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## Praying Naked

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# **Praying Naked**

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

**Katherine Mary Condon  
May 2019**

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“On the seventh day God says: *What you’ve got is virgin charm & a knife in your pocket.*”

*Narrative Magazine* (Spring 2017)  
“Praying Naked”  
“Getting Through Monday”  
“To the Woman Who Accused Me of Not Being a Feminist, I’m Sorry”

*Four Way Review* (Fall 2016)  
“Argument for Loving from a Distance”

*The Adroit Journal* (Fall 2016)  
“For the Christening of a Ship”  
(Now titled, “The Sacrifice’s Prayer”)

*Nashville Review* (Summer 2016)  
“The Real Self Is Very Scary”

*Indiana Review* 38.1 (Summer 2016)  
“Driving, 4 AM”

*Ruminate* (Summer 2016)  
“At the #1 Fried Chicken & Seafood”

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“Timestamps”

*REALITY TUNNELS* (Spring 2016)  
“Giving Myself Advice”

*The Mackinac* (Winter 2015)  
“We Need to Talk”  
“Real Elegy”

*Blunderbuss* (Summer 2015)  
“Don't Be Bitter, Baby!”  
“How to Know the Wildflowers”  
“Volatile Elegy”

*H\_NGM\_N* (Spring, 2015)  
“Katie Condon, an American, One of the Roughts, a Kosmos in the Flesh”

## ABSTRACT

The desire to be touched, to come home, to take every touch back, to reveal oneself for what one is—this is the progression of the speaker’s desire over the course of “Praying Naked.” Touch is the speaker’s rebellion, her route to sexual autonomy. The speaker comes home when her rebellion fails. Shame that she prioritized her own selfish want over the needs of other women, other daughters and their mothers, makes the speaker wish she could take every touch back. If only she remembered sooner that her dying mother is a woman, too, a body of knowledge eager to teach the speaker about lust. “Praying Naked” began as theater, a speaker in a mask who performed her artifice as truth—this play, for a while, was enough. At the end of “Praying Naked,” the speaker stands before her audience, maskless. She wants her audience to take what she made for what it is, constructed, mimetic. An exaggerated, extravagant, and blunt representation of a psyche with all of its shifting parts.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### Lineage and Aesthetics

The poems in “Praying Naked” are most obviously indebted to the New York School and Confessional poets. These poems merge the often taboo personal content of Confessional poetry with the New York School’s use of wry and lighthearted language in an attempt to create a tonally dynamic speaker whose psychology is complex and whose values are often difficult to classify. Moreover, the combination of these qualities generates a sense of political urgency often seen as lacking in both parent aesthetics. This political urgency is enacted in large part by structuring poems as what Jonathan Culler calls events in the “lyric present,” or a poems that seek to “create the effects of presence” and participation (37). Before discussing my poetry’s particular relationship to each school, it is useful to address what Confessional and the New York School poets reacted against and valued aesthetically, as well as how the two schools viewed one another.

Indeed, although both parties were rebelling against the New Critical dominance of the 1950s and 60s, the New York School and Confessional poets did not see themselves as aesthetic allies. The contentious relationship between Frank O’Hara and Robert Lowell, to offer one representative example of the tension between these two groups of poets, is fairly notorious. O’Hara claimed that “‘Lowell’s ‘confessional manner’...lets him ‘get away with things that are just plain bad’” but that readers are expected to show interest in his work “‘because he’s so upset’” (Perloff 13). Lowell, for his part, scoffed at the New York School poet for writing “Lana Turner Has Collapsed!” on the way to their only shared reading in 1962 (Perloff 13). Lowell seemed to suggest

that one should pay poetry the respect he believed it deserved by revising a poem until it was polished, as no spontaneously written poem could be.

Lowell's objection to O'Hara's poetic process makes sense when one considers what Confessional poets valued. Confessionalism's founding motivation was to "[violate] the norms of decorum" of New Critical and high Modernist discourses (Middlebrook 633). Poet and critic Edward Hirsch explains that Confessional poets were reacting to T.S. Eliot's notion of impersonality in particular, which is why their poetry utilizes a first person "I" who discloses highly personal experiences that involve taboo subjects like sexuality, suicide, and mental illness (125). Indeed, the direct and explicit nature of Confessional poems like Anne Sexton's "The Lonely Masturbator," and the "raw sensibility" with which they were written, were meant to stand at odds with the prevailing New Critical discourse, not to mention the standards that the Cold War expected the American parent to uphold (Hirsch 125-26). These principles, as articulated, for example, by then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's "internal security" doctrines, expected fathers to exhibit "virile leadership" as a way to develop the strong citizenship of their families, particularly their sons. Mothers, on the other hand, were not to challenge "male dominance" less they want to be "put back in their place" (Middlebrook 647). Additionally, these (presumably) straight married American parents were encouraged to be figuratively celibate in that "sex was unmentionable on TV" as well as in the public sphere (Middlebrook 647). All of the "original" Confessional poets were parents, and their poetry adopted all that America deemed unmentionable as their subject matter and made those matters public over and over again. The Confessional poets, in other words,

were reacting as much to the “stereotypes” of the functional American family that they were pressured to uphold as they were to impersonality of high Modernism.

In addition to the ways Confessional poetry responded to its historical context, it is necessary to consider critics’ use of the word “autobiographical” to describe Confessional poets’ work. While it is absolutely true that much of the material these poets use is drawn plainly from their own lives, it is also the case that Confessional poets like Lowell, Sexton, and James Merrill have been cited as “[confessing] to things that never happened” in their poems (Lerner 54). Indeed, Merrill sees the Confessional mode as “a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it sound as if it were true” (“Realism and the Confessional...” 470). In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Lowell agrees: “[In *Life Studies*] there’s a good deal of tinkering with fact...I’ve invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented...[If] a poem is autobiographical...you want the reader to say, this is...the *real* Robert Lowell” (48). The Confessional mission is not, then, to tell the Truth of a self. It is instead to create an authentic individual in the poem whose job is to convince the reader that what they are revealing “about the inner self [and] the outer world” is first and foremost worth believing in (Hirsch 125).

If the Confessionalists approach poetic content with a reckless abandon that any rebel would envy, then their formal approach to that material is the just-waxed 1958 Chevy Impala Convertible featuring roomy bench seats and electric wipers that they comfortably run away from home in. What I mean is: while there are exceptions, many Confessional poems are highly stylized and are most comfortable writing in conventional

stanzas and forms. It is not unusual, for example, to spot a Confessional poem with a rhyme scheme, as in Plath's "Daddy," or meter, as in Snodgrass's "As a Child, Sleepless." While Lowell and Plath favor symbolism and allusion in particular, generally speaking "artful" images (symbolic or otherwise) used to represent the body or an emotional state is an essential characteristic of the Confessional mode. Another quintessential Confessional convention is to punctuate the poem with a straightforward, declarative statement (or "confession," as their name implies), such as, "My mind's not right," which is a line from Lowell's infamous "Skunk Hour." These declarations often appear without warning or introduction and are intended to be shocking. In addition, although Sexton occasionally employs a self-deprecatory humor similar to New York School poets like James Schuyler (as when she writes "I break out of my body this way / an annoying miracle"), the Confessional poets at large treat both their rebellious content and their polished forms with extraordinary seriousness.

Like the Confessional poets, the New York School was also attempting to violate the expectations of the New Critical and high Modernist discourses. However, unlike Confessionalism, the New York School was offended by the seriousness and formalism that New Criticism mandated, and mutinied by adopting a "non-academic" experimental aesthetic that valued irreverence, collaboration, humor, "vitality," and "optimism" (Bushyager 506). It goes without saying that the New York School poets were affected by the same surveillance-crazed America during the Cold War as the Confessional poets were, though with higher stakes. While the government enlisted fathers to ensure members of his family were being "good" civilians, they also encouraged the American

people to report anyone they believed sexually deviant (i.e. queer) because they argued it was likely that person was a Communist sympathizer (Smith 181). What this meant for O'Hara, Schuyler, and John Ashbery, three of the four "original" New York School poets, was that they had to keep their identity as gay men quiet. "Confessing" that they were homosexuals in their poems, in other words, could have them tried in court as "security risks," regardless of how innovative their poetic approaches were (Smith 181). This is not to claim that New York School poets never invoke autobiographical material in their poetry. Rather, they merely "[skim] the surface of the self" (*Narrativity* 5). Indeed, Marjorie Perloff suggests in her book *Frank O'Hara: poet among painters* that while the first person is "ubiquitous" in many New York School poems, the "I" is "distanced by various devices: self-deprecatory humor, long-angle shots, fantasy...[and] confusing second person references" (136). Maggie Nelson adds that this distance doesn't eliminate intimacy—instead "intimacy precedes identity" in the New York School poem (89). In part, this distance was to avoid "disgusting self-pity" in the poems, as O'Hara has put it, but it is also possible that, like the Confessional poets, the New York School's aesthetics were formed in a reaction to not only aspects of the New Critical discourse they scorned, but also the political climate that scorned them (Perloff, 29).

Although descriptions of personal experiences disclosed by an "I" associated with the poet himself exist in New York School poetry (Schuyler's "The Morning of the Poem" serves as a good example), at large, New York School poetry was more interested in observing habits of dailiness as opposed to drawing conclusions about their psychic lives. Perloff puts it nicely: The role of the "I" in a New York School poem, "is to

respond rather than to confess...[The] self...dissolves and becomes part of the external landscape” (135). In this moment, Perloff is gesturing toward O’Hara’s signature I-do-this-I-do-that mode, in which the poem seems like it was written as he was walking around the city running errands and grabbing lunch—or, as Culler would categorize it, O’Hara wrote poems that are “events in the lyric present” (8). O’Hara, as well as his New York School companions, adopted both Manhattan’s high and low culture as their poetic content. Hamburgers, Daffy Duck, comic villains they dubbed The Strangler, and James Dean live in the same poems as French surrealists, abstract-expressionist painters, Italian operas, and jazz musicians. On the subject of poetic subjects, the New York School was also known for naming the very process of creating the poem as their subject—Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” illustrates this process-as-content convention most famously. The effect of this process-oriented mode is nearly identical to the effect of making dailiness and pop culture poetic subjects: the purpose is not to make room for wonder that ends in epiphany, it is to make room for wonder that is on-going.

