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Slow Emergencies

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Jordyn N. Rhorer, Student

Julia Johnson, Major Professor

Dr. Andy Doolen, Director of Graduate Studies

SLOW EMERGENCIES

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Jordyn Rhorer

Nicholasville, Kentucky

Director: Julia Johnson, Professor of Creative Writing

Lexington, Kentucky

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SLOW EMERGENCIES

Like the ever-circling lines in the skin of trees, sometimes the whole of a person is peeled back, layer by layer, until only seeds remain. Names, faces, stories, and relationships are unmade and molded into new shapes. Without warning, those left at the base, at the roots, can't recognize this maple's form. They hold a pile of leaves, a bottle of glue, and the hope that something familiar will take sprout again. The tree becomes new, and its tangled branches reach out. These poems explore the lives of those living with and caring for those with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The hope is that they will touch on all the layers that make up a person, and the connection that nature and materiality have with building memory.

_____Jordyn Rhorer_____

_____04/27/2016_____

For Mom and Dad.
I couldn't have done it without you.

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Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements..... iii

I.

 To Do..... 2

 St. Joseph Bay..... 3

 Moving Day..... 5

 Coup de Foudre..... 6

 Stealing Wild Blackberries from Annette Dillard’s Yard..... 7

 Squeeze..... 8

 Release..... 9

 Create..... 10

 Eshet Chayil..... 11

 A Showing on Greentree Road..... 12

 October Snow..... 14

 L’aperçu..... 15

 A Missed Rendezvous..... 16

II.

 Weeds..... 18

 Shelter..... 19

 Mother..... 21

 Hemming a Pair of Dress Pants..... 22

 Farm Lessons..... 24

 Ponds..... 26

 Letters from Private Walter Payne Rhorer..... 28

 Trips to the Zoo and Living Rooms..... 29

 Return to April..... 30

 Accessories..... 31

 Matriarch..... 32

III.

 Slow Emergencies..... 35

 Early Onset..... 36

 MMSE Part One..... 38

 Collection..... 39

 First Summer Dream..... 40

 MMSE Part Two..... 41

 Blight..... 42

 Diminish..... 43

 Out of Sight..... 44

 MMSE Part Three..... 45

 Re-Home..... 46

 The Shape of Your Brain..... 47

 Imagined Diagnosis..... 48

 The Store of Things..... 49

Vita..... 50

I.

To-Do

Prove

Hold your hands up to the sun
Let mud from tad-pole races dry into the long lines of your palms
Count the year-lengths
Don't let anyone catch you predicting

Demonstrate

Show with the one hole that only opens when tennis shoes move heel-to-toe forward, how each
footfall and push reveal bare feet hiding under blue canvas

Confirm

Document church breaths and bulletins fanning hot air into red, moist faces
Speak with the bird trapped in the garage
Retell Sunday sermons to her while she hides behind a coal shovel.
Tell her about family photos, the one of the old Blackfoot woman in her casket
Tell it again, this time remember all the words the preacher said about death and doorways.

Catalogue

Number the patches of moss in the yard
Note how they cling to the roots of ash trees, but stay away from evergreens
Manipulate hours to seem like minutes while you follow assembly lines of ants from the
underside of kitchen cabinets to cracks in the basement
Turn up the teacups in the corner cupboard to see if they have star signs, like the ones who tell
your fate, or predict births of important baby boys
Name spiders, who filter in through missing stained glass panes in the front door
Name them after people from ancient times, ones you hear as you fan through the new hardback
books deacons' wives put in the pews

Remember

Tap the rhythm, the way they taught you
Say the whisper names again and again, sixty-six times
Mourn those left tomorrow, curled up like dried leaves in corners of bedrooms
Wonder what they were looking for
Suck in the humidity of mid-July
Feel full of water

St. Joseph Bay

Tchaikovsky stars fill the almost morning sky.
They sing to us from black, blank space
and I count the breaths it takes to swirl
my eyes away from the water's reflections
amid the wide blanket of dotted andante music
circling us, filling our eyes, our heads.

It is too easy to lie back my head
against the boardwalk, let sky
swallow me mezzo piano into music.
Just two inches, a chasm of space
lies between us, our bodies are reflections
of each other, our whispers come in swirls.

The frog song along the beach swirls
and swells. Every star sings overtures for my hands
to reach past the barrier. Stop my reflecting.
Hear choruses of witnesses building in the sky.
They cloud above me in unending, unbroken space
and finally touch soft skin music

that covers you, taste humid music
with my fingertips along your spine, swirl
my hand into yours, and let July breezes space
out our breaths as we reach our hands
into the freedom of Tchaikovsky's sky,
not knowing what is water, and what is reflection.

