

OVERGROWTH

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ABSTRACT

This collection of poetry explores themes ranging from ovarian cancer and inherited disease to the fertility of the natural world, discovering the vitality of both wanted and unwanted growth. The author uses a variety of poetic forms, from prose poems to free verse, experimenting with aerated and dropped lines, employing vivid and striking images as she writes of her local ground, tensions between native and non-native flora and fauna, the spiritual life, and the female body.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty-four months, working and writing at the University of Tennessee, I have been able to generate a large amount of material and to consider much of it critically. Compiling a thesis of the poems I have written, however, fitting them together coherently and placing them within larger currents in writing, has been a much different—and differently rewarding—task. I hope, in this introduction, to consider both the poems that follow and how they speak to the world in which they were formed. The poems themselves deal with a few major themes, including fertility, birth, growth, and overgrowth: these ideas move into and among each other as I consider the growth of tumors, my own fertility as an ovarian cancer survivor, and the spread of non-native invasive flora and fauna. The title of this collection, “Overgrowth,” is meant to evoke both the fertility and luxuriant growth of wild places and the uncontrollable, malignant spread of introduced species, or disease. This tension between wanted and unwanted growth has inspired me to write poetry of the female body and the natural world, and to engage ideas about spiritual experience and family histories. In attempting to draw connecting lines between my poetry and major currents in English and American poetry, I have come to see my work participating in its world in a number of ways: as Appalachian poetry, nature poetry, and poetry of the female body.

While I have read many great English and American poets who empower and give voice to the female experience, including Sharon Olds, Adrienne Rich, and Ruth Schwartz, several of the poets who have most influenced my own work and ideas as a female poet have been of other nationalities: I have found myself most influenced by the Irish poet Eavan Boland and the Polish poet Anna Swir, as well as by the American poet Marie Howe. Swir’s collection *Talking to My Body*, full of poems that celebrate the autonomy of the female body, its goodness for and to itself, was a profound discovery for me. I loved Swir’s unfussy assertions, her sense of awe, and the confident ownership she claimed over herself and her body, even in maternity, a state often accepted in American thought as a reassignment of the value of the female body—from being a good for itself to being a good for another.

Boland's poetry of the feminine experience also asserts the value of the female body independent of family ties, but treats those family ties with a careful gentleness, especially in *Object Lessons*, a book which is part memoir, part writing on poetry. In *Object Lessons*, as Boland writes about her life as a young poet, she discusses her struggle between her twin identities as an Irish poet and a woman poet. At the time, although Ireland was characterized as a woman in national poetry and plays—as well as everyday language—the Irish woman was peculiarly divested of power, and of history. Part of Boland's vision as an Irish poet, then, became to write as an Irishwoman, and to recover domestic histories erased by the official histories of the Irish patriarchy. Boland notes, at the end of *Object Lessons*, that it is very difficult to explain to male poets “how emblematic are the unexpressed lives of other women to the woman poet, how intimately they are her own” (248). I have felt this deeply, and Boland's articulation has inspired me to write into the domestic histories of the women in my own family—of my mother, and her mother, two women whose lives have been partly eclipsed by powerful male family members. As Boland set out to recover some of her grandmother's unrecorded history, I began to imagine my mother's and grandmother's, and although I know little about my grandmother, a connecting line that I have been able to explore is heredity: my grandmother died of breast cancer at a young age, and I developed ovarian cancer. This focus on heredity, what may be passed on from mother to daughter, has much to do with the mechanisms of memory—another avenue I've been able to explore in my writing.

Marie Howe's poetry has also been invaluable to my writing. Two of Howe's more recent collections, *What the Living Do* and *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, also focus on memory. As Howe wrote about her brother's death, she did the recursive and reconstructive work of memory, returning to conversations and even to childhood, writing these scenes with her characteristic gentleness. In returning to memories, Howe was able to construct new—more whole—scenes of her past, making new meanings from them. This is something I greatly admired in Howe's work, and have tried to do in my own. Howe's seamless narratives and light-handed, gentle voice also impressed me deeply, and I have tried to mimic her beautiful sensibility while writing poems about events and people from my past.

Besides identifying myself as a woman poet, I also identify myself as an Appalachian poet. Having been born and raised in East Tennessee, I have a love for the Southern Appalachians that is sometimes quite fierce, and this attention to landscape, the natural world, and to the historical Appalachian tensions between the rural and the urban, have also made their way strongly into my poetry. Appalachian poetry has often been characterized—rightly or wrongly—by its awareness of the natural world, and its participation in the pastoral tradition. In his book *Six Poets from the Mountain South*, John Lang notes that much of the contemporary poetry coming out of Appalachia demonstrates a groundedness in local identity, a sense of comfort or home inspired by the poet's natural surroundings (5-6). While this groundedness is often tempered by changes in environment, the exploitation of land and landscape, and more metaphysical questions about how the natural world can communicate, or signify, to us, I think it is fair to say that the pastoral tradition is richly handled within the current of Appalachian poetry.