In this way, the New York School was making room for its own shocking poetic content in poems that were more formally experimental than those of the Confessional poets. In general, New York School poems loved “fast talk,” colloquialisms, and associative logic. Their sentences sprinted, and were enthusiastic to abandon strict meter and rhyme schemes, occasionally eradicating punctuation altogether. While the New York School’s aesthetic often reads as improvisational, it is in nevertheless technically sound and complex. In addition, these poets valued playfulness and collaboration over seriousness and carefully constructed images. Kenneth Koch, in particular, utilized

humor in his work, and wrote a long, satirical poem called “Fresh Air,” which lampooned the seriousness both the New Critical and Confessional discourses honored—as Nelson phrases so efficiently in her book *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, “*Ugh, move on* may be one of the New York School’s most abiding messages” (207).

All in all, what New York School poets disliked about the New Critical discourse the Confessional poets did not mind, and vice versa. While the two schools have next to nothing in common aside from a shared historical context, there is arguably another quality that the two modes share: political fluidity. As I mentioned previously, and as Nelson reminds us, the New York School’s choice to remain politically discreet could be because an openly queer person “in the mid-fifties... ‘[risked] being excommunicated’” (69). Being politically fluid, then, was not because New York School poets were aloof, but because their safety depended on it. Elsewhere in *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, Nelson reiterates the feminist platform that the personal is inherently political (188). In this way, Confessional poetry, too, is political without having to announce itself, if only because its content is unapologetically and shockingly personal. However, compared to the sometimes brazen political directness of their contemporaries, like the Black Arts Movement, both the New York School and Confessionalism’s political presences are more difficult to identify. The poetry of “Praying Naked,” on the other hand, has no problem obviously engaging in political discussions about female sexual agency. “Giving Myself Advice” argues, for example, that being “somebody / somebody would like to fuck” doesn’t “make [a woman] an

object—it makes [her] Desire itself!” (Giving Myself Advice 16-19). The success of such political statements is in part thanks to the collection’s hybrid use of Confessional and New York School aesthetics. In the above example, the assertion that being “fuckable” does not make a woman an object is one that Confessional poets might have applauded for its controversial stance and audacity. In a Confessional poem, however, the tone would become progressively more serious. “Giving Myself Advice” and “Praying Naked” more broadly, on the other hand, frequently counter sober tones with humor and imaginative momentum. Instead of laboring over a provocative stance, these poems draw on New York School aesthetics to think through such stances quickly and associatively. The effect of this particular aesthetic blend, to my mind, is a poem with huge vitality, speed, and wit. Moreover, it creates a complex, multifaceted tone. Deeply serious tones in combination with playful more humorous ones aims to normalize the female desire and to explode the idea that women should be ashamed of “their impulse / to please” (“To the Woman Who Accused Me...” 28).

Indeed, rapidly shifting tone is a prominent aesthetic characteristic of “Praying Naked.” In the collection’s title poem, for instance, the speaker talks about the shame that colors her sexual life with casual pithiness. “I’ve never let a man love me / without feeling very Mary Magdalene about it,” the speaker begins (1-2). These lines have all of the serious tonal intensity of a Confessional poem at the same time they operate with the light-hearted tone of the New York School. “I’ve never let a man love me” is somber and the enjambment effectively isolates this tone, if only for a moment. The more irreverent tone that follows the line break complicates this seriousness by using “Magdalene” as a



verb, playfully subverting the religious narrative of a woman who was saved by Christ from her own lust. In his essay “Sad Anthropologists: The Dialectical Use of Tone,” Tony Hoagland says that tone “is not just the expression of feeling, it also includes the speaker’s knowledge about feelings” (84). Thinking about tone in this way, the first two lines of “Praying Naked” already communicate what the speaker articulates more clearly later on—that she can feel justified in scoffing and making light of her shame, but she knows she can never feel entirely free of it. That her Lord will never “let [her] exist / without shame” is implicit in her playful turn to Magdalene, whose legacy is as much about her “disgraceful” prostitution as it is about her redemption.

“On the seventh day God says: *What you’ve got is virgin charm & a knife in your pocket*” is a more complex example of how Confessional and New York School aesthetics work with and against each other to create dynamic tones in this collection. This poem is a non-linear collage, a form that the New York School poets would have applauded. Three different communication styles give this collage a sense of structure:

1. A conversation between the speaker and God:

God says: *Thou shalt not kill.*  
& I’m like, *but what about with my eyes.*

2. The speaker’s thoughts and internal dialogue with herself:

I never asked for the capacity to love  
ugly things, but here I am.

3. A series of statements and observations that are not attached to the speaker. In other words, we do not necessarily know who is contributing these statements—it could be the speaker or it could be a third, omniscient narrator:

The bartender hums the tune  
of a hummingbird rising from its flower.

Across the three communication styles, the diction shifts from high to low registers rapidly and without warning, accommodating words like “pussy” as well as more reverent language, some of which is lifted from the Bible. This kind of linguistic variety and playfulness contrasts more serious moments, such as, “A woman raised in contest with other women is a child of God.” “Tone,” Tony Hoagland says, “is a theatrical enterprise,” and this poem is a lightshow made of language that ignites and dims at different speeds and with varying intensities. This and other poems, such as “Volatile Elegy” and “Don’t be bitter, baby!,” utilize a similar kind of tonal play partnered with highly personal content to complicate our sense of the speaker’s values. In “On the seventh day...” for example, it is unclear whether the speaker is trying to undermine God, seduce him, or both, a kind of volatility that blended Confessional and New York School aesthetics make possible.

In poems that rely less on the lyric present and the tonal dynamism of the Confessional and New York School hybrid, “Praying Naked” uses image to raise questions about power and the body. The poet Sharon Olds is frequently cited as a contemporary Confessional poet. This, however, is not the only reason that “Praying Naked” shares an aesthetic lineage with her. Indeed, the images in Olds’ work and the poems in “Praying Naked” share images that conflate sex and the body of the parent. In “My Mother Gives a Man Permission,” a poem that I also discuss in the following section, the speaker compares the surgical incision in her mother’s neck to “a vulva’s inner lips.” As I discuss later, the speaker makes this comparison as a way to think about

the similarities between the origin of her mother's cancer and the speaker's origin. The impulse to sexualize the parent through image, however, comes from Olds who does so particularly well in her collection *The Father*. In "Nullipara," for example, she describes her dying father trimming a rogue thread from her nightgown over morning coffee, describing the scissors he used as "the color of taint" (6). While there are other moments in Olds' work that are more explicit, "Nullipara" is a valuable example for the way that it ends:

He knows he will live in me  
after he is dead, I will carry him like a mother.  
I do not know if I will ever deliver.

Olds' use of sexual imagery is not for shock value. The image communicates that the sexual body is not just a source of coarse pleasure, but also reveals something deeper and more complex about the speaker's psyche. After all, an image is, as Robert Bly suggests, "the natural speech of the imagination" (20). It makes sense that the imagination would associate images of the sexual body with the parent, but this imagined image also renders whether the speaker will deliver a question of power. In other words, the image presents the speaker with a choice: to give birth to her father or not to give birth to him. This choice carries particular power in context of the rest of Olds' collection, which exposes her father as abusive. Similarly, imagining the mother's surgical incision as a vulva that a man sticks "his slender tools" into also raises questions about power. The mother gave a man permission to "slit her throat" and enter. The violence and sexual imagery work together to complicate the answer to this question: why consent to let this man enter her

body? When such a question feels, to the speaker, impossible to articulate in the moment, images communicate on her behalf.

### **Emotional Evolution: A Discussion of Themes**

It is possible to read “Origin,” the opening poem of “Praying Naked,” as a dramatic monologue, spoken from the mouth of an actual maggot. Such a reading prepares audiences for “Poem from the Mouth of God,” the collection’s only other dramatic monologue, as well as for “On the seventh day God said, *What you’ve got is virgin charm and a knife in your pocket,*” which incorporates other voices in addition to the speaker’s. On the other hand, one can also read “Origin” as wholly lyric, a genre described by Jonathan Culler as one in which the speaker “absorb[s] into [herself] the external world and stamp[s] it with inner consciousness” (2). Reading “Origin” as a lyric poem teaches audiences about the speaker’s attitude toward her own origin story, which she has “stamped” with anxiety—the anxiety she feels having been born from a decaying thing: mourning dove carcass; mother en route to carcass. With her origin always in mind, the speaker undergoes four stages of emotional evolution over the course of “Praying Naked.” In the sections that follow I trace these stages, which begin with the speaker’s rebellion against her mother and the religion she inherited from her. The second shift occurs when the speaker embarks on a figurative homecoming, making peace with her mother before her death. Next, the speaker, deeply ashamed, reckons with the consequences of her previous desire-fueled rebellions until, finally, the collection ends with the speaker’s last stage—a meditation on the anxiety that comes from creating art, one that collapses the wall between the poet and the audience. These shifts not only offer

“Praying Naked” a thematic arc, but also indicate the collection’s interest in the interconnectedness of concepts that seem on the surface utterly disparate, such as birth and death, shame and beauty, mother and daughter.

***The Body’s Rebellion:  
Sexual Prowess as Route to Power***

My voice, a little  
God crudely sculpted.  
—“Hymn”

Four poems into “Praying Naked,” the speaker declares that she cannot forgive her mother “for giving [her] a body” (“My Mother Gives a Man Permission” 27). When she says this, her mother’s own body is on the surgical table—throat is slit open, “the incision / no larger than a vulva’s inner lips,” revealing the place of her thyroid cancer’s “conception,” growth, and removal. Rendering the incision a “vulva” beyond which death was “conceived” reinforces the speaker’s conviction that it is possible to be born from a dead thing, that the speaker’s origin is not so unlike the origin of her mother’s disease. This shared origin deeply unsettles the speaker. Indeed, her mother has been sick so long that the speaker can’t be sure whether or not her own gestation and birth sapped energy her mother needed to slow down her dying.

Even though the speaker feels immense guilt that, while her mother’s body fails, she lives easily within her healthy one, the speaker also feels angry that her mother disapproves of the ways she would like to use her healthy body. This resentment is particularly clear whenever her mother attempts to bring the speaker back to Catholicism, a faith that, to the speaker’s mind, suppresses female sexuality and seeks to control female bodies by opposing contraceptives and abortion. To express her opposition, the

speaker frequently subverts religious language, relics, and ideas as a way to rebel against her mother. When she lost her virginity, for example, the speaker wore “a red dress & smelled like the honey / of [her] mother’s biblical Heaven!” (8-9). The exclamation point communicates on the one hand physical bliss and on the other caustic bitterness. In addition to subverting religious language like “the land of milk and honey,” the speaker also undermines her mother’s advice (“Deuteronomy” 3:20). In the past, for example, her mother used to try to make the speaker fear pre-marital sex, suggesting that “*God...watches our every move*” and would reprimand her if He saw her with a man. Instead of fearing such punishment, the speaker puts on an exhibitionistic show of losing her virginity for God so He can “praise [her] / for how selflessly [she] offered [her]self to the hungry,” a martyr of the body (10, 16-17).

