the innate emotional power of women.

When we consider the erotic in poetry we might think first about the word “sex.” While that term is partially correct, it does not fully encompass the erotic to which Lorde refers. She is speaking of sex, but also of the innate power within women that fuels love, lust, desire, and

creativity. In some ways female anger or aggression, as presented in poems of protest, and the female erotic are two sides of the same coin. Both are ways in which female writers have been and may be discredited. Ostriker reminds us: “Where female aggression has been twisted into manipulateness, female ardor has been chained to submissiveness. To love, for a woman, has meant to yield, to ‘give herself’” (165). The image of the submissive woman in love is a stereotype of mainstream culture that is not universally true. Many female poets who write about this topic present a different, more powerful and assertive image of female love. One poem is “Seduction” by Nikki Giovanni:

one day
you gonna walk in this house
and i'm gonna have on a long African
gown
you'll sit down and say “The Black...”
and i'm gonna take one arm out
then you—not noticing me at all—will say “What about
this brother...”
and i'm going to be slipping it over my head
and you'll rap on about “The revolution...”
while I rest your hand against my stomach
you'll go on—as you always do—saying
“I just can't dig...” (354)

“Seduction” works in several ways to counteract the stereotypes connected with women and love. The speaker in this poem is far from submissive. On the contrary, she is the one to initiate the sexual activity, while the “you” is portrayed as disconnected from the moment. Conversely the speaker is portrayed as highly connected to both the moment and the desires of her own body. Giovanni juxtaposes the “you’s” intellectualism with the woman’s deeper erotic knowledge. She is a woman who knows what she wants and acts accordingly. While the “you” speaks of “The revolution” (10) and asks of the speaker’s actions are “counterrevolutionary” (26), which signals that he is clearly engrossed in the confines of larger society, the speaker acts out of

instinct, ironically staging her own revolution against the expectations society places upon women. She is not submissive; she is erotic.

A poem of mine in which I also explore the female erotic is “Tear My Stillhouse Down”:

The press of leg against knee
brings me back to my body call it longing
my eyes on the flat of your wrist
I want to feel the scrape of it against my thigh
I imagine the women you date the fullness of their lips
The shape of their ear lobes your long fingers around their calves
This is not a love poem I have been in love

am in the hollow of love
where you hear your own breath echo
against canyon walls again and again

I do not want you in the night when my body folds
under the weight of day I want wide afternoon
when we can languish together in midday light
sinews and muscles sliding smooth against bone
the shimmering edges of touch making us loose in our skin

My throat is raw from pushing desire back down
I want it to be the grey-green color of bile
but the heat on my skin

names it the crimson of July tomatoes
picked at their peak

As in Giovanni’s poem, my poem contains a female speaker who addresses an unnamed “you.” My poem is also similar to Giovanni’s in that my speaker is more concerned with her erotic impulses than with being stuck in her own head. With the first lines, “The press of leg against knee/ brings me back to my body” (1-2), we are immediately grounded in the physical body and are invited to focus on its sensations. One thing that differentiates my poem from Giovanni’s is that while her poem remains centered on the physical instance of the speaker touching the “you” throughout the entirety of the poem, mine presents the erotic impulses of the speaker from a variety of angles. After we are initially grounded in the physical sensations of the speaker with

that, “press of leg against knee” (1), she turns her gaze to the body of the “you,” her “...eyes on the flat of your wrist” (3), as she imagines the “you” touching her body or the bodies of other women. My poem then diverges from Giovanni’s again as the speaker breaks the fourth wall by addressing the reader in an effort to help classify the impulses behind this work. She says:

This is not a love poem I have been in love
am in the hollow of love
where you hear your own breath echo
against canyon walls again and again (7-10)

She then turns her focus back to the “you,” as she lays out her plans for what she imagines them doing together. Finally, she turns from the “you” again and takes a more meditative tone which offers some insight into the more subtle and private ways in which erotic desire has affected her body. At the close of the poem she says:

My throat is raw from pushing desire back down
I want it to be the grey-green color of bile
but the heat on my skin

names it the crimson of July tomatoes
picked at their peak (16-20)

It is in these last stanzas that we truly understand the impact of the erotic on the speaker. The power of it has fueled her desire for an unnamed “you” she cannot possess. Although she would like to manipulate and intellectualize it, the desire is a force beyond her control.

The terms “erotic” and “sentiment” are neither identical nor, mutually exclusive. Instead their relationship can be seen as something needing both, the erotic, being a quality that exists within women, and sentiment, being a means for accessing, identifying with, and expressing that quality. When we consider Giovanni’s and my poem, we can see sentiment being utilized in different ways. From the title we expect Giovanni’s poem to be about a woman who is seduced by a man. She subverts our expectations immediately by changing that dynamic. Rather than

being acted upon, the speaker is the actor in this scenario. Giovanni likewise goes against expectations because her speaker never actually speaks to the “you.” There is no discussion of emotions or relationships or the repercussions of choices; she is the embodiment of action. Nevertheless, emotion is present in and fuels these lines.

The emotion in “Tear My Stillhouse Down” is more blatant than in Giovanni’s poem, but also succeeds in being surprising. At the beginning of the poem when the speaker addresses the “you” and begins to catalog her desire, we expect that she is writing about desire bound by love. Midway through the poem when she breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience we learn two important things about this speaker. First, she tells us that “This is not a love poem” (7), and second we are given a glimpse at her nature which reveals that she does not match the stereotype of a woman engulfed by love. On the contrary we learn that she unapologetically desires to control the situation. As the poem progresses we also learn that while she has attempted to intellectualize the situation and has been “pushing desire back down” (16) she has not succeeded in escaping its power. The conclusion she draws by the end of the poem is that her mere will is not more powerful than her own erotic impulse. What sets this poem apart from a standard love poem is the speaker’s ability to acknowledge and work with both in intellectual and her erotic impulses. By doing so she is able to become a “whole” person rather than a stereotypical woman who chooses to define herself in relation to her lover’s assessment of her.

Sentiment and Formal Concerns

In his essay “On Listening and Making” which appears in the critical text *Twentieth Century Pleasures* Robert Hass makes a case, at the level of the line, for the power of poetry. Hass teaches us that by paying specific attention to the rhythm created by the stresses of the language within a poem the poet is able to manipulate the tension within the piece. He also likens manipulation of rhythm to power. Considering rhythm in the context of the history of shamanism

around the world he writes:

...it became clear that shamanism was usually a fully developed, male-dominated, politically central evolution of spirit possession; and that, in the harshly repressed lives of women in most primitive societies, new songs, chants, visions and psychic experiences keep welling up into cults which have their force because they are outside the entrenched means of vision. Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is a power. And power is political. That is why rhythm is always revolutionary ground. It is always the place where the organic rises to abolish the mechanical and where energy announces the abolition of tradition. (Hass 107-108)

If we take Hass's words literally, as I think he intended, we understand that for a poet to succeed in making lasting and powerful verse, verse that can stand on its own, even if it contradicts tradition, the poet must learn to control the rhythm of the line. Sentiment is one of those poetic qualities that twentieth century tradition does not always embrace. For that reason I believe it is essential for any poet who wishes to employ it (sentiment) to do so from a solid formal position. This does not mean that the poet must work within the confines of traditional forms (sonnets, etc.), but rather that the poet must learn to control the language and to write poems that are grounded in craft instead of being centered only on emotion. A poet who utilizes sentiment, but fails to focus adequately on craft is far more likely to produce a sentimental poem.