Star songs, frog songs, become forté reflections
of fires in my chest and your music—
sighs erupt new songs into the sky,
while the purple morning swirls
on the horizon, just above my toes.
We head for a new day. I fill the spaces

between your staccato breaths, spaces
between the smooth water reflections
at my feet with obbligato beats from head to toe.
My complete composition, my new-learned music
brakes into symphony, as I reach for you, swirl
a note on your skin, seared from summer sky.

Your smile swells my lungs, with summer space-music.

I reflect on each note, each rest. I applaud swirling
bay-songs in my head, and watch a sunrise bow across the sky.

Moving Day

Her arms are willow vines. They wish
they would hang so low they could grab
on to some piece of the front lawn, just

a clump of grass and clover, something
to tether her here. She wills her feet
to become roots like the ones

on the oak out back that crawl
to meet the foundation and kiss
the sides of this gray, corner house.

She wraps her vines around herself
and criticizes her eyes for every blink,
missing the smallest second of a last

look back at “before” before she gets
to “after.” Maybe they might not notice,
mistake her for a part of the landscaping,

the new people, the ones who will come
and change everything. Her mother tugs
at her elbow. She reaches out.

A vine blows in the wind, fingers twisting,
and she’s swept on with the family,
away to a new, strange nothing.

Coup de Foudre*

It was the sigh in the mattress that struck,
as it exhaled to make space in the almost
morning air, the stale, patient room.

At the first sign of light you would crawl
in and nestle the cold tops of your feet
between my ankle. The sigh sizzled

and spun me out of a dream where I
made a left turn at a willow tree I'd seen
somewhere-sometime before.

I thanked the air, thanked the herringbone
stitches along the hem of the sheets
that you could fill the space between

the vertebrae at the base of my neck
with swirling chaos whispers.
Good morning. Good morning.

*French: a lightning strike, love at first sight

Stealing Wild Blackberries from Annette Dillard's Yard

Annette Dillard operates in terms of “wills” and “won’ts”. Each morning at 7 a.m. I climb her chain-link fence from the back alley that connects all the houses from Briarwood to Shady Lane. I can sell blackberries at the farmer’s market, as long as they don’t find out whose hateful lawn they sprout from.

Slumped back in a rusted-out metal lawn chair, Mrs. Dillard shoves a cigarette in one corner of her mouth and curls her lip around the rim of a day-old coke can. She finds an opportunity for a “wont” just as I slip over the fence.

“You won’t be pickin’ all those berries. Imma have some.” I pause with my fingers around a plump berry, and survey the pristine back lawn, the unsoiled concrete path, the smiling yard gnomes, eyes bulging—calling out for help—and the nicotine orange tint of her strawberry print dressing gown.

“Won’t touch another. No you won’t.” She slurs over the coke can. I pick another. Beads of fireball sweat pop up over her forehead. She shifts a little. I take my chances with another. Her jaw clenches, cutting her Virginia Slim right at the edge of the filter. She spits.

I grab a hold of my bag, give her a salute, and slink back over the fence, jogging the whole way home.

Squeeze

With my hands, I squeeze my middle,
like fresh dough that waits to be
kneaded into a form. I can take the shape
of any womanly hourglass, if I want, if

I know how to mold me just right.
The squeeze, the daily routine
of pretending curves are lines
has become a ritual. This sacred

sacrifice, to cut off circulation
if I have to, comes in a cloud
of hasty, whispered hopes.
Just one more button, one more.

I wonder if this is all part
of what being a woman means
or if I am something different, something
squeezed in-between. The mirrors

don't have answers, just more questions
about dough and how long it takes to rise,
in voices that spill out dark smoke
in the back of my mind. If I can make

this one button slide in easy, I wonder
If it will be like sliding a key into a lock,
pushing open a door into someplace
I never thought I'd fit into.

Release

She stacks out ingredients in a row,
treats the countertop like an altar
as she lines up a box of pasta,
a package of ground meat.

She and the kitchen are full of evening
light, and the air settles all around her.
This is how she feels whole, the creation
of a flavor, of a scent that floats through walls

and leads people in to her. She is magic
in her kitchen, and she watches a pot
of water bubble with enchantments
on her lips. She remembers the way

it has been passed down from mother
to daughter, *twist the pasta in your hands, never
break the strands*. Like long, thin hair, it must stay
strong, whole. She releases a fistful and it opens

out, spinning around the edges of the pot,
an endless spiral, sinking, bending slowly
as it cooks down, as it listens to a song,
the gentle hum of the woman creator.

Create

Again and again, she spreads charcoal
out like she's greasing a pan for the oven.
Everything on paper sinks into black,
and she steps back, a thought, a moment

of consideration. She has an empty cosmos
before her, a black hole of possibilities.
Her hands are caked with powder, sealed
in the tiny, desert lines of her skin.

The black hole threatens to suck her in.
She takes another swipe at her canvas,
the charcoal now thin between her fingers,
and she evens out the dust. Here, a galaxy

will be born. She circles the spot with a finger.
There, a wandering star. The whole universe
sits in almost-being as she picks up an eraser,
and decides where to let in the light.