The speaker’s rebellion is not always driven by irony. Indeed, she frequently rejects the notion that her body is a chaste and holy relic by sincerely celebrating her sexual power. “Katie Condon, an American, One of the Roughts” accesses that jubilant space by appropriating Walt Whitman’s boundless confidence and unapologetic voice. In this way, the speaker differentiates herself from her mother, who taught her that a woman’s sexual body is for the purpose of creation, and that to wield it in any other way would be sinful. Yet, the speaker finds joy using her body in this self-assured if sinful way, claiming that “you have never touched a woman if you haven’t touched [her]” (1). Her rebellion is successful insofar as it allows her to create a healthier and more complex understanding of her body. Nevertheless, despite her celebration, the speaker’s body is still not *entirely* her own. Indeed, she seeks sexual pleasure for the benefit of others

saying, resigned, that her body is for others to touch, that “[she] know[s] it is good for [them] to do so” (10-11). There is certainly confidence in this statement; however, the speaker still defines her body’s purpose in relation to other people’s hunger, other people’s need. She hasn’t escaped the religion that suppresses female agency—she is only a new kind of martyr.

***Remembering the Body Beyond the Womb:  
Humanizing the Mother***

I can grieve her not as a nation grieves its commander, but as a woman  
grieves another woman.  
—“When the Professor Asked the Workshop...”

In the second movement of the speaker’s development, she begins to see her mother as a complex, multifaceted person rather than a set of ideas. Instead of critiquing the mother’s treatment of the speaker’s body, she wants to understand her mother’s experience of desire. “When the professor asked the workshop, *Who is left that will speak about poetry ideologically*, I thought with abandon *ME!* and then,” appears exactly halfway through the collection and revisits a scene that plays out earlier in the book: the mother’s surgery. Previously, the speaker was preoccupied with her inability to forgive her mother “for giving [her] a body,” but in this poem the speaker is fully present, noting that “the sutures they used to close the slit in her [mother’s] neck / look less like life-lines than [the speaker] assured herself they would” (6-7). In the past, the speaker’s mind would have turned somehow toward her own body, but here the speaker’s concern for her mother is clear. She is terrified—the sutures do not look like they will save her mother’s body from itself. In this moment of the speaker’s development she suddenly wants to

understand the ways she and her mother are similar, are *of* one another. “If I speak ideologically,” the speaker says, “it’s because I desperately want to know the exact stitch / memory & language used to weave each other into the dress / my mother picked out special, knowing how beautifully it’d fall to the / floor” (“When the professor asked...24-26). In this moment, the mother has a body beyond the one that is dying; she has an identity beyond “oppressive parent.” The speaker humanizes the mother in a way she was unable to before. Her mother is not just her guardian, her creator; she is a woman who is knowledgeable about desire.

The speaker gazes at her mother with newfound tenderness even when desire is not present. She listens with care as her mom talks about things as mundane as the pros and cons of getting a new dog. She gazes fondly out at the path cleared of snow so her mother can reach the compost pile. Instead of scoffing at her mother when she bows her head “either into prayer or sleep,” the speaker lets her mother rest while the speaker observes the other details of her homecoming—twilight bluing the snow, the wind’s night summoning song (“In Winter” 18). The speaker regrets acting like the fledgling in “Parable,” who hopped from the nest too soon. Now that she is back, she cherishes whatever advice her mother offers, however ominous. “*Desire’s pretty promises / will bury you,*” the mother says (“Parable” 14). Such advice is invaluable. The speaker knows now she could have used it a long time ago.

***The Aftermath of Desire:  
Acknowledging Shame***

Lord, if you will not let me exist  
without shame at least leave me while I whisper



over my blessed mother's naked body  
the words you said would save me.  
—"Praying Naked"

Three-quarters of the way through the manuscript, the speaker's mother is gone, leaving the speaker with no one to rebel against, no one to critique but herself. As the speaker's gaze turns inward, she confirms that her blind rebellion and reckless pursuit of desire did often bring her pleasure in some form. She also realizes, however, that her pleasure came at the cost of something greater. "I've been called a home-wrecker" the speaker admits, "for welcoming Desire when it strut in / with a cigarette in one hand and an agenda in the other" ("Desire is a Sickness" 14-17). Her affair with a married man is the most obvious reason for this new emotional shift. When her mother found out, she did not "speak to [her] for days" ("From Space, the Valley..." 19). When the speaker imagines the man's daughter finding her to ask "*why?*" she can only offer the daughter her shame: "I don't believe myself worthy / of merciful men. // Don't dress yourself in that ash" ("To an Ex..." 14, 18-20). This statement harks back to the ash-coated flowers at the beginning of "To an Ex-Lover's Daughter." Just because a desire seems too beautiful not to pursue, the speaker knows now, doesn't mean it will not end in destruction and cinders, coating everything in ashy shame.

It would be easier for the speaker if her shame did not manifest itself in her life beyond the affair. But driving through the night, her sense of unworthiness overwhelms her. Watching porn in her bedroom reduces her to tears. An interesting product of the speaker's shame are questions that come to her in such moments: "Is it wrong to feel a hurt kind of beautiful?" Her shame gives the speaker the distance she needs to synthesize

the consequences of her desire, to understand its origins and how they have changed her. She is, for example, much more skeptical and guarded now—she uses her shame as a boundary. For example, in “Driving, 4 a.m.” the speaker use her shame as a way to control how much her loved ones understand about her interior life: “when they wake they will know only as much / of [the speaker] as [she] let[s] them” (17-18). Her earlier rebellions required some vulnerability, but not much mindfulness. Her shame, on the other hand, has made her question vulnerability’s usefulness and favor self-awareness over pleasure.

***The Anxiety of Creation:  
Birth, Death, and Artifice***

She is less afraid of dying  
than she is of living.  
—“At the #1 Fried Chicken & Seafood”

By the end of “Praying Naked,” and certainly by its last poem “Resurrection,” the speaker has returned to thinking about creation—the anxiety that surrounded her own birth from a dying body, but also the anxiety that comes with creating art. Much of “Praying Naked” is based on my own emotional experience as my mother struggled with thyroid cancer. Writing about her illness gave me permission to preemptively grieve—the poem was a space to process my fear and my anger that she might be taken away so young. Because I am thinking of my own mother as I write the poems that include her, the line between nonfiction and imagined narratives blur. Much like Confessional poetry, the speaker in “Praying Naked” often confesses to things that never happened, including that her mother is dead. Indeed, in reality my mother is alive, fully recovered. Naming my speaker “Katie Condon,” however, and claiming that her mother died raises an issue

frequently discussed in conversations about contemporary poetry: who gets to write what? I think that openly addressing my decision is important for two reasons: on the one hand, this kind of self-interrogation is something the Confessional poets did infrequently and it signals one way that my poetics departs from them. On the other hand, such conversations about ethics introduce a second kind of anxiety of creation to “Praying Naked.” If in the beginning of the book the anxiety was about having been created at all, about having been tasked with a body, then at the end of the book it is the anxiety of creating art, of balancing within that art imagination and fact.

“Resurrection,” the final poem in “Praying Naked,” serves as a kind of *ars poetica* in which the speaker addresses her motivations as an artist, admitting that she wrote her mother “dead & dead & dead / & yet [she] rose / each morning, buoyant / with sun” (9-11). Even when “Resurrection” is not so obviously explicating its own process, its use of neologisms subtly calls into question the poet’s motivations in that they function as veiled insults the speaker directs toward herself. Although poets have frequently employed neologisms in their work—Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” is just one example—this poem is more in the vein of Lydia Yuknavitch’s playful and powerful wordplay in her memoir *The Chronology of Water*. Her neologisms are particularly striking in a scene toward the end of the book when she writes about her “heatsurge” of sexuality during pregnancy (246). Yuknavitch’s neologisms in this passage, such as “milkworld,” and “songstory,” work on two levels: one, they reinforce her power to create another body without muting her own sexuality, which “goes to bed in some other women when they are big with life”; two, they draw attention to Yuknavitch’s role as

writer of this passage—her new language to describe the sexual agency she discovered during pregnancy is powerful for the ways it draws attention to itself as a new language. *Look what else she's created*, this infant lexicon says.

The neologisms in “Resurrection” call attention to themselves in similar ways. The poet created them, they are artifice, they underline the process of their own creation. Moreover, these neologisms frequently serve as new names for the speaker: “doubtswaddled,” “griefdaughter,” “*Judaschild*” (11, 21-22). Yet, despite the shame that is connoted by these neologisms, the speaker does not apologize. Instead she asks: “Have I sinned?” This is instructive for two reasons: on a level of plot, has the speaker sinned for believing her mother would succumb to her illness? But also on a level of poetics—is it a sin to imagine alternate realities in the poetic space? “Resurrection does not moralize, nor does it offer answers. While the speaker holds herself accountable by interrogating herself in front of her audience, at the same time she refuses to apologize. This refusal implies confidence, or at least a stubbornness, in her condition as an artist. What human does not fear death and grieve preemptively? What artist does not seek to bear that which her imagination has conceived?

“It is possible,” Yuknavitch writes after her son is born, “to carry life and death in the same sentence. In the same body. It is possible to carry love and pain. . . What if there is hope in that” (251). “Resurrection” carries life and death in the same word: in order to be reborn, you must die first. In this way, “Praying Naked” ends both far from and exactly where it began. Indeed, at the beginning of “Praying Naked,” the speaker considers how she was born from a dying body, but at that point could not yet understand

how such a dichotomy could incite anything but anxiety and fear. At the root of her rebellion early in the manuscript, after all, is the desire to characterize herself in only one way—sexually free—rather than, say, in pain and in love all at once. What the speaker begins to realize toward the middle of the book is something her mother knew all along: no physical distance can separate them entirely. Just as birth and death live in the same body, so do mother and daughter. And yet, after the mother’s “death” the speaker feels only absence, and in her new solitude only shame. Or, shame is the only affect she is aware of consciously. Something within her is doing its work, teaching her that “wherever there is beauty there is intention / to grow numb in it,” just as wherever there is beauty there is also dread, wherever there is death there is also her mother’s life returning (22-23). In her willingness to create a new language of closeness, the speaker demonstrates in the final poem her new ability to identify hope in the proximity not only of death and birth but in the presence of her mother inside herself.