I am teaching myself to find a balance between craft and sentiment by looking to poets who both master tension and rhythm, but who are also able to take a personal topic and expand it out to make connections with a larger world. For example my poem "Ars Poetica #46" is directly

influenced by Adam Zagajewski's "The Greenhouse":

In a small black town, your town,
where even trains linger unwilling,
anxious to be on their way,
in a park, defying soot and shadows,
a gray building stands lined with mother-of-pearl.
Forget the snow, the frost's repeated blows;
inside you're greeted by a damp anthology of breezes
and the enigmatic whispers of vast leaves
coiled like lazy snakes. Even an Egyptologist
couldn't make them out.
Forget the sadness of dark stadiums and streets,
the weight of thwarted Sundays.
Accept the warm breath wafting from the plants.
The gentle scent of faded lightning
engulfs you, beckoning you on.
Perhaps you see the rusty sails of ships at port,
islands snared in rosy mist, crumbling temples' towers;
you glimpse what you've lost, what never was,
and people with lives
like your own.
Suddenly you see the world lit differently,
other people's doors swing open for a moment,
you read their hidden thoughts, their holidays don't hurt,
their happiness is less opaque, their faces
almost beautiful.
Lose yourself, go blind from ecstasy,
forgetting everything, and then perhaps
a deeper memory, a deeper recognition will return,
and you'll hear yourself saying: I don't know how—
the palm trees opened up my greedy heart.

At the beginning of this poem we find ourselves, "In a small black town, your town" (1) and as the poem unfolds, the continued use of second person pulls the reader into the action of the lines so that the reader becomes the "you." Thus the narrator moves us along through the lines as if we are the ones stepping out of "...the frost's repeated blows" (6) and into "...a damp anthology of breezes" (7). This use of second person makes the reader an intimate player who emotionally engages with the action of the poem. Halfway through, at the start of the fourth stanza, the focus begins to shift from the "you" observing the environment to the interior imaginings of the "you"

which stretch far beyond the immediate geographic location.

There are no weak or misplaced words in Zagajewski's poem. Each line functions individually, but also builds on the next leading up to the final stanza. We move from his song-like description of the greenhouse and life therein to his exclamation in the final stanza of, "Lose yourself, go blind from ecstasy,/ forgetting everything, and then perhaps/ a deeper memory, a deeper recognition will return" (26-28), and thus this poem reveals itself to be a kind of prayer or incantation. While I do not emulate the thematic concerns of Zagajewski's poem, I am very interested in his use of second person, in the way the poem moves down the page, and how he expands outside of the intimacy of a moment. "Ars Poetica #46":

Evening is drawing to a close, and the baby who cannot
yet crawl is shuffling herself across the quilt,

defying the need for sleep. It's 8, then 9, then 10 pm,
and sometimes you think you'd like to shock her,

just once or twice, on the fattest part of her thigh.
Enough to make her cry, but not wail,

to want comfort but not feel despair.
There are places where women throw girls like her

into dank wells, or slop buckets.
Where half the boys saved, will find themselves

in twenty years with an empty chair
at a table their wife would have filled had she not been fed to the pigs.

What is longing, if it cannot be the flurry of two
young robins tumbling mid-flight in a blur

of claw on wing? Even the wild turkey can flap itself
over the arch of the house roof

if two dogs, noses working on triple speed,
flush out his scent from the dark of the forest.

Perhaps it is enough to open a jar

of heart of palm and let those slender layers
slip over your tongue.

I am working toward several goals in this poem. First I want to portray an intimate moment, in this case the image of a mother trying to put her child to sleep. However, because I am aiming to utilize sentiment rather than being sentimental, I resist the easy opportunity (as suggested by this moment) to turn this into a poem about tenderness, or even about love between mother and child. Part of the way that I try to undercut the impulse toward tenderness is by introducing the unexpected and violent image of the mother shocking the child until she cries. I am not trying to show the mother as someone who is brutal; rather, I give voice to her frustrations. She is exhausted and desperately needs the baby to sleep. I also want this to be a poem that successfully juxtaposes intimacy with the outside world. In this case I move from a single mother and daughter to many unnamed mothers and daughters to the natural world, and then finally back to the “you.” I choose to move the poem in this way because I want to both make unexpected connections and to illustrate the universal feeling of longing, which I see this poem as ultimately being about. The mother longs for the child to sleep, the Chinese parents long for a boy child, and the robins long for territory. Longing is different from desire because longing is not only a want, but is as deeply rooted as a physical need. Longing is different too because it is sometimes expressed in a machiavellian inspired violence, that is at turns driven by need, desperation, or survival. Finally, I use the second person because I want my reader, like Zagajewski’s readers, to be drawn into the poem, and to feel as if they are somehow participating in it, even if the poem evokes emotions in connection to ideas, such as infanticide, with which the reader might not normally choose to engage. That act of forcing the reader to engage with uncomfortable or unfamiliar topics causes the reader to step outside their boundaries of comfort and to consider the

poem in a more serious light.

All Together Now

In their book *The Poet's Companion*, Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux address the role of the poet in larger society: “Good writing works from a simple premise: your experience is not yours alone, but in some sense a metaphor for everyone’s” (21). In this passage they are speaking both to an awareness a poet should bring to their individual writing, but also to the fact that every poet is a representative of a group (some more than one), and that poets bear the responsibility for validating the experiences of that group. Addonizio and Laux go on to explain that:

our daily experiences, our dreams and loves and passionate convictions about the world, won't be important to others...unless we're able to transform the raw material of our experiences into language that reaches beyond the self-involvement...so that what we know becomes shared knowledge, part of who we are as individuals, a culture, a species. (21)

Therein lies the challenge of incorporating sentiment into poetry. On one hand we owe it to ourselves and other women to access what Lorde calls a “power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge,” but we must also harness this power and use it to transform our experience into verse that goes beyond self-involvement to shared knowledge (Lorde 53).

These ideas about poetry as a shared experience are echoed by Edward Hirsch in his critical text *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. Hirsch writes, “Reading poetry is a way of connecting through the medium of language—more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with one another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation” (4-5). Here Hirsch speaks to a certain awareness of the reader and of fellow poets that all

accomplished poets have. What I mean is that an accomplished poet writes with the knowledge that a poem has the potential to fulfill multiple functions: to act as a potentially cathartic medium of self-inquiry, to make a statement about the human condition, and also to seek a connection with a reader who may find an echo of his or her own experience on the page. It is my goal to write poems that fulfill each of these functions and I believe use of sentiment to be one important way of achieving this goal.

In “Poetry, Belligerence, and Shame” Sarah Vap meditates on quandary of sentiment:

I don't see sentimental poems as a problem. But there is something around the discussion of sentimentality in poems that *does* deeply unsettle me. It doesn't have to do with sentimentality, or the risking of it. Rather it is the monitoring of sentimentality in poems, the naming of sentimentality in poems, the connection between this censorship and the belittling of certain life experiences and wisdoms, the diminishing of whole cultures or their ways of experiencing the world, the degrading or silencing or quieting or diminishing of whole subject matters or voices or ways in poetry simply by associating them with the term “sentimentality” that churns in my gut and gets up my fight. (74)

When we consider the presence of sentiment in poetry, the issue should not be the topic of a poem, whether that be babies, marriage, or love, but rather the way the poet balances sentiment with the other elements within the work. In my estimation, the most successful poems that incorporate sentiment come across as emotionally moving and authentic without falling back on stereotypes that are unrepresentative of the complex range of emotion and feeling normally associated with the human experience.