Eshet Chayil*

Woman of valor, she is more precious
because she finds creation with her hands,
rubbed raw against paper, black dust
caked in the deep lines of her palms.

She gets up before dawn, to speak
to the empty air in a still house.
She does not wake anyone but
a few bluebirds across the yard.

Woman of valor, she prays
for inspiration, makes deep, sure lines
on fresh paper. She is energetic.
She is strong. She never forgets

what it means to make. She steps
soft over old floorboards, and rages
across living rooms when no one
is watching, when everyone is watching.

Woman of valor is mad. She is broken.
She has more questions piled up in bent
notebooks than she does recipes to settle
a hungry stomach. She keeps secrets.

She leaves the windows open to hear
the night settle in. She steals the sheet
from her sleeping partner, but leaves
the blanket to keep him warm.

Woman of valor is clothed in strength.
She wraps it around herself, like a terrycloth
robe each morning and decides as she looks
in the mirror, that it fits her well.

*Hebrew: woman of valor

A Showing on Greentree Road

We move through empty rooms,
examine not-too-new carpet,
open and shut closet doors,
full of my stacks of shoes
and your pressed suits.

We weave around mismatched
furniture. You show me
with your arms how the bed
we don't have will fit
in the room that isn't ours.

*Look, you say, the bookshelf
can go here.* Your arms expand
wide, the width of libraries
with mahogany shelves. I fill
myself with the smell of old pages.

*Look, you say, we can hang
our coffee mugs on hooks.*
You measure with your hands
a square peg board. I count
the colorful cups, rearrange
them like a painting.

You are magic. Your body
measures the spaces, there appears
our home. Colors change, fixtures
change, flowerbeds change, seasons change,
and two turns to three, three to four.

We float through rooms. Gray
snowfall sticks in your hair. You move
slower. You ease down to sit at our
soon-to-be kitchen table.

Wrinkles set in around your eyes
and your fingers become thin
and brittle. I pass mirrors, but refuse
to look. We dwindle, we age.

You are translucent, a ghost
tapping windows, checking
for cold spots. You talk about
storage space, subfloors, and HVACs.
I hear your voice from far away.

I bump around empty rooms.
I pair socks at the dryer, check
a pot of soup, in the kitchen,
tie tiny pairs of shoes,
hunch over a desk full of papers,

until you, hand in mine
bring me back. The lights fade.
The bed dissolves into the floor.
The cups disperse like snowflakes

on a warm window. Bookshelves
empty, book-by-book. Rooms.
Just rooms again. *Maybe* you say.
Someday I say.

October Snow

I clench my fists and wish I could reach under the skin on the back of my hands where crack lines have formed, ready for ice to settle in. “Sit,” and “stay,” are words for winter. They come without asking. They are the dry, silent surprise.

Itching, I step forward into the dark, open room, my feet peeling like damp, chilled, cheesecloth across the floor. Under the cracks in the blinds, peeks a sigh, stuck in another cold morning. I make a curve with my back and clamp my elbows

to my sides, a brace for flannel-sheet memories to sit. I reach out with one hand and open the back door. A quick pull, like a Band-Aid. Under my breath, I pray for the sun to remember what the spring air tasted like months ago.

A whisper of ice and stillness swoops in, makes its way around the kitchen, floods with scents of fresh snow through the house. In the blue flowerpot, the Black-Eyed Susans sit in a clump, gasping and brown from shock. They scrape

the siding and wait for my reaction as I reach to open the screen between me and long, unwrinkled white sheets.

L'aperçu
the glimpse

She waits for mother moon, the same one
who watched three generations birthed.
Emerging in black sky, it slides its way
into her mirror, reflecting the window
across her bedroom. Sharp curves
of a pure silver sphere cut through
sheer drapes and slice her body

from top to bottom. She arches, both arms
in a palm-to-palm formation over her head,
elongates and waits until mother moon's
reflection inches to match the new round, the
space where there was none before.

She hears it, soft-lip whispers of wind through
the attic above, feels it in her bones, she straightens
before she lines up her sides with moonlight.

Knees together, ankles, elbows, everything tight
on tip-toed edge, but she can't seem to match
the bulges. Nothing budes, but whispers
become echoed shouts, curtains flutter
and spill mother moon beams over and around
and inside her. She swells, lifted,
weightless with the glimpse of it.

A Missed *Rendezvous*

I wish I had words for what your tongue
can do, wrapped around drawn-out oo's
and delicate shhh's when you let out
the words *bouche, boucle, brosser, brune*.

You close your eyes and get into character,
more French than *pain au chocolat*, with your
fingers cupped around your bottomless
pour-over like it's the last *touché*
touch you'll ever *toucheras* touch.

Your lips spell *café*, and you watch her,
the girl two tables over, her toes inched
farther and farther away from herself
like she'll *faire un somme* over a philosophy
textbook. I imagine you are in Paris.