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# PRAYING NAKED

**ONE**



## Origin

I was born inside a mourning dove.  
There is wind in all of us.

Here I am  
in a century that has its eyes

shut tight—don't I know exactly  
why I'm here. In the end

the sun varnishes us all  
in amber. Undress

for that light. There is flight  
in all of us. Find me

in the pasture sewing  
bluebonnets into each bend

of our laughter. I was born  
inside the decayed mourning

dove you found shaded  
in lavender. Call me *maggot*.

When you die, don't worry.  
I will rise up from you

opaque as the angel  
admiring your rotted waist.

I, too, will die—am  
dying—though I

am a maggot, though I covet  
fragrance from your breathless

flowering. I am born  
from grieving. I am

as afraid as you.

**On the seventh day God says: *What you've got is virgin charm & a knife in your pocket.***

& I'm like, *Thanks?*

The heart finds its anchor in the sky.

The woman is told she is a tabernacle.

On the forty-third day, I confuse my hangover for grief.

God says, *Your longing will be for me, & I will dominate you.*  
& I'm like, *Nope!*

The morning wears a cotton dress.

Is this all I will amount to:

The hot breath of months in my pocket?  
Every telephone pole I mistook for a tree?  
The melancholy suspicion of library security?

Nah.

The bartender hums the tune  
of a hummingbird rising from its flower.

I say: *I inherited Sappho's pussy*  
& I believe me.

God says, *Thou shalt not kill.*  
& I'm like, *But what about with my eyes.*

I never asked for the capacity to love  
ugly things, but here I am.

Carnation, daisy, lavender lately the lavender of late.

I boil my stock exclusively with wishbones.

I say, *I like my men smooth & far away, reticent  
as a bookshelf.*

& God butts in: *I can do that for you.*

His eyes search me like a pendulum.

I've scraped a dead man's ashes out  
from under my fingernails like lice eggs.

A woman raised in contest with other women is a child of God.

God says, *This is getting serious.*  
& I'm like, *You bet.*

I remember my ignorance  
& miss it.

The skies open silently with a woman's legs.

Morning glory, morning glory, morning hallelujah.

## The Sacrifice's Prayer

I cannot offer you a sky & an egret  
or a small marsh & thirty turtles  
gathered & sunning all in a row.

You are not an airboat. Or a steeple  
from which I hang my white sails.  
Perhaps you are a window, or a vessel

tailored for the soul & the quiet  
*tinks* of rain on a car-hood—for my voice  
that said, *I grabbed the blanket from the bed*

*of my truck*, when I really wanted  
to grab the rain & sea. There is a sea  
at the back of my eyes.

In it, a dock & your body bobbing  
in waves disjointed by wind.  
You are not a house, not a journey.

The hand with which I bless you  
knows no god—is not so proud  
to prevent me from falling to my knees

& huddling there with childless  
murmuring. Your pity like the dark  
lull of the marsh.

The shipping channel is dredged  
& deep, dredged & deep.  
I've seen you gather the sea

around your face like a mask.  
Help me mask me. I cannot find mine.  
It is somewhere here—

I've felt its sleep for years  
beating its fists against  
the dark in my eyes.

## Aubade

There are mornings that don't breathe at all.  
Always arriving, the jays appear. Or  
the morning exhales and I nod at the sun.  
I take my birth control right on time.

Imagine: the glare of so many windshields  
made of rain; dawn's abandoned husk on the lawn.  
*Listen to me!* I plead to no one. Right now, if I were a  
mother, darkness would wait or come running.

My own mother said:  
*If a woman held her infant by the feet from a window  
I'd understand.*

In the air, humming birds battle over sugar water.  
This is a symbol for my life. I fight and fight. I wake up.  
Steam rises, then disappears, above a dark stream.

## Praying Naked

I've never let a man love me  
without feeling very Mary Magdalene about it.

Just the other night I was dancing with a friend  
of a friend & he got handsy & I got servant-minded

letting him move his grip from my waist to my hips  
& lower, while a Motown base boomed through the opaque

& sweaty darkness. It wasn't guilt I felt  
when I decided I was obliged to let him

explore the finer points of my swaying  
body. Maybe it was loneliness. Maybe

it was my own desire to be desired, since, if a man  
wants me, I know I have at least a little worth left.

Or it's payback for the hours I spent treating  
every bead on the rosary as the Virgin Mary's nipples,

pressing each one to my mouth  
& murmuring her own prayer over them.

If I have offended the Lord  
in my manner of worship, then the Lord

should not have made women so beautiful.  
Look at us. Even when we are stripped

of our bodies—reduced to prayers & beads, shadows  
the music rubs its hum against—even then

we are gorgeous. & even then we are unsure

of our worth. Lord, if you will not let me exist  
without shame at least leave me while I whisper

over my blessed mother's naked body  
the words you said would save me.

## My Mother Gives a Man Permission

to slit her throat. The incision  
no larger than a vulva's inner lips,  
the surgeon slips his slender tools in.

*It is simpler than her first time,*  
he says—the nodules curled in the throat  
almost at peace.

Rain, & in the late morning  
my knees scraped from kneeling  
at the mouth of the lake.

*Simpler, but not the last time,*  
he says—death growing again  
& again because it grew

the first time. My first lover  
forever dressing in my car's backseat  
by the lake. In her neck,

death's conception like a hand  
curling to a fist. In the hospital,  
my mother willing birth

& so I was. In the hospital,  
some man willing life  
& so she is, still.

Death curls & hardens, rain  
gaining speed, rising  
heat in the backseat

& I was—am far—  
from the edge of forgiving  
my mother for giving me

a body. Gaining speed, she  
wakes, sewn. Rain, late  
morning, shore

so familiar it bleeds.

## **Volatile Elegy**

I left a very convincing suicide note in the chrysanthemums.  
How I love pollen & my sticky fingers!

Is being dead all fun & games?  
This comet will sleep upon this park bench.

In my hair, tangled like the possibility of life elsewhere,  
God places a flower.

3am & the North Star writhing. A mourning dove. A glassy eye.  
The stars are what the dead get hard for.

*Sometimes I love god, & sometimes I love geraniums.*  
Take it, the sorrow my mouth makes.

A flower for the lady who is so beautiful.  
A lady for the ground that is so beautiful.

I hold my lust like a pool in my palm  
(some honey for the dead) (some nectar for my God).

Tonight the stars will share my bed.



## What Matters Most

The pines; the moan trains cleave through the night with;  
my father hardening against porn he'll forget  
to delete from the browser history while the creek  
hurries down a cliff face & my mother leans  
against her window to hear that water's pulsing; white  
powder from a moth wing left on the porch-light  
I sit beneath watching the sage I grew from seed  
observe its home above the parking lot while a spider builds  
(as my mother did) a home where it can manage one.

Tell me that the mountains reignite, that snow  
gasps itself back into air, that the plane  
flying overhead carries people who want  
to arrive where they land—that the night  
will rupture into a morning heavy  
with rain & fledglings. I am not convinced  
that my desire to sing  
to the lake I want to lose my breath in  
matters in the slightest —but that foothill &  
the tractor trailer heaving itself up it that cicada this  
horizon gray with downtown's insistent light my breath still  
insisting its presence in my chest like a hymn like a

hymn sung            to oneself            in the car            after years  
                 it bursts from            the pew-shelf            into my hands  
the dust that            follows            matters            it settles  
                 in the outstretched            hands of the light.

## Hymn

Standing on the deck mid-rain  
I watch the wind rouse the pines

their needles brittle  
& thirsty. Earlier, instead

of saying “penis,” the professor  
with three degrees demanded I say

“phallus” in our discussion of *Othello*  
& I know I am being obvious

when I say these pines are phallic  
that they could be God’s

dick pressing hard into the earth  
some believe he continues to make new

but I’ve already said it—forgive me.  
Dear God, this is not a prayer:

*penis dick cock balls*

The pines are writhing.

*penis dick cock balls*

What good is the wind, what good  
is my mouth, if I am only allowed  
to name politely?

Even God shouts:  
*Penis dick cock balls!*

The rain falls all over his face  
& you can’t tell him that isn’t  
happiness.

God, your silhouette is smooth  
& slender on the curtains.

*penis dick cock balls*

Dear God, come to bed  
while rain slips through the sky's sieve

& the birds flit around that wetness  
like tongues.

*penis dick cock balls*

This is not a prayer.

This is wind, this is pine  
bending breathless

into the wetness night sheds.

*penis dick cock balls*  
*penis dick cock balls*

My voice, a little  
God crudely sculpted.

**TWO**

**Katie Condon, an American, One of the Roughts, a Kosmos in the Flesh.**

You have never touched a woman if you haven't touched me.

I call to you from where I swim near the shore. When I call to you, my breasts rise from the  
water so nicely.

Not even you can resist me. There's not a single blemish on my

soul. Hot soul! Soul of  
sweat & lipstick, soul positioned  
in truth! Soul cloaked

by my bright body rising now from the river's clutch. My soul calling you. My breasts &  
heart &  
hips sidling up in the grass to meet you.

Feel even my cheek against your palm.

Is it my clamor that stalls you? I shout at the sky & claw its ether down so you might lay  
me  
upon it.

When you take my body finally into your mouth, my soul will not return the love you  
offer me. I  
will not thank you for liking the touch of me.

I know it is good for you to do so.

## After all, St. Catherine is my namesake

Because I have no food to give  
I give the stray cat a quick scratch behind her ears  
& now she won't stop mewling  
for more on my windowsill. Her green  
eyes are as wide as my own

the first time I moved aside  
my panties for a boy: crowded in my car's backseat,  
I wore a red dress & smelled like the honey  
of my mother's biblical Heaven!

*God*, my mother lectured, *watches our every move*:  
watched the boy indelicately take me into his mouth,  
pretending he knew exactly what to do.

I'm pretending I don't hear that damn cat's *mew mew mew*.  
Imagine if I'd lost my virginity mewling!

If anything I was bored,  
waiting for God to tap on my windshield & praise me  
for how selflessly I offered myself to the hungry.

## We Need to Talk

It's not that I don't love you  
or that I'm incapable of loving.