Terry Gifford's book *Pastoral* has helped me think about both Appalachian writers' participation in the pastoral tradition, and my own. Gifford outlines the beginning forms and purposes of the pastoral in English literature, and notes its fragmentation in postmodern times, pointing out that one of the pastoral's traditional roles—providing a retreat from the urban to the rural in order to critique human society, followed by a wiser return to the urban—has often been carelessly reductive of the rural life it pretends to represent (1-2, 8). Appalachia's popular characterization as a mountainous paradise has often been conflated with a view of its inhabitants as ignorant rubes, "primitive" foils to a rapidly urbanizing America. A comparison is easily made between this characterization and simple country life, rustics and shepherds of the traditional English pastoral. While much of the contemporary Appalachian poetry I have read participates in the pastoral tradition by problematizing the mechanisms of urban "progress," many poets end by problematizing the pastoral tradition itself, moving into a genre that Gifford calls the "post-pastoral." Gifford counts several characteristics of this kind of writing about the natural world and the relationship between the rural and the urban, of which these are a few: a humble shifting from anthropocentric to ecocentric views, a recognition of the creative-destructive nature of the balanced

universe, an awareness of nature as culture and culture as nature, and a growth of consciousness into conscience (149-166). Several of the Appalachian and nature-poets that I have found profoundly influential have woven these powerful concepts in their poetry.

Mary Oliver, perhaps the queen of American nature poetry, has been an inspiration to me as long as I have been writing. Her keen awareness of nature as possessing its own orderly culture, and not a simple one, has helped me sharpen my observations of my own East Tennessee landscape. Oliver seems to have dual citizenship in those two countries, making the pastoral “retreat and return” into a “return and return again.” From *Dreamwork* to *Why I Wake Early* to more recent collections, Oliver remains in awe of the “creative-destructive” balance of the universe—much of her poetry could be called praise poetry—and seems to want to call on a “conscience” for the care of this universe within her readers. While Oliver is not an Appalachian writer, I recognize in her work many post-pastoral elements, and have tried to examine and celebrate my part of Appalachia as she has her part of Massachusetts.

Charles Wright’s handling of the post-pastoral has also influenced my work. His poetry has been one of my largest preoccupations in the past year, not only because it is great, but also because much of it was written in and about Appalachia. Wright’s poetry, especially recent works like *Negative Blue*, a trilogy of Wright’s collections from the mid- to late-nineties, is starkly different from Oliver’s in the way it approaches the natural world. Where Oliver immerses herself in her observations and meditations on plants, animals, and ecosystems, Wright considers the beauty of landscape, mountains, and his Charlottesville backyard with a deep mistrust of his own ability to interpret it. Gifford’s assertion that post-pastoral literature recognizes “nature as culture and culture as nature” means that writers of post-pastoral poetry must be able to see the interconnectedness between human culture and the natural ecosystems that support and maintain it. Wright’s poetry does this in a unique way: it complicates the “pastoral” tendency to create a dualistic relationship between culture and nature, or civilization and wilderness, by questioning traditional poetic “readings” of nature. Do the mountains offer comfort, or do

they signify anything other than their own shapes? Or, to borrow an example from Wright's 2007 collection *Littlefoot*, can the moon signify anything to us besides itself?

First character of the celestial alphabet, the full moon,
Is a period, and that is that.
No language above to aid us,
no word to the wise. (12)

In this passage, as in much of Wright's earlier work, the speaker approaches the natural world with an appreciation for the vast beauty and complexities therein, but remains frustrated by attempts to draw deeper meaning or spiritual significance from it.

In the past two years, I have filled notebooks with poems that interact with the East Tennessee landscape, and Charles Wright's and Mary Oliver's poems both informed my approaches. In this collection, I tried to retain the awe and delight I have usually infused into my nature poems while problematizing my "readings" of landscape and wildlife, opening my poems to myself and to my readers, allowing space for multiple interpretations. In particular, I have explored the balance between native and non-native species in East Tennessee. Mockingbirds, robins, bluebirds, and walnut trees appear in the poems that follow as native species, balancing on the edge of change, diminishment. Kudzu, starlings, house sparrows, and mimosa trees appear as non-native species, competing successfully with native species for living space, and engaging with those native species (and the poems' speaker) in surprising ways. The interaction between ideas of "the city" and "the country" also appear, doubling other poems' tension between "native" and "non-native." The human body, another "garden" of the natural world, is another piece of contested ground, in this collection; cancerous tumors and inherited disease are both nature and culture, culture and nature.

The last theme of my work that I would like to pull out is its undercurrent of spiritual desire—a theme that crops up very often in Appalachian literature. As in Wright's poetry, a longing to discover the presence or absence of God is often connected with meditations on landscape, natural life, in attempts to "read" in them supernatural significance. Many of my poems approach the natural world with just this

desire, and, more often than Wright's, are satisfied with what they gather. What Wright called his "negative spirituality"—the "energy of absence" (qtd. in Lang, 159, 160) that infuses his spiritual meditations—seems as honest and intelligent an interaction with the spiritual world as any other poet's work I have read, including another poet whom I greatly admire: Franz Wright. This American poet's work—although not Appalachian, or, strictly, "nature" poetry—has been on my mind for at least five years, and many of his poems have changed the way I think about the spiritual in postmodern poetry. Franz Wright's poetic voice and form are vastly different from Charles Wright's, but they share an attention to the possibility of God, of the efficacy of human prayers. Where Charles Wright draws back from belief, however, Franz Wright plows ahead, perseverant, irreverent, despairing, pissed, and believing. Wright's collections *The Beforelife*, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, and *Wheeling Motel* are a few I have read and drawn inspiration from, both for reconsideration of my spiritual vocabulary and for new ways to approach spiritual desire and frustration in poetry. Wright's persistent, raw, and growling sincerity have helped me to focus my poetry with spiritual undercurrents in fresh ways—a huge gift.