CHAPTER III
Mirror in the Dark: Poems

The Self

*

The Body

*

Anger/Violence/Politics

*

The Erotic Woman

THE SELF

I Want To Live With Wild Things

I do not want the echo of asphalt on my knees
the smell of exhaust
in my hair

Turn the blare of the horn into bird call
the car into a small brown fox
darting across my path at 6 a.m.

I want dirt leaf rock
pounded into coal packed earth
I want branches overhead

the rattle of my body
loose in its skin all sinew muscle and blood

my ragged breath mixing
against the vibrato pulse of Tennessee hills

cicada buzz of late summer heat
the stripe of sweat cool
and slick down the spine of my shirt

I want my dogs tame as they are to run
with old wolf smells in their noses
I want them to feel
what it is

to be savage I want my girls

to remember it too: their delicate edges
forgotten the sunrise curve of their shoulders
brown and glossy lean and strong

I wish them the mouse corpse
on the trail the stinging nettle the blackberry
I want them to know the bloody scrape

of thorn on palm the price of sweet fruit.

Self Portrait 2

We're two hours into the night-time ritual
of pajamas and teeth and books.

She should be asleep, but here we are
again--victor and victimized--the self-

righteous and the bone-tired.

Some nights I cannot tell which coat will lay itself

over the breadth of my shoulders and down the curve of my spine.
Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" plays on the radio

and I can feel that old melancholy urge
settle back into my chest

the one that makes me think I should take up drinking
the one who calls up old loves like fog

rolling over a grave, the hazy edges
of their outlines, stark, gray against gray.

I want to be spectacular.
I want the chops to pull this all off-

the good and tidy children
the pen flowing seamlessly over the page.

This hen pecking of time is weighing me down.
We float on a river bottom,

she and I. It is 10:30 p.m.

A Ten Year Poem

You are a dog.
Not in the metaphorical sense
that a man is called a dog
when he cannot manage to keep his pants
closed against outside advances. You are a dog
in the pure meaning of four
furry legs and a tail
the gentle questioning press
of head into empty lap.
You are a dog and I am woman
with a husband and two children, who
take and suck and demand and cry and want
through the long night and into the early morning.
In my heart many rooms
are furnished
with the artifacts of need and desire.
Only you, dog
may walk freely through them all.
I have lain down with you
on a plywood floor in the middle of summer
to cry, without knowing
when crying would end.
I have walked you into the blackness
of 5 a.m when the winter
tears at clothing and bites even the tongue.
We have slipped face first down the hillside. It is not
for me to say what shape these days will take
or if we should turn our backs or faces to the sun.
But hour after hour, you have bound your solid
dog's body to mine, without complaint. You lift
your nose, into the damp, crisp air of springtime.
You let the animal in me love and be loved.

The Park at Night

I am walking alone through the park
at night under a waning moon.
The snow crunches beneath my feet
as I heel-toe my way south.

I am pushing away from the houses
of the neighborhood with their blaring TVs
and people blinking into darkened rooms.
Everywhere I look the prairie stretches

for miles and I would love to slip
into the landscape as smoothly
as the white-tailed jackrabbit
who has mastered the art of transformation.

Now he is there now he freezes
tucks black ears against white
body and becomes another figure bent
into edge of night curling his bones against the wind.

Hail Mary - 2 *Shadow*

For Josephine Doucet Cormier

I have been thinking
of you living
inside yourself
for too many years.

Laying down
once a month for your husband
when he would visit from town
folding two daughters

into early graves.
For years
you walked daily to mass
sun on your back

to light candles
and say the rosary.
I think God must love
persistence tears and bargains.

The bible is full
of women like you
tired of waiting for grace.
And so you wore black

promised to do so for the rest
of your life
if God
would allow the next child to live.

That baby you kept so carefully
dressed only in white
for the first terrifying year
of his life is our link.

I like to think of the beads
rolling over your hands
of the private council, you must have kept
with the patroness of impossible situations

Saint Rita
who I, invoke daily now, whose rose petal

emblem is tattooed, down my back like a river
washing me in prayer.

Swimming in Bray

August. We take the DART
south out of Dublin

following the coast. There is no sand, only
rocks littering the shore

It is 15 °C. We put
our towels down

strip and I think, *why am I
going swimming in Ireland?*

The sea is rough, and unforgiving.
You push out ahead of me

past the wave line, and bob
like a red-haired buoy.

I hear you, calling me
your voice lightness against waves.

Rocks hard on my soles, I step in.
Calf deep, the water presses

me back, knee deep, just
when I feel I can go no further

a wave rises, a wall
from the sea

and pushes, knocking me
over flipping in the water.

I sit on the beach, back to the wind
I watch you turn away

watch you glide
through the water like a seal.

Fuel

She did not know she would love wood:
the labor of hauling and chopping and stacking
resin smell weight of the maul in her hands
mottled pattern, birch, spruce
butter feel, of the blade sliding, perfect through a round
star speckled grain of seasoned wood against
the flat of the palm, her fingertip.
She shifts her body, balancing, sits on her step
listens to the landscape, inhaling the scents of forest and damp
she hears: *the wood say nothing*
demand nothing
Lifts her maul again over her head
lets the smooth bodied handle slide through her gloves
crushes out the silence. Elsewhere
black smoke rises, red coals burn low in the stove.
The world, buzzes and hums
waiting for her to return.

Another Father Poem

There is a poem unfolding
in my brain something about fathers

mine with his oversized thermos
that could hold

a block of ice bigger than my head
his hands black

down to the creases
from working on cars

or laying asphalt under
big prairie sun.

Or could it be fathers
in general? Another clichéd poem, women

write about love and longing
the shape a father makes

or leaves behind.
I am, walking through the park at night, alone.

I am, thinking about fathers
and about absences, how sometimes that lack

of a body can bring relief.
I am standing

on the highest point of the park, where I can see every
corner empty

of a human body and somewhere deep
in my gut I know to call this good.

I am thinking about my father
about the gap he left between seeing and knowing

how tonight, I am nothing but a woman
walking alone in the park

a woman, the world teaches, who should know better
than to go around asking for trouble like this.

Confessions 6

She tells me you were charming
6-foot and lean all broad
shoulders and strong
hands that could crack
a walnut or cradle a baby.

She says too that you
always came straight home
always handed over your check.
No one can say you
were not loyal

not a worker in the pure Stalin sense
ever willing to go the extra mile
ever ready to be fucked.

Calgary

Today there is ice fog on the river
and the echo of ravens quorking overhead.

I cannot see them but I know they are tumbling together
and apart on the updrafts, playing kings, and queens

of this scrub-brush park while the trees stand solitary
watch like soldiers surveying a field, leaning into

the burn and buckle of the winter gusts
rolling across Alberta prairie. Just now

the cold is tucking itself heavily into the corners of the prairie.
I can hear the highway's hum in the near distance.

I want to press my face against
the cold bark faces of the nameless trees

to inhale and exhale the song of resin and wood
to be alone, with the deep alone.

The Gray Tabby

Today when I watched our gray
tabby thread his way
across the room and felt him paw
my thighs demanding that I pick him up
I remembered how I pulled him
screaming from an airless
closet and he clung
to my chest the entire ride
never stopping to breathe as he sang
out kitten sorrows.