We're just meeting for the first time
in a very long time, our *retrouvailles* plays
on your lips before you flip the card and
move to how delicate the *gâteau* is here,
how you're not impressed with the *glacage*.

I hear you say, "*Le gâteau n'est pas assez sucré,*"
with your fingers perched in a pinch like
you've caught the word mid-air. I want
to taste the end of your fingertips, I have
always had *les sucreries*. I have the taste for it.

But our meeting, our date, our reunion
is *coupe, coupes, coupons*, cut too short
when you finish the stack of three-by-fives
and pack up your bag without looking my way.

II.

Weeds

We used to wring our hands raw
around stems of Queen Anne's
lace that grew like a runway along
the service road in front of the farm.

Nate and I gathered them up in
bouquets, pressed them like powder
puffs against our cheeks, offered
them to be tucked behind ears.

Daddy and Grand Daddy said
they were weeds, the Bush Hog
was overdue. By next week there'd
be no trace of royalty left.

So we picked them as wedding
flowers by the pond when we
felt like being in love.

We gathered them in piles on
graves of guinea pigs, hamsters,
broken birds, an old, yellow farm dog,
and two, still kittens. Unmarked
places we'll never forget how to find.

The spongy blossoms filled
the back field where the old house
fell to pieces, where David was born,
where lives passed and moved through
the air to reside in mealtime talk.

The weeds were the left-overs
of late summers, of spent days,
left soft on the porch railing as we
followed, one-by-one, back inside.

Shelter

Mom paced
in the living room,
cursed Granddaddy
for building the place,
cursed plaster walls
and concrete walls,
February ice
and March snow,
cursed the dead bird
lying in the sealed-up
fireplace, the old furniture,
whatever there was left
to curse that she could.

The crack
in the foundation
was wide enough
for me to fit my head,
big enough for the roots
of the oak tree out front
to snake inside,
through an open passageway,
into our once quiet lives.

On the stairs,
I ran my fingers
over another crack
in cold plaster, held
the flashlight for Daddy
to see, while yellow
hoses ran from
the open front door
down to a gas-powered pump,
gurgling, sucking in
our prayers
with all the bones
of mice and stripped
snake skins.

There was no point
in jacking the house up
to pour a new foundation,
no money to seal the basement,

so melting March snow
wouldn't creep in,
no fight left in our tired
wading feet, our aching,
wet legs, to lift
the water heater, no time
at 2 a.m. to wait
for the pilot light igniter to dry.

Back and forth,
Daddy paced, asked again
if I could hear water
through the hoses
I heard only the tinkling ice
falling outside,
and the slow cold seeping in.
He measured the water
and wrung his hands.
Mousetraps floated like ships
searching for a place to tie off.

Mother

I find her in the kitchen,
her shadow spread back far
behind her while she keeps
her eyes on my old, graying dog
making circles in the back yard.

She waits for the timer to stop
on a pork roast meant for tonight's
dinner. Her hair is in rollers,
swirls of smoke around her head.

Last night's dishes wait, unwashed
while she taps her fingers on the edge
of a blue coffee cup. That one is mine,
the one with pale forget-me-nots

in knotted tangles of green stems
and leaves. She sips slow, quiet
making sure to leave the new
spring morning undisturbed.

Her shoulders straighten as she shifts
in her chair; the ball of her foot
rests on the open back door.

I stop in the doorway.
She blows a dragon wisp
of steam from the rim of her mug.

The house stays quiet besides
the every-so-often
whine from the door when she
lifts her foot. I creep back
to my bed.

Hemming a Pair of Dress Pants

Unearth
all the old boxes
of scraps and ribbon
from under
her four-poster bed.
Set up the machine
after you clear
the kitchen table
of a week's worth of mail.
She shows you
the blue and silver lace.
It came from a shop
downtown. It closed
before you were born.
Talk about wedding veils
and baby bonnets
and patchwork animals
made from apron pieces.
Lay squares out in a quilt
you'd like to make
one day.
Tell her how you think
the bobbins look like long,
colorful tube corals
like the ones you saw
on your trip to Key West.
She will tilt her head
and get quiet for a while.
Fish around
for the blanket
she made
for a road trip
to the Badlands.
Weave the fringes
around your fingers,
braid every three strands
while she folds a cuff.
Talk about vacations
and turn on a light
so she can see the eye
to thread.
Watch her hands.
Ask about

the first time
she learned to sew.
Listen while you
turn your back to make
a bowl of popcorn
the way she likes it.
Not too salty.
Let the kernels sizzle
in her favorite saucepan
just long enough
so she finishes
the first leg
before you can see.

Farm Lessons

I.

Her little knees cling together
to cradle a crooked creature
while she waits on the concrete stoop.
She strokes a brown, fuzzy head.
Her big brother fills
a deep basin with water.