This collection is filled by all the themes and interests I mention here, from the Appalachian post-pastoral to the rediscovery of domestic history, but the shape of the collection itself emerges in the forms of the individual poems. I have borrowed surprising turns, mid-poem, from Franz Wright and Charles Wright; I have written lyric poems in celebration and prose poems in grief; I have dropped lines and aerated some of my poems with more white space than I have ever used before, after reading Charles Wright; and I have dedicated myself to urgent narrative poems in admiration of Eavan Boland and Marie Howe. These borrowings have been pure joy. I hope that joy still lives in traces in the poems below.

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I.

A Poem for Seamus Heaney

The grass in your country furs the fields thick,
wide, and lush. Broad green blades plunge skyward
from tufts acres wide, snugging the ground,
fitting tailored and luxuriant.

Your cows and sheep
break their legs on stones and gullies they can't see
for the grass.

Its sharp color and profile
did not remind me of my own fields
of yellow grass, and I wondered. Your furze banks
did not sound like my white hedgeblossoms.

But I came back
to my fields of patchwork,
lifting grainstalks in fine lace borders,
in peacock fans, and rolling low
like waves in the wind. They

are populous as Belfast
with yarrow, wheat, and daisy,

mouse, mole,
and a spider,

catching dew and grass seeds
in her spherical web.

City / Country

I have wondered if the yarrow,
sunflowers and cornflowers in my yard know
that they are not growing in the country.
As I do. Does the root know, or the leaf?

Hot May mornings gather in asphalt, cement,
the interiors of cars parked on the street, bouncing
and trembling in the airless corridors
between buildings,
and not even the alleyway trees
touch.

Two red sunflowers were born yesterday
with eyes closed like newborn
pups. The cornflowers opened one
blue eye.

Kudzu

1.

Glass-topped table

on the morning

porch,

how dully you reflect

through your pollen-

silt. Mockingbirds

whistle ridiculous,

interstate roar lodges creakily

in maples,

and kudzu flowers

drip downward, cluster

like grapes.

2.

We wait for winter

to level the kudzu mountains,

punch holes in their massive

green foreheads, pop them

like balloons.

But in January, not even

0° will kill them.

Our gentleness,

the bluntness of our winds,

snows, good intentions,

will see them sleep

and be happy a while.

Every spring for years

my father and a handful

of neighbors would tramp up

the slope behind our house

with shovels, picks,

gasoline, and push the hairy vine

back. Every summer
it rolled down again, offering

hiding-places in June,
great mysterious hoods
like hollow green haystacks,
and violet flowers in September.
Mitten-shaped leaves winked
in fall breezes. My mother dreamed
tendrils of kudzu were reaching
for the eave of the house.

Twenty years later,
I watch East Tennessee nights
swing slowly down toward 30°.
Leaves yellow, curtains
shriveled. But nothing will kill
them, nothing

will kill them. They will spring up
with the crocus at Easter.

3.

In the bamboo thicket across the street, kudzu has sent long streamers up the canes and now reclines victorious on the canopy, enjoying August sun, getting fatter and fatter. Smaller canes at the edge bend under the weight of these happy summer curtains, bowing, while the curtain falls slowly, unraveling at the hem, touches the ground again softly.

Two days ago, a professional parachutist rose in a helium balloon for 24 miles into the rounded edge of blackness, opened his door, and jumped. Falling, gaining the speed of sound and accelerating past, goggles fogging, records breaking, coming back over the threshold of space like he had seen the ghost of an ancestor of Earth. Coming near, see the grass, pull the cord, start running before you hit the ground.

March Birds

Since we have not found
a use for the songbird
as food or pet,

mockingbirds, cardinals, and sparrows call
and call and chuckle and wheel in gangs.

Diving from eave
to bushes, sitting
on the dangling light wire or fence
registering the day's schedule with the day,
chucking chattering jimmying sweeting twitting.

And here's the white-throated robin
bustling across the just-turned raised bed,
chin streaming
with worms.

Springthink

In March, the rising sun has turned
from its business on the other side
of the world, and meets us with questions.
Do you notice the Alpine bells?
Are you able?

Last night we watched the weathermen
point to radar, whorls of red
and magenta supercell
pushing across our city. Trees
outside swayed like singing muppets.

Life, increasingly long, lays its flags
forever, is paving a pass through mountains.

Never before have I lived in a house
like this, that towers over a sidewalk,
dropping its narrow steps down
sharply, hurrying me
to roadway.