At home
he spent two weeks hidden
and sitting in the corner
only coaxed out
when my male cat
finally let him nurse.

I hated his supplication-desire and grief-
so easily tended.

A cliff diver may try
to calculate the arch of his trajectory
considering the pull and sway
of ocean current against rock.
He may test the wind
attempting to gauge
just how far it might push him
off his course.
I know now to call
these acts rituals of the sane.

Passion thinks not in numbers
but the grace of salt foam
floating delicately on wave cap
the weight of sorrow against the spine.

It is not the fall but the surfacing
that may kill you—
the deep muscle burn of thighs
careless slip of oxygen into blood
Bulge of eyes
arms reaching

ever up through the eternity
of pulse plunge and breath.

Forgive me
for days I wished
that cat dead when his cries were thorns
his voice a lashing the shores
of my already brittle heart.

When December Leaves You Longing

for spring, you can at least have
a hot shower at 1 pm the water
calling you back to the Médanos de Coro
where you gulped and gulped
from the faucet, knowing
it would rot in your gut, unable
to stop after months of cheap plastic bottles.
You can have the girl-dog's head in your lap
her eyes soft and muzzle
sleek, nose twitching to catch scent
of your breath. You can have
the eagerness of her body, her curving
spine calling out, "love me,
love me." You can have the shimmer
of goldfish in their tank, plump
and fortunate, where they were once
weak and burned black. You can wake
to a small hand on your arm, a high voice
telling you how purple birds sang in her dream
and you can have too, the lean
hot body of her sister tucked through the night
her smell of pears and milk flowing over your sleep.
It is true there are clothes
on the couch and dirt on the floor, belts
that squeal in the truck every time it rains
and a nest of black widows
your husband just found in the yard.
But you can have that precious hour
while the children sleep, can have
ginger tea and winter tree branches swaying
against crisp blue sky, that color
which comes only with the cold.

Mama at Thirty
after Edward Hirsch

Halfway between birth and now she drove east
fifteen hundred miles away from my father
moved us into a shabby white

house with an empty kitchen, a basement full of rats.
We heard them in the night, their scrapping
and squeaks, while Mama worked downtown

hustling her tables on the night shift. She and my sister
battled daily over nothing it seemed
and afterward my sister would slam our bedroom door

blasting music to drown my cries. I'd crawl in bed
with Mama, and she would curl her body around
my toddler self, hand on my stomach, her words

be still now humming in my ears.
She was thirty and I was two. Now I have slipped, into her
skin as my daughter calls in the night, saying *cuddle me*

and I wrap my limbs, around hers, pull
her close until her chest is tucked, against mine.
Some days there is space for nothing else but this:

the mother in me alone, with her child in the dark.
This is a space too small for fathers, or the slam
of doors echoing, through a windy old house.

There is only the deepening of our bodies
into breath, and the slackening
of the cord between us that has grown

ever more taut as our separate lives
pull us apart. Tonight the wind
whispers and the cicadas hum, the trees vibrate

with the terrible and beautiful weight of generations
and I can feel the dark sky heavy above the house
pregnant with rain, coming down on us all.

THE BODY

Hail Mary- 1 Heat

For Josephine Doucet Cormier

There was a hot quiet.
Two tubs in the yard
made of galvanized tin
a pine framed washboard

that was starting to crack
just at the corners
and an oak tree choking
on Spanish moss.

The baby slept nearby.
So, her slippery hands
plunged into the water
the scalding rinse

its coat of steam
bathed her face as she worked
in a sweat-wet dress
under Louisiana sky.

Now she pulls a man's
shirt through the hand wringer
now pauses, eyes closed
with wilted fingers

to pass the cherry rosary
over her palm.
Her husband drinks, this baby
like her first

will not live.
Here is the world
again, the cicadas fan
their wings against the silence.

And here is a woman
skin reddening under
the glare of sun and grief
turning back to her work.

In Bed As It Is In Heaven

There are bodies. Mother bodies
father bodies, infant and child
bodies, tangle
of sheets and limbs. Ripe
stench of flesh
on flesh. The lusty farting baby
pulling at mother's breast, milk--
slick and warm flowing
over them both, once blue sheets
stained white with apple sized
moons. A sour
must rises from the pillow
light against nighttime
breath in a closed room. At first you strip
the bed, run the wash
stuff the machine-- all
before dawn. You hurry home to turn
the load over, starting the dryer again
and again while supper bubbles and the baby
cries out to be held. Long
after dark you pull the quilt
up to your chin and begin anew.

This lasts a few weeks,
until the ever damp
sheets and your ever damp shirt
start to feel like a chrysalis, golden and tight
and you forget the way your body
felt in the old skin.
As the ache in your bones pulls you down
to the bed, a perfume of baby piss
and sweat envelopes you
feels a little
like wings.

Midnight Kaddish

12:07a.m. the thunder overhead deafening
clatter of water against tin
as she pauses to listen
skin all honey haze
and Gustav Klimt in the single lamp's light:

Praise for this low treble of rain echoing
the rise and fall of ribcage

Praise for this caress of her breath on my neck
girl of muscle and bone rejecting sleep

Praise for her white birch column spine
puckered mouth, milk blistered, and dripping

How not to think of a carpenter with his braces and levels
laying hands on every line of board

Measuring with eye and touch and heat of skin
the fine edges of wood bleeding into one?

Praise to your body, curving and shy desperate, bloom.

Labor

When she was born, and they took her across the room
to measure the depth and breadth of her tiny frame
my work, was not quite done. To push
after thirty-six hours of bending, prone
to the tightness of muscle and skin that rippled and ached, left my body
ready to buckle in on itself.
Such work as this, is not
what they teach you, in stories
where the baby, slippery and new, as the climax
of a good book, marks the denouement.
I think of old time Inuit women hiking
onto the tundra, in the deep
of their labors, perhaps lingering
to kneel, on a small hill, pausing between contractions
to watch for bears. I think
of the blood smell of labor drifting
over the fields of blueberries
and the mother bear stopping, to push out
her tongue, to taste the breeze. No one
knows, what the body remembers
when labor has run its course
and the sharp keening of your infant, echoing in the deep
of arctic chill, blocks out all sounds
urging you, toward the warmth of home.
To stop then, to pause and push
the bloody lotus out of the womb
pressing again, and again, with the hard heel
of your hand into the triple ache, of hunger
and pain and fear. How can we not call that work?

The Soon-to-Be Mother of Four At the Consignment Sale

Doe-eyed and staggering she moves
down the aisles of the sale
heaping clothes into a bin

while her mother looks on
8 month old baby in tow.
She tells us all

me with my two and the old
women working the cash box
that her mirena just didn't make it

in time. She cannot be
more than 22, her face round
and sleepy as a school-aged

child rising early to catch
a bus, rising too quickly
to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

My grandmother must have had this look.
Somewhere between a fierce
hopeful girl

and the eighty-four year old
curving into herself was a woman
in a tiny shoe piled

high with the limbs of six
children and the stacks of cloth diapers
she washed daily by hand. She says,

*with the first I gave cream
by the last it was water.* I imagine
the layers of her body stripped

year after year as one child
followed the next, the fabric
of her skin thread bare

by the last son, the one who made
her wish for death as she weeped through
his birth. I see her in the river Jordan

little hands reaching, a mouth
pulling at her breast, and another small

body tucked away inside.
All of it rain into the current

the waters throbbing with a chaos too electric
to bottle or to hold.