She hums to the crippled kitten.
It was plucked from the litter
that hid under porch shadows,
a cluster of yellow eyes.

Brother shuts off the water hose,
and she knows there will be
no begging. He told her
that for sure. His mouth
is tight. "Go inside," he says.

Dread sweeps in a chill
across a field of soybeans,
and up her shaking legs.
From inside the house,
she hears the chimes
of the kitchen clock.
They fall flat in the air.

She places the kitten
on the step, plants a heavy
kiss between its ears,
and retreats
into the quiet house.
Ears covered
with her cupped palms.

II.

He recalls the time he learned,
how the late frost had shocked
his mother's flowers with a crisp
chill. Half sleeping, he heard

the flat chime of the chain on the fence.
His sister, too small to know, wouldn't
wake from the sound. Soft blue light
crept in past the sheer curtains
over his bed. He waited.
He prayed.

Surely his heart would
burst and resound across
the near-silent morning.

His father's boots
crunched past the bedroom
window. He cooed
to the old, hunched, farm dog
whose limp was the only sign.

The boy threw off sleep, ran to the yard
to meet them, to stop them.
Dew coated the bottoms of his feet,
sent chills up his legs.

"Go back inside," his father said.
A frothy cloud of breath floated
upward to a purple bruise sky.

His father waited until the front
door shut behind the boy.
Footsteps faded.
Even the birds spoke in soft
whispers over a long pause. Then,
a single clap of thunder.

Ponds

Shoulder to shoulder,
the five of us grandkids
stood in a line behind
Memmaw. I looked everywhere
but where the four boys
squirmed and elbowed,
stood on tip-toes and peered
over weeds to see, where
Uncle Gip waded knee-deep

over a man—what was left
anyway—mostly ballooned legs
and feet with spotted flesh,
floated at the rim
of the swollen pond, full
from a melted winter.

Memmaw stood, eyes closed,
hands wrung around
her floral apron. She shook
her head back and forth, lips
moving for a God I couldn't yet grasp.

As we waited for life
to creep back into the sheer, blue
skin, for a thaw,
for him to rear up,
his arms to bloom open wide,
his anchored form to thrash
for air, or for the coroner
to round the front gate,

I thought of Memmaw and how
she plucked broken limbs
off the rose bushes at church.
She would tell me to wait,
to watch how something
could seem dead,
but be alive again.

I looked to the house,
turned away from my
eager cousins, to see

the kitchen window, where
a row, a line of mugs
glasses, jars and plastic cups
sat with rose stems
in their own ponds.
waiting to sprout again.

Letters from Private Walter Payne Rhorer
A Response to "Sea Level" by Joe Breidel

I found them in a handmade, wooden crate,
like a tiny coffin, in the back closet of my great-grandma's
house. The envelopes were thin and fading. Hundreds,
addressed from the naval base in New Caledonia.

In dwindling pencil he scrawled neutral notes,
complained only of the tiny stack of replies.
He missed the gentle curves of her handwriting
and the smell of fresh-cooked apricot pies.

Without ever seeing it, he knew Breidel's
Sea Level, and the way calm can settle in a heart
like graphite on old paper, like frozen prints of the sea.
I can see my great-grandpa's calloused hands as if

he cradled the fragile level, as if the envelope hidden
in waves contained his own letters. He knew suspension
how to keep an eye, and his words, on a settled sea.
Everything's fine here. Got no mail today. Time capsules.

Each letter is a straight horizon line leading back to Kentucky,
to the farm house he built with his hands, the baby
girl he didn't think would know him. There would be no
dark marks in his print, dipping below the waves,

or sharing tales of the high crests. There was no
point in telling the whole truth. Only to stop time,
push pause with every line. *When I come home, when
I see you again, when I get back. Gentle, kind lies.*

Trips to the Zoo and Living Rooms

I always gravitated towards the melancholy
tortoise, the towering, quiet elephants.
I longed to trace their wrinkled
faces with my fingers. Their skin was

old parchment, topographical maps
of time. Their eyes searched
through me, reminding me of something
back home, a withered face confused,
deteriorating into a burgundy armchair.

Across rope fences and through steel cages,
I studied the ones people said
never forgot, the ones people said
knew how to trick time, how to live forever
Back in that dim living

room, a face so similar, deepened, darkened,
and hollowed with time, watched as we filed
past one-by-one. His eyes knew none,
and I stood in the doorway, willing him to remember.

Return to April

Lachrymose quiet falls over each beginning
of new springs. I return to the first April
after curtains drew back, cardboard boxes
lined up in the hall, to carry what was left

of handmade picture frames and iridescent
carnival glass dinner trays. A box for pie pans
that huddled together in cabinets under the sink.
One for a bag full of costume jewelry,
and a chipped, black teapot, dusted with age.