II.

Infidelities

1.

On a drive to Asheville
as their affair was secretly
blooming,

my sister and her lover

stopped to take pictures of an oak
with a dying crown,
dew still on the grass
in the field.

Unhappiness lay over her mouth
like a hand.

The flush of the morning
came,

wishful.

A bubble
of breathable air
underneath the raft.

2.

Growing out of our garden that spring
were heads of lettuce, beet leaves
rimed with red, tomatoes
slyly toppling. Rats
who lived underneath our house
ran out at noon to climb
the tomato vines, crush
the blushing belles
into their tiny mouths. Growing
in me, the most silent
tumor, lading the slender fallopian
with its fecund
weight.

When my she disappeared,
evenings, I put it down to misery, not
spite. When she spent days
away, when she didn't show up
unless he was there, and ditched us
when he wasn't, she grew
into the curve of an interrogation
point, and the dot
at the mouth
of an i. Her mouth an I,
an I, an I.

When I came home
from the hospital, sewn up
like a baseball,
I lingered in the kitchen
making tea. Her absence
growing, with all my thoughts about it,
iridescent and taut, shimmering.

Yard Sale

When things started to become
apparent, I started having dreams.

In one, she came out of his room
in lingerie, smoking. When I asked

what she was doing, she smoked
at me, blowing a white cloud lazily

upward. In another, she scattered
invective over me on the porch

and when she left, slamming the door, he
apologized for her, hoped I would understand.

After things became apparent
the dreams slowed down. But last night

I dreamed he'd set up
a yard sale, selling everything he'd bought

for her and never given her.
I walked down the long

tables, gold-beaded jewelry,
Spanish-leather boots, mauve and yellow ochre

scarves and dresses, boxes
of Swan Lake records.

A Hell of a Year

It drags its knotted ropes into the next year, but the face of the husband begins to exist a little more naturally: it begins again to be present in rooms. School convenes and lets out, and the children grow tall, by hand-breadths. How to fall in love with your friend in Utah most graciously, most commodiously to her husband and kids, and to yours? Knots like small rocks appear in the kids' shoelaces, there's scissors, swearing, and another parent gets cancer, sells the car, succumbs.

The stanchions of the bridge over a river, rushing with fog in the mornings, breath in the evenings, settle on bedrock. In summer the lights on the bridge seem dim with haze, in autumn they emerge like fishes. I wondered what to say to you, my sister, I noticed the telephone pole outside my house developing a bend where bolts the size of my fists were anchored, I drove I drove so long through river fog, over the parkway bridge, the weight of my car, my breath, freighting it, the fog closing behind me like a face turning away.

Mimosa

The long slender fingers of the mimosa frond
want to touch my face. No
I guess I want that. Even so.

They touch my window
in the breeze,
they have forgotten the heat wave
they barely survived, and
reach.

Bipinnate fingers delicate
as the flight feathers
of a hummingbird.

Whatever world you come from,
go back

Tell them how strange it was
that these eyebrowed walkers
unconstrained by shade
and root

laid themselves always
on chairs and beds,
could only be comforted
by strangers.

A Summer Storm

Yesterday, due to an unstable atmosphere,
all the leaves the trees dropped
in our six-week drought
blew into the street and hammered
at our windows.

The weeping willow
was like terror, all her hair caught up
in the wind, pigeons careened between
roofs and wires.

I thought I was standing in an ocean.

Leaf scurf foamed up and down
the street. Gusts leaned wildly
on the bamboo tops
which bent heavily,
slowly.

Starlings and a hawk swam still,
suspended for a second, then swept
away.

If the gods were angry,
how would we know?

Or God, say God was angry: say God
wanted us to look up at the sky.

At the edge of the hot bubble
of air, storms spin,
a cool wedge creeps under the heat
and the placid ceiling looks down
on the rushing clouds below.

Sext

The silence of heaven
bears down infinitely

heavier than the weight of the yammering
world.

The crush I hold off with the thin
ridges of my forearms.

How is it that the silence
falls so heavy, and so bright?

They told me to become open
to receive from heaven, to dilate

the pupil and to cup
the ear, as if what comes down from heaven

were a play of shadows
or a faint strain
of music.

Why I Feed the Birds

It's a pleasure to see them full, to see them want for nothing.
To see the circumspect wren, body small as a crabapple, come
out into public.

I have come from bed, I have left him
sleeping the sleep of the asleep, feathery, maybe, maze-like.
Soon the dunblushing female cardinal will enter my dreams,
bringing me my message from the other world.

Spilled millet, white on the red floorboards, expands weekly
like the universe. This is when the talking fox will appear,
the talking bear or badger, this is when I will receive my
summons or the enigmatic word in another language which
I do not know.

The First Fights

1.

Fall begins from the poplars
and sycamores,
whether the richer sky yellows
the leaves or vice versa
we don't know. However,
this is blue plus blue,
that is green plus yellow.
The world bumps silently
into the vivid season.

2.

Sometimes on Sundays
we are falsely eager,
easily hurt. The habit I noticed
before we were married
I notice some more. Since the
sky is bluer,
the leaves sleeping on the continuum
between green and yellow,

the sharp sounds are sharper.
Since I expect something,
my disappointment
is greater.