Milk Psalm

A psalm on the day my ducts block and she is hungry. A psalm of praise. My nipples crusted with blood, each pull a tender ache her lips parched. Our swaying bodies give the illusion of love-making. The small joy of my daughter in her pool is not so small this September afternoon when there are three-hundred reasons to lose faith. A psalm then for these days of her illness hours spent at my breasts, mouth on one, hand on the other, a circle of bare flesh. My mother's nipples—dark and huge—record of the years she nursed me, against my aunt who called it a *dirty practice*. A psalm.

Yael Stops Nursing

to listen She feels
her sister's practiced

cry a two-year-old
 playing at sorrow
and the shrill timbre

waaa-ahh
like a newborn
pulled from sleep is so

familiar she echoes
it back through the house
plumbing its depths

She is a porpoise calling.
 She is sound becoming solid
music taking form

of body-wall and limb.

Now her spine is a pillar in the coliseum
that is this girl...

She is away at school

Singing, drawing fine
bulbous letters, turning
to discuss serious matters
of play with her girl friends
or to mediate a dispute.

She is flipping her newly cut hair

more brown now, than baby blond
and telling me how she is learning
from the Laura books her father reads
how to be a big girl.

Outside, the snow falls heavy

sideways into the trees
While, inside, the floor is cluttered
with things, all that necessary garbage of living
and here, she is
playing the infant again—her head—
peaking from under my too-small desk.

I do not know how

to be the mother I think she deserves
to lay down the anger
the rocks in my gut
sometimes in those moments when she is most
like a mirror of me.

There is a cord that stretches between us
and it pulses from blood to blood, night and day.

By tomorrow she will change again.

By the time she pulls her sleepy head from the pillow
to blink into the dawn
she will seem a near stranger
lumbering down the hall
in the deep shuffle-step of sleep
a half-tame wild thing
who might, bite my hand
just as readily as crawl in my lap and purr.

I do not know
what kind of animal to name her, maybe I
am the one, to be named.

When the nurse first laid her

damp and squalling on my chest

something feral awoke:

I do not know

how many seasons it has lived inside me

I cannot begin

to describe

the shape of it as it stretches

and arches into bone and marrow

filling my darkest corners.

My girl-child and I may move through the day
travelers navigating a forgotten country

We may pause, to sip lemonade

or ponder wildflowers, and suddenly

I will feel that familiar heat tingling on

my skin

the burn of my animal self who wants nothing

so much

as to curl back its lip, to bare its teeth

taste the heat of blood on tongue.

Sunday Afternoon

Not yet two,
she stands in the kitchen,
watches her father
crush a roach with the toe
of his boot.

Dead.

The word slips from her mouth
as smoothly as milk or honey,
those gentle tongue pleasures
we call childhood.

Tell me
of that moment
burnt evening sky
the last purple leaf calling
an end to Fall.

Horse Girl, Age 2

After dark I peek into your room, watch
breath steam from of your long, supple form, flowing
out and down along the carpet's edges
and window's lip until the whole place hums
with you. Liquid animal, you canter
across your horse pasture bed, limbs calling
forth a three beat drum, back arched in dream grace.
Last week we worked together, you and me
carving out this space. Already you shut
the door, saying *I need to be alone*
your newly trimmed mane as sharp as your words.
I miss the weight of your tiny foal self
pressed close all night long, that soft equine mouth
pulling comfort from this mother body.

For You, Who Would Have Us

in bed late with the New York Times and lazy morning sun. Five minutes out the door and the car always sparkling. Spicy Ma Po tofu in beautiful bowls, artisanal beer in glasses precisely warmed. A trip to Mozambique just because. I give you tiny girls who will make you cry over their fickle hearts. I give you three changes of clothes and a screaming fit before breakfast. Endless nights of pasta with cheese and nothing else. Tap water to wash it down. I give you piss and shit and vomit: on the bed, on your clothes, in your hair. The peddling of feet in the small of your back at midnight. I give you daughters.

I Lay My Hands on My Body

After Sharon Olds

There is a part, of me
that won't lay down, so willingly
in the arms of domesticity with its home cooked

meals and sweeping the floor at 10 pm because
the kids are finally, mercifully asleep.
She is a woman who drinks alone on a Saturday, willing the baby
not to cry. She is watching a show, about a place

she once visited that seeped into
her marrow, and lit
her up from inside.
But she is not

there.
Where is the father fuck the father. He is gone.
He is two weeks into
an out-of-state trip.
He is, looking
five years younger than he did last week.

He is a man

who does not, need to count
to ten every hour
to try and keep it together.

I want to say fuck the father.
People keep asking if I am done
if I have grown and pushed
enough babies out of my body.

All of my answers, my million ways
to say yes are met with frowns and phrases like
"Really" and "Are you sure" and "Don't you want another"
What I want is to scream "two halves of myself is enough."
Last night I dreamed again about driving

off a bridge, into the water.
I spend my waking hours
planning, trying to train my unconscious
mind not to panic when the car falls.

Step 1: Brace for impact.
Step 2: Unbuckle yourself
and the kids. Step three:
break the glass and kick like hell.

Water. There is no getting over the raw fear
that I may be too weak to pull out two
other people alive.

Now they are down the hall turning
in their sleep.
Once they turned in my body but they are growing heavier
and heavier by the day. Fuck the world
with all its questions I only have two hands.

ANGER/VIOLENCE/POLITICS

Honeysuckle Vine

The girl stands contemplating the honey on her lips, her hand reaches among bees who work flower to flower, she squeezes another bloom on her tongue. A noise from the house drowns the bee's private humming, draws the girl back. She has been sent to select a switch from the vine. Now she considers the branches, touching with fore-finger and thumb. Too thick and she may as well have picked the belt, too thin and the whipping cord breaks the skin. She chooses something in between and turns then, back to the house, last week's welts red as a tattoo down her butt and thighs stinging ever so slightly as she walks.

Benediction, 1973

For Amy and Becky

She is 16 and shy with delicate wrists,
thin against the muscles of her forearms.
This is Casper, Wyoming where she is quietly waiting
to bloom. She walks every day from school
down a long road to work, sizing up customers
before they even reach her booths.
Those two men, in their mid-twenties she guessed,
did not strike her as right when they asked, again and again,
would she please go on a date with them both so she wouldn't have to choose.
One year later she nursed my sister as she watched
them walk across
her 10 pm news-
the story too gruesome for daylight homes-
and she remembered the line of sweat that had rolled
down her back, in the August heat of the cafe,
how it stopped midway down, frozen under their gaze.
The two girls were 11 and 18,
their tire flat when they left the store, strange
since it had been fine just a moment before, two
young men were waiting, smiles ready, car
door wide. Days later, Becky
climbed 120 feet from her death,
her sister's small body broken below.
My mother says if those girls had just been raped
it would have been mercy. She always pauses
then as if she can still feel the bile
that rose as she waited for them to leave,
the heat of the men's hands reaching
out to catch her wrist, asking her
one more time to *please come for a drive.*

Losing Time

City on fire, 300,000
bodies moving away from its center.
Sister Juarez spills in: A headless man
swings from an overpass. A little girl
is raped and killed. Her face fades into news
print, another name passed behind cupped hands.
My students cross the Rio Grande daily
for school. It's 103 and the asphalt
is going soft down the sides. Another
shot and no one dares look or even crack
a window. 1,500 dead since June.