I don't know how to love only you.

Listen: I love you today  
& also Bradley the bus boy from the Bourbon Orleans Hotel Bar  
who, when he collected my half-eaten po'boy, smirked at me  
like I was crawfish he'd love to clean out.

& yesterday I loved Jason,  
the Swiss yoga instructor at LA Fitness,  
whose voice lilts like a harp from the front of the room—  
& I know you know that a voice is a jet on which I fly  
First Class into the arms of desire, but, honey,  
know I loved you deeply yesterday, too.

I do wish love were simpler.  
Like the birds & the bees.

Actually,  
I know very little about how birds love.  
But I know bees have fucked the roses into cliché.

You are cliché.  
Or if you're not, you will be.

Darling, what man wouldn't I love to be a flower?



## Ode to Gabriella

I buy larkspur on the one-week anniversary  
of the musician not calling me back.

More than likely he's out with Gabriella, a cellist  
he's been seeing according to a mutual friend.

I am no musician (never had the patience to practice)  
but what I lack in patience I make up for in nerve:

Gabriella, you are beautiful.

When you pull your bow across his strings  
your arms bend like my larkspur bends toward morning.

Your curls strewn across your chest like glissandos  
he'll sing while you compose yourself atop him.

Gabriella, lift your head up from that tired instrument.  
I have lips full as hydrangeas. Your legs, each a stalk in bloom.

Bend yourself toward my morning  
& let me climb into you like a bee into a foxglove.

Let's root ourselves on every highway median,  
in every rancher's pasture. Come with me

my tall flower, my sweet Gabriella.  
Fill my entire field with music.

## Timestamps

Ten hours ago, Adam Liddy liked my profile picture alone in his Asheville apartment. My brown eyes coaxed him back seven months to the time I pulled him by his shirtsleeve onto the dance floor in the barn, poured him a shot of bourbon, shared a blanket on the porch, asked him to close the flue of the woodstove at the party because it was getting too hot. He must've remembered my laughter as I climbed onto the puny wooden raft at midnight to listen to him describe what being suddenly lusted after by many women feels like & how he would never cheat on his girlfriend. *Never*, he said.

Nine hours ago, Adam Liddy wrote me an e-mail to catch me up on his life: his non-existent & therefore perfect teaching load, his new French fellowship, & his recent breakup. What he didn't write but wanted to was that he'd convinced himself desire isn't tangible unless you act on it—that when we climbed into the trailer storing the left-handed desks, that when I sat down in one & looked up at him, just before a security guard shined his flashlight onto my shadowed face, desire wasn't thrashing around like a snake under his boot.

What I didn't say but should've was: *Adam, I'd never cheat on my boyfriend, either*—& I wouldn't. But there's nothing wrong with getting off on the shape tension takes in a small space, with lifting your eyes up over the wall you've built & named *Life* to see how you might be different.

Adam, there's nothing wrong with desiring what you know you can't have—nothing wrong with playing with potential like a housecat plays with a bird it won't mean to kill.

## Giving Myself Advice

Katie, it's clear you want to tear through his body  
like a derailed freight car through a turnip field.  
Forgive me for sounding aggressive.  
All I mean is recklessness turns you on.

Admit it, you love a lawless man:  
a man who scales mountains without any underwear on,  
a man who can open you up  
a stubborn bottle of beer using only his teeth.

The art of recklessness is hard to get right—  
it's about finesse, which might not make sense  
to you lately, Katie. You, who scrolls through Facebook  
all morning, thinking an act of recklessness

is sharing the cat video your mom posted  
on your great aunt's wall, which you're watching now  
for the third morning in a row!  
Katie, get off your ass & be somebody

somebody would like to fuck.  
This does not make you an object—it makes you  
Desire itself! Desire, when you want  
to lure a reckless man do not shout

that you're going to plow through his body  
like a derailed freight car through a turnip field  
(the poem began poorly). No, Desire, if you love  
a reckless man, do not chase him on his tiny misadventures.

Let him scale you like a cliff-face  
only after he's chased you down your tracks  
for a good while, eyes wide & mouth open  
gathering what he can of your madly showering sparks.

## At Poetry Readings I'm Always Drunk

I put on lipstick & ride my bike to the reading for the erotic juxtaposition.

I have conversations & pretend I smoke cigarettes by smoking them.

I rise from my chair with Holly-Golightly-type-laughter-&-grace

& hope I am being sexualized by everyone.

I knock back a shot & sit somewhat still listening to people read

like capital-P-poets & buy their books mostly out of confusion.

Sometimes, the poems aren't afraid of mystery

& people get dense with quiet.

On coasters, I write down the lines I'm convinced I'll reuse later, like:

*I write to be ancient and alone.*

To the readers, I speak ineptly about how happy I am

to have met them. How honestly I want to live

& not too quickly. From the other side of the big room,

I watch myself mumble self-consciously. Smile

stupidly. In my mind, I'm already riding my bike into the old night,

like a drunk astronaut toward the moon.

## I'm a Kick-Ass Woman

Ask anybody. This ass has never been kicked  
to the curb. I do the kicking. I'm a nasty-ass woman  
drinking chamomile tea at dusk. I know what I've got  
& it's a throne for an ass. Grab it. Kiss it. Pop  
the pimple on that ass. See what happens when you  
disagree with my ass. I've got a bad-ass ass. A kick-ass ass.  
A good-pair-of-jeans-is-hard-to-find-type-ass. Cue Flannery's  
ass, *as broad & innocent as a cabbage*. I'm getting literary  
on your ass. Listen: you can't have *passion*  
without *ass*. Or *Parnassus*. Make way for my poetic ass,  
as essential & enduring as your thesaurus  
but sexier. I'd tattoo the *Cantos* on my ass  
if it would make it less boring. This Is Just to Say: *A Carafe Is a Blind*  
*Ass*, or: I'm no Modernist. I'm the future  
of The Poetics of Kick-Ass—the voice of a nation  
from the mouth of a woman with the keys  
to the van that fits all of your sweet-asses. Climb in.  
We're bound for the coast. Bet your ass  
we'll be there before dawn. Sit back & watch  
my Walt-Whitman-dashboard-hula-girl shake his ass  
all the way across the American desert  
we'll make an oasis of by the time we're through.

**When the professor asked the workshop, *Who is left that will speak about poetry ideologically?* I thought with abandon *ME!* & then**

I Googled “ideology” that night when I got home. Who am I kidding? I know nothing about the science of ideas, though I read

as much Kant as I can. At the end of the day, all I can recall is the way the light tripped down from the fluorescent bulbs

onto my mother’s face when they wheeled her past us into post-op. How the sutures they used to close the slit in her neck

looked less like life-lines than I assured myself they would. Teach me something about the ideology of women: how we can crave motherhood

& autonomy at the same time, knowing both are gardens for loneliness despite our daughters or our lovers leaving our face damp with reckless kissing.

I’m sure Freud has opinions about why daughters & lovers & mothers share the same hotel room in my unconscious, but my intentions are pure: I want to learn

the path my mother’s finger traveled down the sternum of the first person she fucked but didn’t love so I can grieve her not as a nation grieves its commander, but as a woman

grieves another woman. We all know we turn into our mothers, & hers died young in the grip of her body’s disease. Please, tell me one more time

what Derrida said about language—was it that we can deconstruct it as we do a cadaver: cut into a word to understand

what prevented it from keeping itself alive? I don’t know. I don’t know much beyond what language does when I fuss with it

& put it all in tidy rows—that a word can walk toward me then like my mother’s ghost. That it can be dusk all day. That we are self-taught

in the philosophy of our own desire. If I speak ideologically, it’s because I desperately want to know the exact stitch

memory & language used to weave each other into the dress my mother picked out special, knowing how beautifully it’d fall to the floor.

# THREE

## In Winter

Even the deer love convenience.  
Their droppings litter the grassy path to the tree-line  
dad plowed for mom so she can reach the compost pile  
when business draws him away.

Twilight turns the snow blue & the trees  
are cello strings the wind pulls its bow across.  
Driving home after dinner, mom says  
she wants a dog, but is feeling timid—lately,

when the opportunity of a companion presents itself  
the bitch miscarriages, or the pup tests positive  
for a fatal disorder, or my mom's own body gives out  
(for the second, third, fourth time).

Adopting a dog isn't worth the risk, mom says.  
The snow on the driveway left black from her spinning tires.  
From the living room, I watch the deer  
emerge from the woods as slow as twilight.

They bow their heads—as mom bows hers now  
either into prayer or sleep—& they begin to eat  
the waterlogged & shit-strewn grass.  
So this is what it's like, coming home.

Mom snores herself awake,  
straightens up, tends to her knitting.  
On the path, the deer are little bass clefs.  
The wind's enormous instrument urges us all into night.



## Driving, 4 a.m.

As if the valley were a wound, fog  
covers it with its gauze, rendering the light  
worthless, so I pull over the car & sob.

Somewhere in these mountains there is a robin  
watching her nest from a neighboring pine  
& somewhere there is a falcon screeching

for its mate & somewhere in another life  
I am not on the side of the road wishing the doe  
crossed the highway a few moments sooner

so I'd have a reason to lift myself out of myself  
& drift over to inspect the intestines that tumbled out  
of the gash my Toyota ripped in her belly.

It's been so long since I've understood the world  
as a place I deserve to be alive in. Somewhere beyond  
this valley, people I love are long ago asleep

& when they wake they will know only as much  
of me as I let them. How easy I've made living seem.  
How willingly the mountains lent me their flaking

birch & bird song, their rising mist & moss  
so I could mask my constant hum of pain  
& enter each day convincingly alive.

Wherever there is beauty there is intention  
to grow numb in it. Somewhere in another life  
I am already dead & somewhere in the mountains

there is a black bear gliding across a ridge,  
glaring down at the valley where I remain wary  
of the stretch of road I cannot see.

## Don't Be Bitter, Baby!

"Each one of my breasts," she cried, "is 3lbs  
of pure gold  
& if you don't believe me, tough!"

She thinks the secret to possessing  
beauty is to be nauseously overwrought about everything

& I hate to admit, occasionally she's right:

sometimes the only way to solve my hunger is to scream  
*I have a vast lust for beef!* as I drive through  
McDonald's at 3am

& sometimes wearing a boa to the supermarket  
is the only cure for my sorrow.

She tells me I glitter  
& brags that the guy she took home last night  
looked like George Clooney & God's flower child.