3.

Since it is too late,
I want to turn back time.
Or I want the begonias and aloe
living patiently in pots
to die. I would like
to see them thirst
and wither,
turning their green eyes on me
with inscrutable
calm.

Year One

Equal forces, opposite forces.

I will crush you

if you will crush me.

Absence

How tired I am of wanting you.
There's a hush in the house, the hallways.
Cotton batting

makes the nearby sea, gulls walk
in it, struggling, ducks
that find their food by diving

have presentiments, don't dive.
I would lie on my side,
my elbow

at your navel, my hand on your chest,
your shoulder, sandy pale and warm.
The smell of you made me sleep.

If you aren't your body,
who is your body? That I love it like this,
with my soul?

A glass broke in the dishwasher.
Now we brush small shards
off every tenth dish, clinging, like magnets.

A Parable for the New Century

And Jesus spoke to them, saying,
“A marriage is like a box kite,
especially dragon box kites.”

Two children were flying
dragon box kites on the hillside. The kites gaped
and shivered high over the horizon,
at first like great hooked fishes,

then like leashed dogs, pulling hard
into the sky.

III.

After the Death of the Garner Twins

The mother with pale skin and blonde wisps of hair coming loose from pins enters the room where the grieving parents are receiving friends. In a knit baby sling she carries a very small lump, with a rosybrown head still as a loaf of bread between her breasts. Her skin glows, she drinks iced tea at the buffet, talking with friends.

There is no answer, not one that will come with knocking, not persistent knocking, not promises, not despair. With dead twins waiting at the mortuary in pillow-sized caskets, the faces of the parents are gray and loose, as if tomorrow morning, they will take shovels and bury their children deep behind their eyes, inter them among gray matter folds.

A crooked V of geese slides soundless through morning sky. Messengers from Wisconsin. They fly, seeking assistance from a neighboring goose kingdom, as refinery runoff is killing their young and sickening the elders. Over the southern Appalachian mountain range, in a laurel wilderness, at the root of a trillium, lies the aid they are looking for. Or, it is crammed into a seed floating on a swell of Lake Pontchartrain, awaiting the sparkling crash of their lighting.

Reading Szymborska

As our pantrymoth scourge lessens,
as I clap them out of the air
and smear them from the ceiling
with a broom less
and less often,

one of them has blundered into a cobweb
above the kitchen lintel
and is suspended there,
flying, flying, wings ablur,
casting a small shadow
which does not move.

It has struck me that Szymborska
might have written about this
exercising moth, this moth
on the elliptical for winged
bugs, and might have pointed out

the photograph beneath it, propped
on the doorframe. In it,
a man and a woman
wearing the high-waisted pants and blousy
shirts of the sixties
stand in a field, holding bows almost as tall
as themselves, drawing the strings terribly
taut.

They pause in the one moment
between draw and release,
they aim high, so their shafts
will glance from the plaster wall
at just the right angle
to flutter past the moth's
blurred wings like tiny batons
or shivers of light.

He pauses above them.
He rests his wings. But then
he is off again, his shadow
humming tinily
and still.

On the Second Cold Morning of the Year

fog persists past seven in alleys
and in the city streets. The enormous face
of Stephen A. Burroughs,
Attorney at Law, slides grimly
and alertly past
on the side of a bus. Small
eyes and pinched mouth
unsurprised by this method
of travel, invisible elbows
swinging underneath the bus,
invisible hands rubbing palms together
at the wheel well, knuckles not
being barked by tires.

Airplane Sighting at Mead's Quarry

While I am up on a ridge overlooking the quarry
whose basin has filled with green water,

the shadow of a dragon skims its surface,
wide wings spread for a water landing
or a small animal snatching,

then scatters itself among the trees
on the bank
and beyond the bank.

Student Conferences

Monday, and my students
present their drafts to me
one after the other
like plates of dinner.

Interminable, cold office,
 incomprehensible drafts,
I wander through them
with a flashlight and
a machete.

 Green medallions,
 small circular windows looking out
on wastes,
 jungles, those ropes
 tying the tree crowns together
are vines, odd animals
swing.

 It doesn't matter
what I said, that I was right,
that I forgot —

here is a parsley salad
for your Monday, here
is an entire tube
 of toothpaste
 squeezed out into
a mint dog turd
for your Monday morning.

Meditation

It is the privilege of the mountain
to be alone, the privilege
of a well. The leaf
hangs alone on the branch.

I make coffee in the kitchen,
one window open
to faint calls of robins and mockingbirds,
allowing in draughts of shaded air.

In the stillness
a fruit-fly roars by
and disappears, tiny waves slapping
in its wake.

One spider drops from the end
of a grass stalk outside the window
and hangs. Drops
another inch.

No-one is lonely but us.

The Girl Who Came Out of Her House, Brushing Her Hair

The lifting heat of Dominican evenings
slows and gentles all movements, but she

walked by the powers of beauty,
pulling her perfect mass of dark hair

over her shoulder
like a branch of black roses.