There is a tiny body stretching out
in my womb, pushing her way into life
each day more insistent, more demanding
of food and space, of energy and time.
The bump, bump on the sonogram echoes
the rhythm of our blood at double speed.
Just three months to go-I should be feeling
joy but it is something closer to fear
at the thought of her moving separate
from me in the world. Oxygen pulses
south, her brain holding 300,000
neurons set to bloom into a wild
cacophony of synapses. Her limbs
curl and uncurl in the watery dark.

I watch as Ingrid Bentecourt de-planes
in Bogota, six years of suffering
lining her forehead, wrists, and two parched eyes.
She looks incapable of speech, her tongue
thick as an anaconda comatose
of swamp pig and heat. She has forgotten
the intricacies of camera talk.
We press forward in our seats. She is there
just beyond the screen. We wait without breath
without even feeling the lack, until
words spill from her like the Orinoco
300,000 drops of blue anguish
rolling over us, a people tired of
naming our stolen, laying out our dead.

Belfast in July

I take the bus north out of Dublin
to visit a girl I know from college.
Leaving a pub she points casually

to a café that had been bombed the month prior
and I cannot fathom how she can go on
walking through a city where police barricade themselves

behind steel and barbed wire where lamp posts
are not lamp posts, but cameras meant
to catch any act of defiance or retaliation.

But it is quiet and it is summer
so we drive together with her brother through the city
past the shipyard, where the Titanic was built

Samson and Goliath still towering overhead
past the tidy campus
of the university. Our conversation is light but I know

they want me to love their city, are willing me
not to ask about politics. So I don't
but everywhere there are murals of men in ski-masks, holding guns

every neighborhood is defined by the colors
of the curb stones and finally I ask (I cannot
not ask), to stop for a picture.

They are good hosts so we do, but the minute I round the corner
trying to find the best angle
my friend is there shot like a bullet from the car

her hand on my arm pulling me back
saying *it's not safe to be here alone.*
Driving back to their house her brother

stops the car at the top of a hill
and we can see the whole of Belfast unfolding
below us a city that looks as quiet and boring

as any might look, on a late afternoon
in mid-summer all of the colors bleeding
and waxing together. He tells us then

how when he was twelve he sat here once
astride his bike at noon, watching burning cars
dot the road down the hillside

lighting the way into the heart of city.

Still Life with Roaches

You open a drawer and you find one, not one but a collective of beady-eyed staring bastards.

Their antennae undulate in your direction. They taste the food particles on your breath.

Their ancestors once tasted dinosaur breath.

This is not really a still life. This is finding a nest under your daughter's bed, and nearly punching a hole in the wall but stopping because she is watching.

It is not a fair fight—chemicals against population mass.

You are alone.

What is this really about?

You do not remember. Something about food, or God and justice.

Or the story of another woman on her knees, scrubbing her way toward an afterlife that may or may not reward the pious and the bored.

Confessions 1

I am a Southern Baptist Pastor's Wife.
No one knows that I do not believe in
God. I met my husband when I was just
sixteen and I thought he was the spirit
incarnate. Maybe that was my folly.
Or could it be that when you are a wide-
eyed girl possibilities seem to creep
up on you like a python on a mouse,
silently, but with such force that you can
only succumb? My husband had his hand
around my throat and we both knew the length
of his arm and no matter how I kicked
it always drew me back to the same spot.
Which of you wouldn't doubt his glory then?

Beauty

Call it ritual: The spreading of wax
between legs ripping out of coarse hair.

Call it maintenance: That which is wild
is cajoled
 into being domestic.

Or transformation: A woman
is made to look
 like a girl
sometimes an infant.

This type of attention
 is called grooming,
like the word for dogs they're one and the same.

If You Want to Keep a Man, You Should Blow Him

My ex-boyfriend
who was drunk more often than not, and so more honest
once told me if you want to keep a man, you
should blow him, without
being asked, you should
be less of a hard ass about things like good oral hygiene
and stop worrying so much, about money
and climate change, you should act a little more slutty
a little less prudish, and a lot more free.
Do you know those words free and woman do not

mix like oil
and water separate when touching not because they dislike the taste
or sight of one another but because forces
in the cosmos out
of their reach and out of their control have determined that they
are too weak or stupid or selfish or naïve or childlike to be together?
The fact that they are none of these things does not enter
into anyone's calculation of the way the world should turn, or whether I
a grown woman, who wants to be the boss of her own body
as my four-year old daughter says
should be true for every person

can measure
my own worth
outside of sexual acts I may or may not choose
to perform. And isn't it all a performance, this laying of blame
on women, like their lips on your dick
is some kind of key to perfect love
or perfect salvation and do you know
that your dick is not necessarily a gateway to pleasure for all
and in fact your use of it has consequences
in the form of potential babies who may look cute sitting on the floor
amusing themselves but this is not, the reality of parenthood
and you, are not the one stretching, out your body and emptying your wallet, just
so you can point at the baby, on the floor, and say look what I made
isn't it wonderful, now watch the kid so I
can go have a beer.

The Pill

In 1965

I would have been your champion too
and you strong enough to kill
a fetal horse.

But it wasn't only strength, it was passing
that little pill
daily across our lips
that was liberation.

I was seventeen, when the doctor put the first pink pack
into my hand at my mother's request
her way
of keeping her daughter smart.

Five years later you've been
replaced by a ring I push monthly
up and over my cervix, where it guards
my uterine gates, releasing doses of poison
so tiny they almost don't matter.

Little pill, last year you gave my aunt breast cancer.

You gave her a double mastectomy at forty-two, and a line of close female
relatives who have popped pills, like you, or taken shots
twice monthly for years, who now live
under a long shadow, waiting for lumps to form in their breasts.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not wishing us back to botched coat
hanger abortions or unwanted babies
born in secret and left to die in dumpsters

Don't misunderstand me, I want sex just as much
as the next girl. Sex without worries, sex
without the prospect of blood, or the terrible choice to spill it
on my hands. I know everything has its price, but I spent
last night curled up in the ER
my ovaries feeling like someone slid in a knife three inches deep
and twisted the blade again and again

This is too much. My ovaries have cysts and are bleeding
after five years of not ovulating because
of you. I read in the paper today how the good folks
at Columbia University think they have finally done it
created the first: pill for men.

They are beside themselves congratulating themselves
They have
been talking about this, for the last twenty years. I say
it is now 2014
why has it taken you so long
to tally the losses?

Ars Poetica #46

*-I don't know how
the palm trees opened up my greedy heart.
-Adam Zagajewski*

Evening is drawing to a close, and the baby who cannot
yet crawl is shuffling herself across the quilt

defying the need for sleep. It's 8, then 9, then 10 pm
and sometimes you think you'd like to shock her

just once or twice, on the fattest part of her thigh.
Enough to make her cry, but not wail

to want comfort but not feel despair.
There are places where women throw girls like her

into dank wells, or slop buckets.
Where half the boys saved, will find themselves

in twenty years with an empty chair
at a table their wife would have filled had she not been fed to the pigs.

What is longing, if it cannot be the flurry of two
young robins tumbling mid-flight in a blur

of claw on wing? Even the wild turkey can flap itself
over the arch of the house roof

if two dogs, with noses working on triple speed
flush out his scent from the dark of the forest.

Perhaps it is enough to open a jar
of heart of palm and let those slender layers

slip over your tongue.