The world isn't ugly, she tells me, if you let it borrow your stilettos.  
She giggles, "Don't be bitter.  
Eat lipstick. Sob onto your mirror."

& I do,

each tear ballooning the reflection of my grievances  
falling red from my hypocritical mouth.

## How to Know the Wildflowers

On YouPorn there is a girl getting fucked  
in a field filled with wildflowers.

She doesn't moan like the other porn stars  
screwed from behind by plumbers & pool boys.

Quiet in my computer's blue glow, she delivers  
her body, bending willingly to his whims.

If she is the wind, he is a quavering thistle,  
his thorns reaching out to cut her breasts

for no good reason. This is not the first time  
I am drunk & crying watching free porn.

I touch my breast like that will remove his thorns.  
Is it wrong to feel a hurt kind of beautiful?

Buckwheat. Honeysuckle. Swamp-rose-mallow.

## Parable

Rage & oregano.

The open window.

The lawn.

A fledgling hops the nest  
while the robin is gone.

Steam from the pot.

Tomatoes. Tomatillos. Ricotta.

Same as anywhere else: a mother's corpse stored  
in an armoire of ash. There is want  
for miracle. Aspen shade. Chrysanthemums.

Caterpillar

in the basil

Mother said  
you should have killed.

Liver & current.

Blood & sand.

Dove songs.

Early kale.

Mother said,

*Desire's pretty promises  
will bury you.*

You balance on her tomb.

Foxglove. Forsythia. A bad spill  
on the white carpet.

Get the bleach.

Hold

the baby.

The fledgling shakes in the cardboard box.

Dusk bears dawn bears dusk.

## Getting Through Monday

It's difficult lately to see the point  
in even the world's most beautiful efforts.

For instance, the fog that covered the creek this morning  
like a veil the wind moved aside every so often  
so the light could soften the water's rough face

or the little blonde girl who sang  
*My Darling Clementine* to the monarch butterfly  
she cradled dead in her hands.

Today, even the prospect of making  
love is unfulfilling. The sun is out  
& I have no reason to be dismal.  
I don't want to die.

I have so far understood my life  
as something I can control,  
realize now it is not, & for recognizing this  
many say I should be grateful.

I'm working on it.

In the meantime, life slogs through me  
like a slug through the garden & other people die  
for no good reason while I watch construction workers  
move across the roof they're building  
& consider how this scene could stand for time—

how each shingle is a year in our lives, & each nail  
something beautiful passing through it  
anchoring us to the scaffolding (which is memory)  
& reminding us that we have no choice  
but to be here until the rain  
soaks us weary & we fall, leaving only  
dust (which is the soul) & heaps of concrete.

## Poem From the Mouth of God

There is a reason  
I have yet to let anyone  
see my face. I am a lonely man

& socially inept. I send angels  
into women's rooms  
because I never mastered the art

of non-offensive pick up lines  
& even with a wingman  
only one woman's ever said yes.

She is tired of me.  
Who can blame her  
when I spend my days

at every window in the house  
shuttering & unshuttering myself  
from the view I created

& grew afraid of. My son  
doesn't visit anymore  
& you're not surprised.

Me neither. After centuries,  
the first miracle I performed  
was this morning

when I raised myself  
out of bed & lifted a razor  
to my horrible face.

What advice do I have left  
except that you should make things  
& keep them closer to you than ethers away.

Do not be like me.  
This light is the only good  
I've offered you,

but even light, too often, dies  
in a furious burst.

## Vow

On nights I can hear the owl calling from the woods  
the moon is no longer the only thing I project myself onto

& thank God because if Sarah says, *ampersands are so 2009*  
then I can only imagine what year the moon went out of style.

I wonder if Sappho knew when she wrote,  
“gem light / not one human heart has ever resisted it

or the moon,” that one day the moon would be a faux pas?  
That owl is Sappho & Sarah can be the moon

& I will remain my same self alone in bed wondering  
if what I’m hearing now is the wind or a gentle rain beginning

& here is Sappho calling me from the woods saying,  
*Come with me, Katie, & Don’t bother with your clothes,*

& I won’t—I will let Sarah’s old light dress me  
& if it is raining the rain will adorn me like 3,000 sapphires

she will consider long out of vogue, forgetting  
that Time & its made-up constraints don’t concern me

especially since I am near the edge of the woods now,  
the place where Time cannot follow.

I promise you this:  
even if my words are destroyed they will be remembered.

## At the #1 Fried Chicken & Seafood

Before I knew what *senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo* meant  
I thought it meant: *the angels from their perches descend  
like grackles to collect my soul & other souls.*

Collected first will be my mother's soul, since she is so close to dying.  
*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo*—I am twenty-five & far from dying  
& walk with great purpose to the fried-chicken-joint

where I speak with homeless men about my life openly.  
Like angels from their perches grackles fly down  
to eat food people let fall from to-go boxes

& all of their eyes are black & small, so small.  
*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*  
Away with you, birds, who glare at me

like my dying mother!  
My mother who has been dying  
slowly since I was a little girl.

*Ti rispondo, ti rispondo.*

Outside of the restaurant, I always intend to speak  
with homeless men briefly & of the weather only  
but it never works out.

I hand them my name like a dollar:  
*Katie. Ti rispondo. Katie. Ti rispondo.*  
*Katie, Katie, Katie.*

Those homeless men clutch my name  
against their chests like a dollar that will love them.  
*Senza tema* & they grab my arm

*senza tema* & I run from them  
like my mother runs from death: very slowly  
despite her effort—



*Senza tema, ti rispondo,*  
death is coming,  
it is coming.

Of death I intend always to speak bravely  
& of strangers' deaths only  
but it never works out.

I know *senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo* means  
without fear of infamy I speak  
but what does it mean

that my mother's dying, has been dying  
has been has been has been?  
*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo:*

I'm afraid like a grackle.  
Like an angel.  
Like a mother.

*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*  
*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

She is less afraid of dying  
than she is of living.  
Has been. Has been. Has been.

*Senza tema. Ti rispondo.*  
Death is coming.  
There it goes.

## FOUR

## The Real Self is Very Scary

Last night I woke up from a great sex-dream  
that wasn't a dream at all. I was scared of myself  
for even when I was unconscious I was willing.

*The real self is very scary* is a line I stole from a poet  
who, I'd bet anything, has also been awakened  
by her lover in the middle of the night, half aroused  
& half terrified because she wasn't in control.

But when am I in control?

Half the time I am dreaming of my students  
sprouting a second set of arms & wrapping them around me—  
of their being so strong they carry me without a struggle  
down the hall to the principal's office, where I am reprimanded  
for showing them a poem about human grief.  
Half the time I am clawing my way out of a dream  
about my mother growing flowers  
from her chest so she'll look *pretty in her casket*,  
& her hair falls out by the handful.

I don't know if there is a God  
despite my mother trying to convince me of him for nearly 30 years.  
If there is a God, then I've definitely never been in control.

Have I?

I am thinking of certain men who I have awakened  
& stolen from their static lives. Of men I've laid down in groves  
of poison ivy & pleased under the moon, which was cliché  
until just now when I reclaimed the moon.  
Moon, you have seen me control the hands of men, have you not?  
These men, who I have let have me.  
To whom I have said, *the real self is very scary*.  
& I wasn't lying, was I.

## To Every Woman Who's Been Kept a Secret

I'm talking about you, Laurel.  
About Saturday night when it took your boyfriend  
5 hours and 6 beers to bring you up.

Laurel, I don't know where you are, but at the bar  
your name spilled from his mouth like moonlight across the creek  
I initially hoped he and I'd wade naked into.

What else could I do but think of you somewhere in this same night  
laughing, maybe dancing, and as unaware as I was  
that the other of us existed. The worst part, Laurel,

is I can't bring myself to blame him—  
it's easy to say secrecy is bred by lust, but believe me  
lust has little to do with it.

We're all bored, Laurel. I am, aren't you?

On Saturday night, your boyfriend kept you secret  
so I could be a pawn he moved  
across his board of "In Another Life."

In his other life, Laurel, you are a nun in love with Brad Pitt,  
and I am the fountain the penny's thrown into, and he is a bachelor  
with a bottle of bourbon and a waterbed.

In another life, he is smoking cigars on a yacht in Shanghai.  
Or he is a lion eluding his hunter. Or he is Lenny Kravitz  
feeling sexy, if lonely, in his leather. He wants to be the falcon

at rest in the cedar. He wants to be the falconer  
alone in the field. He wants to believe he is a martyr  
in his real life—that we are the hay the fire flares up from.

Let him burn with the whole world watching.  
It's what he doesn't know he wants—to be worthy  
of something fiercer than he is. Of a woman's  
fire. Of the affection we have for him

even as we reach up and wrap his bones in our heat.

## To the Woman Who Accused Me of Not Being a Feminist, I'm Sorry

for pointing out that we are subject to  
& act upon the same ugly desires

that fuel the men who've used us.  
I apologize for every time I've confessed

*I need a man's love, & meant it.*  
Forgive me, please, for continuing

to believe that roses are beautiful.  
Pardon me for loving them more as they wilt,

heavy with dreams of being scattered  
down wedding aisles. It's true:

the mornings I'm coated in sweat & come  
& hear the train heaving over the river

past smoke stacks pushing up their innards  
I don't pause to consider how the world is home

to a million angry phalluses.  
Can you blame me? Look at my man

lying there soaked in what light makes  
it through the curtains—his thin

& gorgeous mouth slack & silenced  
by pleasure our body afforded him.

You can't tell me women should be ashamed  
of their impulse to please—

that we should cast each breast in iron  
& march into the day daring it to try & love us.

I am not sorry I mirror the desire  
none of us can fend off.

If you insist, I will leave you  
to your heavy breasted troops

& climb back into bed  
where I'll resume my life's work.

## Argument for Loving from a Distance

Raining this morning & the foothills are dusted  
with the gray light that comes with bad weather.

Even through the water's falling sound  
the train makes itself heard across the city

like church bells at midnight. What beautiful moaning  
loudness becomes when it's forced to stretch itself

across a distance. Like the way my lover's song greets me  
from upstairs, where he's singing in my shower—

even across our short reach, his voice sounds truer  
than it does when he sings & I am near him. Listening

to him croon through the water's heavy moving,  
I'm certain Eurydice was pleased

when Orpheus looked back too soon.  
How happy it is to die twice

when your reward is your lover's real voice  
reaching you across wind & water & time.