Recipe for Health in July

Allow the opinions of other people
to perch like starlings
on the telephone wire across the street.
You hear them, see their migratory
mass, but

they do not shit on your rug.
Allow yourself to believe
(secretly, if need be) in a certain holiness
of your skin, and the workings
of your most inner body.

Stop concerning yourself
with people, and begin instead
to enjoy them. Look at them.
Discern what their hands tell you.

Discern also the attitudes
of light

in the morning and evening. Read
the shadows as they fill the grain
of this paper.

December Evening, 2012

Now, the lull between dangers
lengthens. The past suffering recedes
like a missed train,
the future suffering

glows like false dawn, fades.
This year, I set down
that love is aging
and all the hooks

have been caught in eyes,
the bread is rising this time
and I am changing.
Love does this, and no one

but love. Like the substitute
choir director told us one fall,
To be great, hang around
greatness. To be love,

be with love. It will be impossible
to be the same.

IV.

[Listen]

Listen

to the voice of the tumor—
it wants out. The baby
wants out.

 Alien wills
blink into existence inside us
as if by mistake
and malingering,
 they expand
they hunch their
 skinny shoulders
and grow.

The skin of a bubble thins,
 a knife
goes forward like a scout,

skin and muscle yawn apart
and what wanted
to live its own life
 is lifted
out.

Wearing the Paper Apron

At the oncologist's office, the nurse
sticks her head in, says: Sorry,
we're waiting on

the radiologist, he's still reviewing
the sonograms.

While he is doing this,
I wait for the life I will live
to leave the ring of dryads
and approach.

While it is leaning phantasmic shoulders
slightly,

hair billowing
slowly, as if under water,

I am reviewing the sonograms,
the beeps of their capture and the

impassive face of the sonographer,
ponytail, gum,
indefinite jaw, indefinite
fingers.

Home-Made Bomb

At perhaps the fifth division of the cell,
clustering smally under the skin
of the ovary,

the officer on his beat raised
the alarm. Lines
ferrying help quickened, fans humming constantly

in the war room, the unconscious mind
of the body taking measures
underneath all

my perception. Antigen count rising,
the malignant self filling the pelvic cavity
like Alice, arm moving

to window, foot
to chimney. A body
living in my body,

urging its splattering firework,
building its home-made
bomb.

Another One of My Poems

bears the ghostly presence of a fetus. I mean
to write a poem about my first six months
of marriage, or my friend's divorce,
and when I am done
I show it to someone and she says, Oh,
there's a baby.

There,
there on the wall behind your head
is a shadow of a baby in utero,
there on the biscuit you made and are putting into
your mouth is a curved ridge of
dough that looks exactly like
a baby.

When, three years ago,
my abdomen swelled over an ovarian tumor
the size of a cantaloupe,
I was put to sleep
and wheeled under the
bright lights. Precisely,
the blade opened me nine inches
wide. Something alien
and yet made of my body
emerged, complex,
hungry.

Use of Studies

Central pathological review was adopted in this study. Radical surgery was defined as hysterectomy with bilateral –ectomy –ectomy.

Conservative surgical procedure was less so, any surgery that preserved the uterus and one or both ovaries.

This is the 4-year birthday of my tumor, the one that would not pop from the ovary,

blow its egg down the tube, and instead puffed. Conservative surgical procedure opened my coat of skin.

My shirt of blood.
(Either it's impossible to be more naked, or it's impossible to be naked.)

Among the 102 patients who were finally evaluated for clinical outcome, eight had tumor recurrence

none of them died of the disease
5- and 10-year disease-free survival rates were, and, respectively

A bubble machine works industriously away in the pelvic cage, bubbles popping, growing.

Outside of my body,
I watch myself from inside my body.

After Oophorectomy

The hourglass flips
and sand pebbles through,
counting days, filling
the bell,
holding the clapper still, twig
by straw, nesting.

Tell me
one impossible thing. Tell me.
Nothing is less possible
than the tiny birds
in my body, making their nest
monthly,
waiting
for Mare
Fecundutatis

Mare Imbrium
to edge into light.
Then, tumbling,
it buckles.

I have one ovary. One miracle
enough.

to mounds of fur-brown sliver and crumb
at the curb.

A jet plows above,
veers suddenly to the south.
Yesterday is yesterday, is yesterday,
is yesterday. Fall silent.
Become dim. I want to be alive
this time next year.

Oh Progesterone

It's January,
and birds wake warm
on the yellowing bark of our trees.
Someone is singing
jerry, jerry, jerry,
outside,
 pricking the silence
with quick, clean
strokes.

 The silence of my body
waits to hear one
small surge.

Ubi Sunt

1.

Since my mother's father and uncle both
developed dementias,
honeycombing of the brain,

she believes she has early-onset Alzheimer's,
and imagines,

in vivid detail, how this will affect the kids,
especially the one still at home.

Molting cardinals dart
in and out of the bushes across the street.

Hoods of shriveled kudzu hang
on the trees,

November frost is gone
at the first touch of sun.

A mother, someone said, is a story
without a beginning.

2.

My mother's mother and grandmother both dead young,
both left young daughters.