Capitol Hill

today the fight comes down to reproduction and the voices of women
the rustle of 8 billion bodies
elbowing for space. I envy the elephant who can shut her womb down, any
time she chooses. We are not so carefully
designed our bodies do not hear, the echo of the empty bank
vault or pay heed to bills, arriving without end.
I read how women interned in concentration camps still bled
monthly until their bodies were almost starved.
We are taught about killings and torture, but somehow the image of blood
running unchecked, down thin and dirty thighs
feels especially cruel. Not the wasted potential life but the animal savagery
of nature pressing its agenda with a blind eye.
There are people in this country just as blind calling every fetus a miracle
I am here to tell you, there is no truth
to that claim or the one that pretends a woman is not a woman without
a child or that any woman who would choose to exercise
choice about what grows or does not grow, in her womb
is somehow wrong. I am eight
months pregnant, while nursing a toddler and every day my body
becomes a little more hollow. Making milk
while growing, a fetus means, my own body, is pulling calcium from my bones
for the good of two other bodies
who in fairness I have chosen to have but what if
I had not made that choice
did not, have the power to choose and what I felt, after
my labor, that long and tortuous cramping
one body suffers to expel another, what I felt when seeing
the person I had endured it all for, what if it was not love
but something more akin to anger hatred and grief which you
cannot call a myth because
in the last six months, at least twenty-three
women have thrown, their newborns into dumpsters.
I am not talking about China, or India or some place you might call
third world. I mean 2012 and the girls of small
town and big city America giving birth on the toilet and trying
to flush their babies for reasons, I cannot begin
to explain except to say we live in a culture where public faces and private
lives do not intersect where comprehensive learning
must be some person's idea of the devil incarnate. But we
have to ask ourselves, who is suffering
here and who, is setting up the laws that put women into
a position where killing becomes the best and only
option.

Where Are the Words

For what makes a father hold his child down by her windpipe
to lay his belt over the length of her body, or a mother sit by, hear
and take a moment to spin tales of her own grief she will later use
in her own defense.

For the space between a child of your own
and one not, where an ounce more sympathy should live
but does not.

For the grandmother, who chooses to re-draw her life
for three children who are not her blood, or the weight she feels
at putting her own child last because some crimes cannot be
forgiven.

If there are shapes for these things, they are poison warnings
yellow tape marked "Police line do not cross," and tiny labels that say
"Hazard, may cause choking."

They are the smell of the slaughterhouse
at dawn, just as the first blood hits the floor, mixing with yesterday's
bleach, the scent of adrenaline passing from one cow to the next.

Confessions 3

I did it for no one else.
I ate with purpose. I woke up
wanting to feel bile in my throat.
For four years I prayed it would
not stop.

I did not try to hide it
from my mother.

I did

not care if she cried.

I grew to love the smell

of toilet water.

My body complied without aid of toothbrush

or finger. I craved the release.

I did not regret
the waste or care about the starving.

When it finally stopped it did not feel
like any kind of blessing.

THE EROTIC WOMAN

Here I Am

Here I am: staring at someone
else's shit in the toilet.
Those skid marks sliding
up the side, that no amount
of flushing can kill
and me

the only one willing to wield
that nasty brush.
Here I am knee-deep
in the sour-milk smell of laundry
the dryer broken and the wet clothes freezing

stiff on the line.
I want a life, less complicated by shit.
I want your body and my body
in a late summer wheat field, just us
and the geese overhead, honking their way south.
I want the bite of winter to be
a little less keen.
I want

a space for melody and poetry
where Adam Zagajewski and the Pixies can riff
on the life the soul
and I can fit my mouth against the curve
of your ear, for however long it takes

to unwind our sorrow. I want
the scent of mint to linger around me
after you are gone
rushing off to whatever it is you do
with your day.

When it is still
I listen for your voice. I am hollow.
I am tripping all over myself
all over that invisible line
we cannot cross.

The Good Cook

What you called pot roast was actually
my left calf muscle

slow cooked in Southern
Comfort and cayenne pepper

and the soup you licked out
with finger and face was seasoned

by the salt of tears You call me
the good cook

like it will keep me mute
and I feed you my body piece meal

like eating
and loving can interchange

If we are what we eat
will you become me?

Your eyes are small and greedy
teeth huge-white.

Do you prefer my breasts
pan-fried or oven-baked?

Can I drain my blood for you?
It's red hot with a hint of smoke

and I'm sure it will complement
my batter-dipped tongue.

Tear My Stillhouse Down

The press of leg against knee
brings me back to my body call it longing
my eyes on the flat of your wrist
I want to feel the scrape of it against my thigh
I imagine the women you date the fullness of their lips
The shape of their ear lobes your long fingers around their calves
This is not a love poem I have been in love

am in the hollow of love
where you hear your own breath echo
against canyon walls again and again

I do not want you in the night when my body folds
under the weight of day I want wide afternoon
when we can languish together in midday light
sinews and muscles sliding smooth against bone
the shimmering edges of touch making us loose in our skin

My throat is raw from pushing desire back down
I want it to be the grey-green color of bile
but the heat on my skin

names it the crimson of July tomatoes
picked at their peak

Confessions 2

Look at you, his wife is wailing over
the coffin and all you can think about is him
on your flower bed spread, some random Thursday afternoon
laying him down and laying him down and laying
naked inside the space between light and dark
where you can live together. Don't you
want to rush over right now
pull her back, wipe her face and put your hands
on her shoulders? Don't you want to tell her *enough*
is enough? Her family will hold her up and straighten her gown
lead her back to her chair. Aren't you tired
of playing the dog, waiting for the scraps of love
to be dumped in a heap at your feet after much begging?
If you cannot weep and cannot vomit your grief
for all to see, what is left, but to rock back
on the heels of memory as it carries you into his touch
lips, knees, all of it wide open.

Salt

It was the summer
of 90 degree shadows and women
I loved crumbling one
grain of salt at a time.

My body was liquid
spilling out of itself:
I rose at dawn to the smell of bread
warm from the factory

and to the man with the Cuban tongue
who knocked at my door
along with the sun.
Even then we sweated.

He made a ritual
of washing the salt
off both our bodies
before leaving for work.

I read how thousands
of Napoleon's troops
died during the French
retreat from Moscow –

the results of salt deficiency.
I tried starvation for myself
and nearly succeeded.
Even now in Europe

a handful of salt is thrown
after the coffin
into the grave.
It is supposed to protect the dead

from the Devil or at least
pay their toll. My roommate covered
her room like a shroud
and cried her own salt

into her sheets.
In DeVinci's painting the man
with the spilled salt

is Judas.
Some believe, his own clumsiness
betrayed his crime.
Ancient Hebrews called salt
a symbol of the joy of joining

eating together
meant living
in brotherly love.
We only shared

half a house.
Greeks used salt
to buy slaves and make sacrifices.
I discovered even “the salt of the Earth”

will weep at a woman’s knees
if she uses
the right combination of words.
At the start of the Civil War, Union troops

fought a 36-hour battle
to capture Saltville, VA. During
wartime, cities with salt
mines are the first to be taken.