I didn't know how ordinary things could call
out to me. I wished for a leftover whisper,
a sign in teacup rims, boxed Christmas place
settings, or a weathered straw sun hat.

Before very long, names appeared, penned
in permanent marker on cardboard, to claim
pieces who spoke in different voices to each
of us. Voices from sometime before the spring.

We heard but not in the same time or way as each other.
When tulips bloom, I hear your polka-dot dress,
the plastic zipper-bag of pink curlers,
and the bamboo-handled purse that wait
for Sunday in the bedroom closet,

nascent grief lingered in a musty smell I can't
seem to shake. Each warm break in the weather
uncovers wafts of old Avon perfume,
and a longing for bittersweet apricot pies.

Accessories

the eruption of bruises
on my grandmother's chest
from falling in her sleep

the dwindling squares
in her eye shadow case
she applies with a sweep

the raised veins across
her arms and sticking up
from the tops of her feet

eleven bottles of nail polish
stationed in a row across
the window sill, a city scene

the hospital wristband
and the persistent
shade of her cheeks

the paten leather purse
she clasps between her hands
when she asks to leave

the long cord of the
O₂ machine that tethers
her like a leash

Matriarch

She started out small
smaller than the rest
glued to the inside
of her mother
like a cocoon-wrapped
monarch left dangling
late in the season.
She held on so tight
they ripped her out
plucked her down
with long metal pincers.
Hasty doctors slipped,
took an eye, left a cavity
so she never had two framed lenses,
one side empty and exposed.

She grew up small
shied away from cameras
never breeched 90 pounds
but stubborn enough
to walk the service road alone
to the brick church in Athens
each Sunday. She converted
her mama, compelled
her daddy, her moonshiner
lineage, and her sailor-mouthed
husband to dry up and find Jesus
with an iron, river-Baptist grip.

She raised her babies right,
in the Lord's way, made sure
his shirt was tucked and her hair
was combed. She didn't smile.
She told them Daddy would come
home from overseas
descend from the air like an angel
in one piece safe and sound,
hoped for their sake, it wasn't
one piece in a box.

She faded slowly.

She started missing
Sundays when days and nights
bled together, when babies
had babies and they had babies too.
Clocks got slower, time stretched
out past her arms, back into the blind
spot the doctors left in that cavity,
and she didn't need it anymore.
She hid Christmas money
from the invisible man
in the basement in her socks.

She tucked tiny mountains
of d-CON, green poison crystals,
Under her pillow. Under all the pillows
in empty bedrooms. She lived alone
too long. She flowed
through them systematically
searching, calling, wailing
For that small, injured baby
so someone
would rock her back to sleep.

III.

Slow Emergencies

A maple
flowers in season.
The wide trunk
tells circular tales
and keeps records
all the way back
to the acorn phase.
Brown bark,
like wrinkled skin,
shows no sign
of a dark rot
soaked in
from the roots.
Slow, undetectable,
the knot creeps inside
and releases black
clouds. Pathways
confuse, tales wither,
and samaras
sprout. Only
when they brown
early and release
does the forest
tell the difference.

Early Onset

Daddy is out by the pond,
staring at birds far off, matching
their birdsong with whistles.
Somewhere inside, maybe
he remembers, or doesn't.
I don't try and figure it out.
Maybe if I complete
a circle in the dirt with the rim
of my sandal, I can rewind

all the years of damage
that simple inflammation
caused. Dust rests on my toes,
fills the grooves of skin
that blended in before.
Everywhere, the lines
remember, leave impressions.

I ask him to come home.
He says, we have to wait.
He grits his teeth, expression
blank. He tries to put a puzzle
back together in his brain,
backwards, with all the pieces
turned upside down. He twists
his lips to chew the side of his cheek.

The farm is dry and hot, but the pond
shimmers across a gravel drive,
an invitation, a warning. I reach out
my hand, but maybe he won't go anyway.
I make another circle. I ask why
we have to wait. I ask him to come home.
His jaw is tight as stone, sunburn flaring
up on the tanned and spotted skin
on his nose. He points to the pond.
The surface effervesces—a turtle
dips under the water as the ripples dissipate.

He watches, hands stuffed in his pockets.
I ask again, this time in a whisper, like a distant
bird song he might answer with a whistle.
Maybe he forgot how.

If he remembers the soft dove,
the thunderous cardinal,
I try to be the lonely finch.
I ask him to come home, but he points,
this time at the sky, where two wrens
circle each other in the trees.
His face softens, and he looks
at my circles in the dirt.
Fists uncurl, shoulders droop.
He looks me in the eye
and holds out his hands.
We turn for home.

MMSE* Part One: Orientation

Today would have to be Monday or Thursday
or Saturday, one of the three. The date. Frances
rolled my hair yesterday, or two days ago,
maybe a few years, for church, but we haven't gone yet.
The pews are due for another reupholstering, I know
ladybugs have gathered in the corners of windows
like they do every year in autumn. Autumn. The date?