My mother is the first
in my mothertree
to fledge her daughters,

the first small balloon
to be fisted, not
let go.

I see you, mothers

where you go,
looking
full, and beautiful, windblown,

leaving photographic flakes, whiteshell cameos
in our bureau drawers.

Ménière's Disease

My tea is steeping.

Windchimes whistle whitely on the porch,

banks of bamboo bow
and shoulder in the wind

The inner ear, its coils
its mazes

I forget for a moment which way
the letter z faces—write it backwards

The tiny hairs in the innermost ear,
so innermost it is almost
the brain, so innermost we almost don't believe
in it

taps out messages in Morse code:
dizzy dizzy vertigo
nystagmus dizzy ess oh ess oh ess

Wouldn't you cry
if you were losing your hearing?
That orienting light for the eyes
in the back of your head,

that repository
for the alphabet of degrees between music
and silence?

The Europa Fountain

splashes heavily in a cement ring.

The bull kneels in a moment,
tail thrash, neck huge
and rope-veined craning
toward her,
cock coming,
tongue reaching for her outstretched
hand.

Now, the sun is turning beyond the city.
Conglomerate sidewalks fill
with fine nets of shadow.

Not even one desire
wasted.

After Life

Some day in the rolling green
future
the kitchen linoleum will move
like water.

There will finally be a silence
in your head,
and the body
of the silence
will roll with small swells
with a slow
feathery crushing sound
like orange sections coming apart
nothing will
have mattered.

The posters
slide off of the wall.

The unbridgeable difference
will make no
difference.

A God may remake
the world,
a paradise may split
like an atom
but the eyes will fall shut
the hands fall open

the bell
rope
and tongue

Anticipation of Flight

Today is the day I leave
the fretting-ground (the small
controlled spaces,
kitchen gardens and the porch
that must be swept over and over)
and ascend, Christ-like, into the sky.

V.

Quercus Robur

I was born in Tennessee
beneath the mountains. All
childhood corridors overlaced
with the arms and hands
of trees. I lay in leaf litter
as a kid, ankles crossed,
hands behind my head,
listening to the wind shushing
in the oaks like a child listens
to the murmurs of adult voices
in other rooms.

The canopy rippled, slow
and glittering, like shadows
in the kitchen as my mother
kneaded bread on the counter.

I need open spaces
just a few times a year.
For health, I hang a quilt
of fretted florals on the wall. For
luck, a charm, or the necessary
thinning of air, I need the drawing
of leafwork even across
a surface.

Beatitude

Why, on the day
he is dying, gaunt and mustardy
with jaundice,
 am I seeing
the truest version of the grasses?

On this morning
 new leaves are lifting
 and falling like breath
on the trees, glittering
 like sea-scurf.

A small sparrow,
 entering his nest in the
eave, hovers for a moment,
 his wings
 lit from behind
 like the yawn
of a small star.

Roadside grasses open their seed-heads.
They are allowed to rise
 to full height,
tasseled, as they are,
with purple. Tiered and conical
as firs.

Overton Place

To the east,
the interstate whines and growls. Day
and night, we hear the passage of ourselves
and our desires in a long blue vein, a long
red artery.

Uward,
local mockingbirds growl, flashing striped wings
and cutting sharp maneuvers
with huge, fanning tails, making feints,
tussling, long flight feathers spinning
like spokes.

I've read that city noise
has changed birdsong in certain parts
of the world.

Highway roar, suppressed
shrieks of generators, the echoing *bang*
bang of garbage trucks.

The grackles chatter chatter,
the mockingbirds box and hiss growling
hisses, then perch on a roadsign,
saying something
loudly.

Unsettling

Give me a reason
to keep loving these house
sparrows.

I wanted my way to be lit
by some golden light,
some fragrance
of water.

I dream
of bluebirds now.
Their numbers are declining,
here. Starlings
and house sparrows,
birds
of my childhood,
overrun competition. Heckle
the natives
in gangs.

Since someone poured paints
over our cars one night
outside the house,

my husband has dreams
that kids are breaking
his car windows,
stealing the stereo,
or wakes with a jerk
hearing nobody on the porch.

Winter Clouds

A sediment of birds stirs the sky

November wind, grayfall,
night and rain

They wheel erratic

is it terror or delight?

They bubble

eddy like panic, shear horribly across

They land

in black lawns, feather ruffs stand
on their heads,

perking
as if to listen

Oh, there—

a mass of starlings

twists its huge body overhead,

writhing like a slug

dropped in water

Migratory Birds

On the hackberry a flicker
and black-capped chickadee

hang and perch
in bursts of movement among
the branches. Birds

who stay all winter
begin to regain their bluster,
bossing

the cats, whistling brash buzzy calls
from the telephone pole.

Where

are our swifts, now? Our
swallows and catbirds? Have they reached
Oaxaca, do they fly

over gorges? What
of Reynosa do they remember
in their songs, when they return?

House Sparrows

House sparrows move by the will
of the unconscious universe. Like whirlpools

they eddy. As tree limbs creak,
they chirp. They rise

at 4:00, seeing the lights break
on a northeast rim,

and name their spring children
after aunts, summer children

for parents, who only recently
disappeared. Fledglings sit

on the gutter, fat, clumsy,
still for a moment, looking at something

I can't see.