How relieving the realization he is more himself  
without you than when you are spread out

naked below him, your hair tangled in his palms  
& his song diluted from your sating his longing.

What is constant across all love  
is the inevitability of its end.

One of us will grow bored  
or one of us will die & knowing this

Eurydice was best to leave love early.  
Wait too long & he'll stop

singing, even from a distance. Go  
now! Run from your love! May your absent

touch be the bells he hears clanging out from the steeple  
into the gray night that slows into morning,

where the train will try to out-moan the wind,  
where he will liken this moaning to the way

you sounded beneath him. He will pick up his lust  
like a lyre & sing your name trying to reach you

wherever you are. & wherever you are  
you will hear his song haunting the air like mist.

Listen to how entirely he loves you, for the first time.



## To an Ex-Lover's Daughter

At the quarry, where your father  
fucked me the first time, campfire ash  
coated the flowers.

I am vain

& bottle my grief like perfume.  
The fifth time we fucked, your father whispered  
things like:

*On the trail today I stopped  
by the birches & the birches  
told me [something about love].*

My cherry blossom perfume scented  
your mother's  
divorce papers. When you seek

me out & ask *why*?  
I don't know what I'll say.

What can I offer but a mirror  
you might learn from:

I don't believe myself worthy  
of merciful men.

Don't dress yourself in that ash.

## Desire is a Sickness

Outside of the Super Gas in Cookeville, TN  
some guy in a Yankees hat says: *the trees are going ape shit*  
which means their leaves are red now and falling

but I don't notice them much. Instead  
I'm thinking of the woman who wrote:  
*Amber Asan of Nashville is a home-wrecking whore*

on the station's bathroom wall and I'm thinking  
of Amber, too—whether either of them  
is still in Nashville or cares about that man

they passed between them without knowing  
which woman he wanted most. Near the pumps,  
a little girl catches a leaf spinning from a maple

and says something about fire that I barely hear.  
I've been called a home-wrecker  
for welcoming Desire when it strut in  
with a cigarette in one hand and an agenda in the other.

I've done some stupid shit—  
thought men were meant to be with me  
because they said so and because the sun

was hitting their faces through the trees  
in such a way their skin was covered  
in tiny seas of light. At the pump behind me

an SUV plays an impossible love song.  
The trees drop more of their leaves—their  
emboldened nakedness a ritual  
that families park to watch.

Desire is a sickness we all want.

## From Space, the Wildflowers Are One Bouquet on the Valley's Grave

In lieu of flowers, I collected amber  
sap for my mother from the dying  
tree. From space, she purred

*that tree is dying & you  
are taking away what it created  
to heal.* It was a flowering tree. Invisible

from space, the lightning  
loved it too hard. Remember  
that one time I was beautiful

enough to be in a movie? I sat  
yards away from a Weeping  
Cherry. All that wind. The married man

pulled an orphaned petal  
from my hair. His wife  
the entire pasture of poppies

prepared for starlight.  
She, a mother. Death  
sticky in her hands, my mother

would not speak to me for days.  
I was not a mother  
yet. You could see that

from space. Was I the lightning  
or the eye of the satellite, blind  
to everything but the valleys

wild & teeming  
with bees? Either way,  
the wildflower & all her

mothers are accounted for  
from space—every comet  
a witness to their bloom.

## Real Elegy

I will not write: *O! Voices of the ever-living  
tongue of earth, rejoice!* I write the dead down

the way the ground wrote them down:  
using the roots of many flowers.

## Practicing Digressions

*for Richard*

I am eager to grow old. What a joy  
it will be to bear love down  
on whatever daughters I force

into this sometimes lovely world  
preaching similar things, I bet,  
that my mother preached to me

—like: *You are a woman. Praise  
yourself.* What a light her scriptures are  
on this morning that is gray and cool

as the last lake on the mountain  
before it gives itself up to the sky.  
I meant to be telling you about

age, not my mother, who is aging,  
not mountains or mornings  
or the unforgivingly expansive sky. I admit

it will be difficult not to mention  
the robin on the wire, the light  
lifting itself up over my husband's

slender body, which he lives in more  
confidently than I have witnessed of myself.  
I am practicing digressions on you

so that I can prepare for the ways my  
memory will loosen itself from around  
itself, uncoiling like the threads

in the ice-skating penguins sweater  
I'll love when I'm eighty  
and never want to take off, even

as summer's weight bears  
down like my mother bore down  
on me—my mother, whose voice

is familiar in this poem, though, years  
will have bounded by since I heard her  
sing. Where was I—mountains, steep

as memory. Water, morning, light.  
My husband's body stirring, his hands  
trembling after thousands

of mornings exploring every new  
wrinkle on my breasts. Have I  
spoken of birds? How they stay

on longer into the cold than  
they should, and for what? To learn  
how to forage for food that is not there,

to harvest something finally of absence  
that they will keep with them  
when they decide to flit off

into the thick mist of late fall  
that, when I was young, I wanted  
to walk through, believing

I would make myself a ghost.

## Resurrection

If a son can do it, so can a mother.  
gallop through the airport,  
by her own mobility.

was made of her own body.  
of a mother. O, deadalive woman,  
to make another body.

I was a skeptic.  
& yet you rose  
with sun. Call me *Judaschild*  
from the one who bet you

Have I sinned?

It was a relief to imagine you mortal  
like me: your body a walking tremor, carting a haul  
of cannibal cells. O, hunger & thirst. O, the evergrowth  
of death in a mother & its arrival  
& its halt.

Forgive me, Mother, if I have sinned.

Name me *doubtswaddled child*,  
*preemptive griefdaughter*.

Today, through the airport, I walk  
cast in your shadow, the velvet homedarkness  
that created me.

Mine, even. Watch her  
a giddydrunk dove, amazed

How appropriate her tomb  
How typical  
you used a body  
This time, one all your own.

I wrote you dead & dead & dead  
each morning, buoyant  
who took the bag of coins  
eternally dead.

## **EARLY WORK**

The following is a selection of poems that were at one point a part of “Praying Naked.” I chose to edit these poems out of the collection for one of two reasons: (1) I wrote poems at the University of Tennessee that thought through the same themes with more nuance, dynamic perspective, or realized forms, or (2) I decided that a given poem’s attention and tone disrupted the collection’s careful dramatic arc.



## Home Cooking

Paula Deen, I don't care how good your pound cake is  
it's six in the morning. Paula Deen, let me sleep.  
My mother was nearly named Paula, Paula Deen. My mother  
who is drinking her coffee now at six in the morning watching you,  
Paula Deen, & a cardinal flies by & she says audibly, *Oh, Paula Deen.*  
My mother yelling up the stairs to me now something about getting up  
or I'll be late, but Paula, I don't want to wake up— or face any day  
that begins with you praising butter & pecans. Paula Deen,  
for Christ's sake we live in New England! at least offer my mother  
something she can grab ahold of— at least look into the camera & remember  
your own mother at the table crying into her coffee  
because the dawn was coming & what good was that?

Paula Deen, I remember the episode you filmed for the homecoming  
of your sons. You made them lamb shanks, Paula, & my mother was frying  
Canadian bacon in a hot pan. My sister was 3 & she accused my mother,  
Paula, of neglecting her toast butter. Paula, she threw her plate at the wall.  
My mother crying, Paula, & picking up her child's mess. Paula, my mother  
burning the bacon in the pan. Your voice, Paula, soothing as the cardinal's  
neck snapping against the sliding door. Tell me, Paula, what is it like  
to be a mother? Tell me so I might walk up to my own & understand  
her insistence on escaping into your country kitchen, into your honey  
glazed ham factory of joy & laughter scraping through my childhood  
at six in the morning. Paula, you've woken me up so often I've lost count.  
Paula, so often I witness my mother's longing & don't know what to say.

## Instead of Motherhood

try pennywort. Place it in your bra. Take it out.  
Crush it to a pulp & add water slowly.  
Then drink. Then think better of it. Use milk instead.  
Instead, crawl into bed & ask if he'll still love you  
if you never crown your cervix with his come,  
if you want to remain pure instead,  
if you want your body to always be a body  
instead of a marrow-making machine.

Motherhood wouldn't be easy.  
Instead, be careful. Drink vodka instead of pilsner.  
Drink it in the sun with friends. Sip it slowly.  
& wear lipstick (pink instead of red).  
Tell his hands to fuck off.  
Tell your body you'll touch it later in bed.  
Breast-milk smells.  
Wear lace-bras forever instead.

## God Is Alive and Well in Atlantic City

I fear those people who do not acknowledge their own death's beginning,  
like my mother who, when going to the doctor,  
puts on lipstick cheerfully and says, *I won't be gone long!*

My mother sends me money in a greeting card  
with nuns playing poker on the front of the flap—  
watery eyes confusing clubs for clovers.

She manages to keep God-talk down to 2 sentences  
before signing with xo's and I love yous.  
She is losing organs like rain.

She says she fears those people who trade faith  
for immediacy, which means: the people who pursue  
the harvest of the world's hushed echoes.

I think about my mother's thinning hair  
while I stand in line at the grocery store—  
how she used to curl it using hot rags,  
telling me how I would be in the future:  
independent and a virgin.

I remember when she admitted to sleeping with men  
before marriage: rising from her chair  
like an erection rises from the body,  
she handed me a pregnancy test.

I prefer to do my penance publicly.  
My mother cries in the vestibule.  
When I pray to God, God feels far  
away— but my mother loves long distances:

she can talk to people in her pajamas;  
she doesn't have to get done-up;  
when her death finally fills her, she will not  
have to witness our faces wet with acceptance.

## O, Heart Uncovered

I write like an honest woman should:  
all hair & tits, all sentimental  
heartbreak—watch me

invoke live oaks & their haggard swooning  
over a Texas road—watch me  
dwell on men who broke me

out of their own fear,  
which they created from nothing  
& called darkness.

I write words even they will be changed by:

*A minute in the body is a minute  
too lonely to be raptured,  
too heartfelt  
to be recognized—*

I owe their darkness nothing.

I am not ashamed  
of the things that compel me to speak:  
a man undoing me, my heart

uncovered, oak trees hanging themselves  
above Texas streets—  
the streets, like me, embracing

the ground they were laid upon.  
The branches of the only sky they see  
dripping a slow heat down.

## Giving Myself Advice

To control a man, withhold concern.

Drape yourself in silk & saunter through his study in lipstick. Light a cigarette. Arch your lower back & exhale slowly. Don't ask what he's thinking. Leave.