It must be October. The leaves have turned, started
to thin out. I could see the pond through dwindling
brush this morning. The sun caught the water
as a flock swarmed above, reflected like a school
of dark fish. They were leaving. They will always
leave. And I'll stay the same. The year?

A year is a year, and I've had so many it's a waste
of time to keep track. But it has been nine, maybe
ten years since my husband died. Even though
I saw him just yesterday. He stood at the back door,
looking up the gravel road. He couldn't hear
me calling. Maybe he wasn't there. Where am I?

I'm in a doctor's office. In town. A town,
looks different to me, but it's been a while since I've
been around this many people and this many buildings.
I'm too far from home, from roots and trees. Too far
from birdsongs, from the lone cardinal perched
outside my window yesterday evening. But where?

I'm not at home. I'm someplace new. I know because
Frances is with me. She's my daughter, not by blood
but by faith and by marriage, and by that look
in her eyes as they wait for me to answer. No, I'm not
home with my picture frames and long stares. They never
blink. Frances doesn't. She knows. I know too.

*Mini-Mental State Examination: 30 point questionnaire used to measure cognitive impairment, frequently used to screen for dementia

Collection

In the top drawer, under a pile
of underwear, lies a stack
of driver's licenses. Taken

at the point they all dreaded, the moment
when freedom and a steering wheel
were too much for family to handle.

My father looks for them
in the aftermath of funerals.
While we fight over carnival glass

and handwritten notes, he needs
a face, a signature, proof
that they could get around once.

Like his stacks of baseball cards,
he keeps them organized, in order
of date of death all the stats are there.

He pulls them out of his dresser,
flips through each one to show me
the numbers printed in blue.

Height, weight, eye color, the facts
and faces he's afraid he'll forget
one day, when he can't drive,

when I take over this stack.
On that day, when I ask for his
wallet, I wonder if I will begin

a collection of my own. How many
freedoms will I take? This small pile,
the cards hiding in his drawer, the faces

stare on, eager to finish
their day at the DMV, a normal
day, any day to remember.

First Summer Dream

The first snow of helicopter seeds
came in an afternoon gust
You thought for a moment, wind song
gripping your insides, that this time
it would take the maples down.

You looked on from the open
garage door, watched the accumulation
pile up on the drive until everything
was brecciated yellow jasper.

Rows of branches, arms waving
for you to run for cover, formed a tunnel,
one that tried to suck you in,
pull you from your shoes,
from the seedlings in the drive,
from their names and faces,
and before you knew it,

you lifted from the concrete floor.
You tilted skyward, curled your arms
in, burial style for the spin, higher
and higher, until there was no reason

to tell the difference between earth
and everything else. The branches reached
out for you, pulled you on through a vortex
of wind and sound and long explanations
of what was happening in the swirl of your brain.
You could only hear the beating of the seeds.

Just as you reached the precipice,
all the flapping vessels around you
spilling out into the open, you spread
your arms and met the sun face-to-face

and you stopped, feet firm on the floor
of the garage, a settling cave. Silence swept
over the yard, with a faint flutter of wings.

MMSE Part Two: Object Registration

Sure, while we sit here in this sterile room,
cold, confused, having waited thirty minutes
in total silence, she can remember “clipboard,”
like it’s nothing. Less than a second, even
when she’s never used a clipboard in her life.

Lord, help me, and “stethoscope” too.
That’s an easy one, but in the middle of the night,
my name doesn’t come to mind. I don’t understand
her face, my mother-in-law looking at that doctor
like he’s some old friend, stopped by for dinner,

like I’m the stranger she’s stuck with. Last time
we did this she tried to hide, but things have slipped
down recently. When she sees me cross the living room
to answer the door, there’s surprise, a lift in her eyebrows
like she thought she was all alone, the same look she got

pouring over a countertop covered in flour, years
ago, when the kneading started. She took me in,
not her daughter, but as good as one, good enough
for her son. Somehow, I have faded into the floral
wallpaper, the green and white quilts. I am

background noise, but these ordinary objects are
no trouble for her mind. A third, an ink pen,
and she hesitates. She never liked writing much.
Recipes, birthday cards, copied Bible verses,
that was about it. But surely she knows a pen.

I want to shake her, make her remember the things
that matter, forget anything but the faces of her children,
her children, her great-grand children, how to bow
her head for blessing over dinner, the words to her favorite
hymns, the sound of my voice. Forget everything else.