Cooking Cuban

This meal was not intended for you.
It was my hope the cumin garlic and ginger
would be strong enough to call back the dead.
I imagined the seared pork tenderloins served on a bed of spinach
would stimulate
dormant brain cells and pink grapefruit coleslaw
would roll over the tongue
electrifying those stagnant taste buds. My greatest hope was
cinnamon bananas, soaked
in rum. I knew they would carve a path, straight through the withered arteries
to the heart.
I saw each bite, giving a little more life
until
like Cuba he was hot and volatile, ready to meet the world.
He did not
rise refused to even make an appearance and let me tell you
tears will not persuade
a dead man nor can he be moved with
begging or bribery.
I found myself, with an island of food and no one to feed.
I imagined it rotting and stinking until my house crumbled, leaving me huddled in the ruins
spatula in hand.
Then today I opened my window, and there you were. An infant. Now my new sets of flatware
and freshly washed plates are useless
you can only imagine this is how I have always been.
You are so new it frightens me to watch the way
your face changes when I walk in the room and how you cock your head
to listen.
I am afraid that you might break in my arms or choke
on my food.
Mostly that after we eat you will turn to me, and say without remorse
Sorry wrong window.

To Build a House

a foundation must be poured
timber cut to size
there are blue prints
to follow or not
and any number
of experts to consult a house
is a shell until you
have filled it with kitchenware
books and furniture: the most essential things
a house cannot be built in a day
some take years to construct
and some are never finished
to build a house is the slow progression
of my hand to your hand
of your lips to my lips
two parts into one

The Harvest

While you were sleeping I cut
along the neat line that marks
the start of the wrist

Your hair is mine too I pulled it out
strand by strand last Tuesday
while you sat eyes closed

believing I was trimming dead ends
and your back fell victim to my paring knife
the night we slow danced drunk and shirtless

My pieces of you are laid
out across my kitchen table
They are starting to take your shape
Sometimes late at night I sit with them

drink a cup of mint tea
and talk about my day
They are very good listeners
Soon I will claim your shoulders

thighs and feet After your chest
is in place I will use it
to rest my head

The last part to go will be your eyes
Your hands draw back
and your tongue loves omission

but those brown spheres that follow me
in every room are honest
I will keep them on my bedside table

They will be the first thing
I see every morning
and when nightmares come I will sleep

knowing you are there seeing me

Measuring Grief

It is called keening,
what women in India do
at funerals, that high pitched

stream of wordless sorrow.
I have seen it too
in Ireland

and the black churches
of my southern childhood.
It is devastating to watch

a strong-backed
woman collapse
on her prostrate lover

tearing at her body and his
as if to marry
the two.

I think of the tight, screwed faces
of my own family
last winter at my cousin's wake

their bodies bottled-up and rigid
hearts more concerned
with propriety than grief.

I have always been
that way too
but just now the thought

of you gone
stings my eyes and squeezes
my throat free of air.

At the base
of my spine is a small
coal waiting to flame on the winds

of your departure.
It will lick up my back
and rib cage

over my chest
and neck
burning until I keen

my tongue bloody with the wailing.

Confessions 5

What can I say
to make you understand that sometimes
kindness just isn't enough? You may ask

how I could leave a tender man, for a hard one
exchange love, for the fever of skin on skin.
What words can describe

how it feels to be touched only
in bed, after dark, curtains drawn?
The contrast, is like setting, your skin, on fire, watching it, blister

doing nothing, to cool the burn. When this happens, and you
have been treading water for far too long
heat is relief, its bearer a savior of sorts.

Remorse

It is the price of speculation
and I, am flattening my hand against
the burner of the stove because some things cannot be
reined in and made lovely by words.
This is more prayer than crime. Three days ago you told me
that we are leaving and I cannot bear
to let regret fill me no matter how hollow I feel.
How do you measure the loss of what you did
not know you wanted
as you watch it pass like a bread truck through the city where you
have walked broke but contented without naming your hunger.
Washing my hair in the sink is as close
to God as I can get, the warm water trickling
like divinity from the tea kettle down my scalp and onto my neck.
If cleanliness is next
to godliness and that is next to holiness
aren't I working my way
up some ladder toward reward
or my next incarnation where I can live as a house cat
free to be wild or cruel
because that is the mood that carries my day.
In 2nd grade I wanted, to be president
later a vet then a naturalist then something else.
Now I find myself walking in circles wearing
a uniform labelled "what if." My mother likes to discuss my sister's potential:
her beauty brains way with languages and people. My mother
no longer speaks in present tense but she has not stopped letting
the shadow of what my sister was
of what I am almost always the inversion to hang
over us both. I spoke with a friend today, who just broke up with her girlfriend.
They are trying to be friends and I don't understand
why some things especially those we
find toxic are not allowed to curl up and die. When
my dog
became too weak to walk and my mother put him to sleep
I got the call surrounded by strangers and couldn't cry.
I should tell you
if love and dreams were mutually exclusive, I'm sure
what my choice would be.

Winter in Ester, Alaska

For all they said,

I could not see the winter
until it came and the fireweed began dying
its unfolding crimson petals giving way

to pillowy down while the wind moved through the aspen grove
creaking past branches
shifting with the hours
unwinding

leaves like giant moths
or falling crepe streamers.
From my front porch
I could smell the high bush cranberries, bitter

in their decay.
Sophists believed— reality is relative—
perhaps my heart was once again tricking my nose.
Sometimes I think nothing

can be durable or steadfast.
Birch trees and spruce trees can be levelled
by human greed.
The spectacled cormorant

can hardly wish itself
back into being.
One night this summer two
ex-lovers approached

each without knowledge
of the other
and apologized for their failings.
They wanted closure. According to Webster's, to "close"

is "to fill up or finish or stop
to come to an end."
I'm not, convinced this can ever happen
between people.

Maybe the best we can do
is linger together, finally
in the blind rough winter cold enough
to crack our bones.

Notes to My Daughters

1

I am flipping through a poetry book
some random Monday afternoon
and thinking about bodies what it means
to pinch a thigh in anger
I am seeing you again after our walk crying
over the five minute drive because it was suddenly too much
all the many forces
of all the many worlds coming down.
I am flipping through a poetry book

you are moving among classmates and you are not
thinking of me or if
you do it is only for a moment
before the next object catches your gaze.
This is how it should be. This is what I remind
myself because I do not
want you to be the child who sits in the corner wailing.
This hate-love-longing
I feel for you in every second is not for the weak.

2

Listen girls there is an animal
in you, and she is not dirty
or ugly or ripe for the picking.
She is savage she
is teeth and claws and deep need
for blood. You will think she is sleeping
you will think you have her contained.
You will go on living
moving politely through the city making
polite conversation. You will listen, to others speak of the failings
and foolish minds of women
and she will growl then again, and you
will know it is time.

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Carolyn Rose Stice was born in Cheyenne, WY, to her parents Beverly Atchison and Frank Stice. She attended Academic Magnet High School in North Charleston, SC. After graduation she headed to Randolph Macon Woman's College where she studied Creative Writing, with an emphasis in poetry. She obtained a Bachelor of the Arts degree in 2004. She then moved to Fairbanks, AK. After working for a few months she was accepted into a master's program at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She worked as a graduate teaching assistant and earned her Masters of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing in 2007. After completing her degree Carolyn was awarded a Fulbright Student Research Grant to Venezuela for the 2007-2008 academic year. During her time in Venezuela she researched, translated the work of, and interviewed female Venezuelan poets. Her research was focused in particular on images of the body in work by contemporary poets. At the end of her grant term she moved to El Paso, TX where she worked as a middle and high school English teacher. In 2010 she was accepted into the PhD program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she is currently producing her own poetry and specializing in the work of contemporary female poets.