Efficacy

1.

After my expulsion from the country club
and the neighborhood association,
after having my memberships revoked
by the alumni association,
the birdwatching club, and Kroger,
I am moving into another part of town. Here,

there is a small bamboo forest. Kudzu
vines hood a walnut tree
and are riding a few bamboo canes down
to the ground. Starlings
sit on the telephone wires

and growl at the cats
who trot quickly from shadow to shadow.

2.

Every morning I sit on the porch
with coffee, and stare at the kudzu.

Then I take my pruning shears,
walk across the street, and duck under
the green streamers.
I cut however many vines I want,
usually between six
and ten.

But the vines grow twelve inches
every day in the summer. Green
three-piece faces move slowly
through the grass

and flicker their long desirous tongues
in the sky over defeated trees.
And I sever a few arms

at the elbow. Here and there.

It is natural, to feel
as if your actions are to no effect.

To understand that your life
casts a shadow
like gauze, or the call
of one bird.

But the walnut is producing. Bunches
of the green shells appear
from underneath the vine mantle,
resolute.

Introducing Species

Meadow fescue and Johnson grass outpace
the Indian,

big bluestem, little
bluestem. Look at these long creepers.

Fingers with rings emerge
from our soil. Vines bearing flowers
that smell like grape Kool-Aid

smother all memory of the \$8 an acre
our grandparents were paid
to plant it, new ideas
for soil conservation,
for the new century, the new world.

Where do we go
when our best answer wreaths
its fingers back through
our flickery home movies?

Chervil frets not. Kudzu
tosses back another
walnut tree.

Even starlings
cannot find an exit

nor house sparrows,
only another bluebird's papery
door.

The new world. Welcome
to it. Mimosas
line our highways,

raise their strange pink birds
in rows down the interstate, bipinnate

hands
twice-feathered, once
for waterproofing,
once for flying.

The Balds of Southern Appalachia

1.

Shrubs circle this mountaintop
like a monk's tonsure.

Kept clear for cattle grazing,
I imagine this bald in 1820, a herd
of short-horned cows forced up

the 4,600 feet. At the top,
they folded their legs

and didn't get up to graze for an hour,
shivered crickets
from their wet flanks,

stared at the shadows beneath
Mount Mitchell

and the stars emerging, twenty
at a time.

2.

My husband's friend says that horses
tear up the ground, won't
move on from a patch of grass
till they have torn it up
by the roots. Cows,
he says, take better care
of sod.

Maybe this is why the balds
of our mountains
light on us over and over
with a sparrow's weight.

In some ways, we can appreciate
a careful animal.

3.

On Max Patch,
yellow thumbs of wild snapdragon
survive each summer mowing.

It's September. Queen Anne's Lace
and ironweed freckle
the hilltop.

Cricketsong shimmers
at our knees,
 laps
against the rainfly all night.

The murmur of our voices loosens
like smoke.

4.

The balds of the Smokies
are again becoming forest.
The mystery of their origin falls
below tree line, as the spring pumps
and smokehouses of Greenbriar,
Elkmont, and Cades Cove
dissolve beneath damp
leaf litter, and snow.

Blueberries harbor beech saplings
on Andrew's Bald, covering
the hogpen footprint, overwriting
pastures and hunting-grounds
with their own civilized
order.

5.

Four North Carolinians found this grassy hilltop
in the summer of 1790,
say.

Cleared by Cherokee ceremonial fire
centuries before, its soil may have broken down
the holy ash,
or not.

Cow manure changed the earth once again.
When cattle moved to the valley
for good and barnstormers
appeared on a fine gravel landing strip
nosed into the grass,

someone planted wild snapdragon,
spurred flower,
at the threshold of the pilot
lean-to.

Eighty years later,
they pepper the bald
with yellow, another
European naturalized
by acres of forking
rhizomes.

VITA

Anna Laura Reeve was born in Knoxville, TN, to Rena Headrick Reeve and Larry Reeve. She is the second of seven siblings, and was homeschooled under the Independent Study Program at Berean Christian School, a thriving locus for East Tennessee homeschooling families. After graduation, she headed west to Lipscomb University in Nashville, TN, to pursue a BA in English, which she earned in 2004, with minors in History and Music. She graduated magna cum laude. During her four years at Lipscomb, she moved from her love of literature and literary analysis toward creative writing, and was involved for two years in a student creative writing group on campus. She also served as reader, Managing Editor, and Editor-in-Chief of Lipscomb University's creative arts journal, *Exordium*. After taking a few years off, from 2008-2011, she enrolled in the University of Tennessee's Master of English program, and was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship—which was renewed for a graduate teaching associateship. In the course of her graduate studies, she has given public readings of her work, had poems accepted for publication in the literary magazines *Cutthroat* and *Rockhurst Review*, and worked in the capacity of Editorial Assistant on the staff of *Grist*, a literary journal organized by University of Tennessee graduate students and faculty. She plans to graduate with an MA in English in May of 2013.