You are Philomel:  
full lips red with your own mouth's  
blood. *Jug, jug.* Language

does not yield control. *Damyata.* A woman's silhouette is the thing they get lost in.

*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina.*  
*Quando fiam uti chelidon—* O swallow swallow

Your perfume is red. Your gaze is red.

A man's desire is heavy enough to hold.  
*Damyata. Damyata. Damyata.*

## Putting On My Body

Words equivalent to *body*  
mean *dead*. I am not carcassed

despite leaving my body  
in a heap on the bed.

A bird beats its beak  
against wood— learning

a body is like that— headlong  
resolve into a hard thing

made soft by rain & repetition.  
I kneel over my body

& dig & dig & dig  
searching for the inseam's zipper.

Words equivalent to *buried*  
mean *body*: a breathing tomb

I coax myself into  
by clutching the spine & parting it.

I am kneeling over my breasts.  
I am slipping on my face.

Imagining a ring on each,  
I slide my fingers on

& hook my knuckles  
like buttons into their satin loops.

If I have allowed another  
to undo me—

skin, the stockings  
peeled down the legs—

it's to learn the body:  
each hem & rib, each

vertebrae & tooth  
in the zipper I use to exit.

There is pleasure in the question:  
this time will I want to

kneel & dig & climb back in?  
I've yet to learn the difference

between *bone & snare*.  
There will come a time

when I won't work free  
the noose in my hair.

## Book Blurb

My poems remind people  
of their perpetual  
monogamy to things

they do not understand  
how to love and are tied to.  
I'm tired of those poems.

You know all I want  
is someone to light  
me a cigarette and love

me like Frank O'Hara  
would've if I were the only  
poem in the world.



## Amherst

*Called back*, reads her gravestone. I put a daisy on top & kiss a man in the rain. Standing on Emily Dickinson's chest kissing a strange man. I have done that.

She wouldn't shake a finger at the way I love my men.

I keep their letters in a tin box & rocks on my vanity as evidence of having lived & still living.

A woman would love to die & be remembered.

I move this man toward a pine in the graveyard. Emily breathes. Guiding strangers through the rain. She has done that.

Come morning, puddles  
reflect the daisy I left.  
Beneath, rocks like bones.

I put a wet envelope in my tin box. Another rock below my mirror. *There are no dead, dear Katie, the Grave is but our moan for them.*

## Invitation from Katie Condon in the Form of Praise

A Caveman discovered the power of his dick  
& pressed it into one woman & then another, eventually creating  
the world's most important poet since the fall of the Roman Empire:  
Katie Condon! Antiquity, antiquity! The bravest poet  
since the discovery of fire, Katie Condon sings archeology & blood!  
Today, the riskiest poet since the Immaculate Conception  
invites you to her home for a soy chai latte on the lawn!  
Thereafter, she will take you on a tour of her 1 bedroom apartment:  
in the living room, there hangs Sappho's portrait as a reminder  
of whom she has surpassed with her wiles! In her cabinets,  
Skippy Peanut Butter & Ragu will spin your brains around!  
Talk of *Dream Songs*! Here, friends, nothing is boring!  
The most critical poet since the Big Bang invites you  
into her bathroom where the seashell soaps smell of Coleridge!  
Her bedroom, where Katie Condon, sleeps & fucks & drools, is bright;  
dust filtering through sunlight like the stars in her irises.

## Lament of the Sexy Reality TV Star

The Queen of Kwick Tans had some daughters  
but only one of them mattered.

They called her Kim and she fell in love  
with the entire NBA.

When she saw that she could not have  
every man, she shunned the cameras  
and took to her tanning bed.

There her mother paid her a visit  
on a Monday morning:

“What’s wrong, sweet Kim,  
inheritor of my big breasts?”

“Like, Mom, it’s a hangover  
that has occupied my soul.”

“Should I pour some tequila for you,  
one that we drowned the worm in ourselves?”

“Yeah, pour the tequila, include the worm,  
but make a cameraman bring it to me,  
and make him bring his tripod, too,  
so, like, his vision isn’t veiled.”

And as it was May (play-offs), the cameraman  
entered wearing a *Miami Heat* jersey.

As soon as he set up his tripod in the corner  
like a stray cat she circled him,  
unhooked her laced bra clasps  
and forced him back upon the tanning bed  
where she took her time undoing his fly  
and removing his counterfeited jersey.

“Like, let me descend from televisions  
into men’s laps. I was born  
with the wish to be many,  
but am, without you, only one.”

## Poem that Tries to Keep My Mother Out

I won't let the poem go where it wants to go.  
My preoccupation with my mother's sex life & her persistent presence in mine  
I refuse to conjure. Besides,

pleasure was better when I didn't have a name for it,  
before my mother defined Love as Abstinence  
& Pleasure as the 100 Meter Dash to Hell.  
Pleasure was better when I didn't know why I blushed  
when my grandfather downshifted to get up the mountain  
between his house & ours, the bulls out my window moaning  
in their pasture toward the cows & calves in the next.  
For me, pleasure has always been present  
enough to undress.

I am not thinking of my mother.

I am thinking of Ryan  
collecting me from my grandfather's truck. Of him holding my hand  
through the two-dollar screening of *Hellboy* at the Town Hall,  
which we snuck out of to visit the basement bathrooms  
where he kissed me & something in me hummed.

From Jake I learned that waiting for pleasure is often better than pleasure.  
I let him be my first & thought of my mother while he had me;  
how our eyes are the same almond shape, the same dark brown,  
our hips full & our waists tight. How desire must have followed us both around.  
How I wouldn't be afraid of pleasure like she wanted.

Had my mother had a seat in my grandfather's pick up,  
she'd have learned that pleasure is pleasure no matter the source.  
Had her mother survived past her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, my mother  
would've had someone to buy her pregnancy tests  
like she bought me after Jeff snuck the condom off,  
sticking it between the bed & the wall.

I didn't want my mother to be a part of the poem.  
My mother who bought me pregnancy tests. My mother who loves me  
& said if I were pregnant & I kept it, my father (who knows pleasure  
is pleasure is pleasure) would walk out of my life because I'd ruined it.  
& if I killed it, she'd be the one to leave because Religion & Pride  
& Motherhood being so beautiful.

Goodbye, Mother!

I am not afraid of pleasure, but I am afraid of you!

So long, Mother!

          You have permission to leave the poem  
because I love you & one day you will die & I will never know  
if you knew pleasure as I do. Because I am indebted to you  
& it's hard to say that in a poem.

## Ode to Unfortunate Heritage

April is the cruelest month! Just look at that girl,  
her tits too big for her little summer dress,  
dangling her feet from a tree limb  
as some guy nibbles at her toes, but is, clearly,  
just staring up her dress.

O, what a simple existence for the good-looking!  
For the swollen cloud-cover that threatens  
its joyful spring rain!

If I could only push my breasts up so high  
that they may touch the jeweled crown  
of spring perhaps then I would be worthy  
of the thrones of trees, the low hanging  
hands of the live oaks, cupped and cradling.

My lips are the lips of a week-old tea rose blooming.  
My hair, the golden yarn too good for the loom.

But my breasts (O, my breasts!) were inherited  
from my father who, were he a woman, would, no doubt,  
have had them enhanced.

O, father,  
your genes are not exceptionally helpful in spring!  
Your sperm with great grandma Janet's big jugs  
so tragically lost the race!

This t-shirt feels  
boring! The scent of my armpits  
is aroma finer than prayer!

O, rain cloud. O, soft spring.

## Steve Nash Can Have Me However He Likes

He can leave me open at the 3  
& drive hard into the hole himself.

I don't care if all he's got is good hair  
& cut triceps—beauty is a pump fake

into a no look pass. Beauty is a thing  
we create ourselves:

I put Beauty on, then strip  
Beauty down like a hard-worked jersey

stripped from a body,  
from Steve's hard body, after a game.

*Tell me about your life when you dream,*  
Steve asks in my dream.

When I dream, I dream fluidly & of flowers.  
I dream of rough rubber & white rayon nets.

I am a god when dream.  
Take pleasure in that.

Take pleasure in me  
as I draw men's lips near with my pen.

You can have me & you can, & you.  
You will never leave me—

I am beautiful & open.

## Pamela Asks the Right Questions

Pamela had not been a prostitute for long  
before her exes wanted to become her clients.  
Suddenly, her old boyfriends loved her  
body the way children love strange flowers:  
raised above a garden's dirt-bed  
they wonder what it takes to be a bee,  
wonder what it takes to pluck the stem  
and drink the flower's nectar.

Pamela feared that she was a flower  
to which the bees only came for answers.  
*What answers?* Pamela wondered out loud  
one night when her ex-college-boyfriend Chad  
had her lying on her back.

*What answers?* Chad didn't answer,  
but she didn't expect him to.

A drop of sweat dripped down Pamela's cheek.  
Her feet gripped the sheets  
with their small fingers.  
She pictured herself as Eve,  
fruit-eaten, waiting hours  
for a verdict from God.

In the dark garden, she cloaked herself  
gently in palm, pursed her lips,  
let one breast fall, as if to plea,  
*Oh, God, give it to me.*

*Give me an answer.*



## Makeover

I struck a deal with Beauty & Beauty gave me Maybelline lip-liner in *Silence & Slow Time*.

In my mirror, I am bright mouthed & inanimate. Call me Collagen-‘Till-I’m-Marble, Unravished Bride.

Beauty is a silk  
sheath. Beauty zips me into  
Beauty. “Beauty masks

made of turmeric & Time should be applied to your T-zone weekly,” shrieks Beauty.  
Beauty is delusion, delusion, Beauty.           *Beauty*                           *Beauty*

Beauty praises Cover Girl LashBlast Waterproof Mascara.

Here Beauty comes, in from the rain.

## 5 Year Plan 5 Years Later

If I close my eyes, I hear you again  
singing in the car. The stars  
have not blown away as you have.

I collect your voice & lie down  
in its light—its timbre cocooning me,  
breasts & all, like a corset strung tight  
then pulled tighter.

How quickly grief  
weaves through the eyelets.

Even as I write this, my chest is tight.

The music I make myself is not for me,  
nor for the rusted chords of your breath.

It's as if words no longer need the body;  
like I'm drunk again, listening  
to my neighbor's wife moan through the wall—

the dependable voice of the world.

## VITA

Katie Condon has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Inprint. Her recent poems appear in or are forthcoming from *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. Katie will graduate with a Ph.D. in English from the University of Tennessee in May 2019.