Blight: When Leaves Fall Early

inspired by *Badly infected tree, all branches girdled by blight and leaves either undeveloped or deformed. 6/27/1919*, photograph, part of the Agricultural Experiment Station (University of Kentucky) negatives, 1895-1948, UK Special Collections Library

Twisted branches stretch out in complicated
systems of information from trunk to leaf
Some twist back, curled against themselves
and unknown fears, a black decay that grows
beneath the bark. We can't see it, but any tree,

maple even, knows when something is off.
Overcome, the tree sheds leaves one side
first following the disease. They drop, silent,
like green snow. They only just began to turn.
There, a leaf who just sprouted this past Easter,

taking in colored eggs and lace-trimmed dresses,
how they scattered across the lawn and avoided
spring mud, sinks farther and farther from home.
Another, sprouted on a Thursday when seed holes
were dug with a good backward kick of a heavy heel,

in the back garden, lets go and fades into a field
of forgotten foliage. The two hemispheres of a once
healthy tree, now uneven, struggle to survive, to regain
a sense of season. By the time we notice, there's
nothing to do but watch, gather up leaves and bottles
of glue, and hope the tree won't know the difference.

Diminish

inspired by *Maple leaves-fungus*. 8/10/1906, photograph, part of the Agricultural Experiment Station (University of Kentucky) negatives, 1895-1948, UK Special Collections Library

There's a fungus that grows on maple leaves, spread across the surface, like fiery bursts of amyloid protein on the brain. It seeps out like a drop of ink and sucks away all the green.

The leaf-skin bubbles, tissue drowns as it comes under attack. The fungus reaches out. It targets spring leaves before they unfold, hidden until the infestation has grown too large to treat.

The tar-like stroma of the fungus, full of spores to rake away the color, starts out as a yellowing, a pause. It sits on the surface, like seeds waiting to pop open and destroy the rest.

Once they open, you can see it plainly, the splotched leaves flail, useless in the wind, they don't remember the sun like they used to. Slowly, they curl back, dry out, release from the branch, and forget.

Out of Sight

Hide, *verb*

1.

a: to put out of sight (the end of a gravel road is a good place, no one looks in dark windows, no one stops to investigate behind overgrown vines and slanted roofs, you can slip secrets behind faded floral wallpaper, no one wants to find any treasure there, no one wants to take a ghost away)

b: to conceal (circles under your eyes, pauses after simple questions) for shelter (someplace familiar, someplace you won't get lost, twelve rows in the garden, don't go farther or the well will swallow you up) or protection (there are sounds below the house, in the cracks in the walls, at night creatures cry out, looking for you)

2. to turn the eyes or face (faces are faces and the one in the mirror doesn't match the face in your mind, pay her no attention, your face is full of) away in shame (don't you know what's coming, can't you see the way your eyes sink back and draw away from everything happening now) or anger (because you can ask why all you want, but you'll never get the same answer twice, people will tell you one thing, the whispers in the maple outside will tell you another, be furious, rage, throw the china set out the window, bury your wedding band at the stump in the end of the yard, wail in the opening of the well until someone yells back, rip leaves from their branches, tell the roots they don't know what they've done)

MMSE Part Three: Attention and Calculation

count backward by sevens start with one hundred
the number of lines you count on the back
of your hands deep fractures like diamond cuts
in the top crust of mincemeat pie while waiting
while standing while baking oven light switch flips
but bulb stays dark a breath holds puffs the center
like cheeks something bubbles under covers
cover pinched edges with wash egg and water
don't burn then foil don't burn must release a breath
seven seconds back seven back from one hundred
ninety three next spring then seven again eighty-six
steps to the mailbox from the cattle guard where
a yellow dog waits shoo him devil get behind
no ham hocks to throw his way *go on home* evil one
wags seven more back to seventy-nine might be
when the boys were born or when their boys were born
little worms wiggling under shale rocks
used to be a bench to break beans in the sun after church
on the seventh day seven back again back seven weeks
seven years seven from before seventy two or seventy seven
times to forgive after sixty two there is seven more
shirts to iron and sixty five is fifteen years path the fiftieth
but how many past one just one three rooms two feet one head
two hands one plate one spoon one knife one fork one glass
one empty lap one past ten past twelve clocks hum
at home just one mouth one bite one slice
one hole in the middle of a pie how many
can start from one hundred and count back

Re-home

Start with a good base, something sterile and soil-less. Make sure it's not too similar to the old pot. The patterned curtains can stay, but you will need linoleum floors, not shag carpet, and a bed that isn't soft enough.

In winter, start with a hardwood cutting, one that's matured, seen all the seasons. Wound with vertical cuts, made with shears and lies. Tell this new sapling no, it's not going home. Not today.

Pour in all your time. Start with long hours, cover your branch, check in to make sure its getting enough daylight. Soon, it will start to change. Wounds numb, eyes glaze, and something new

takes root. They say that this tree will be identical. They say you won't know the difference. It will be just as happy as before. Somehow, when you look in on the new pot, you aren't sure you believe.

The Shape Of Your Brain

inspired by an interview with William Markesbery, June 30, 1986, recording, UK Special Collections Library

Sideways glances at brain scans can't tell me what they tell medical students. They're in this for a grade. Down the line, I hope they'll realize what lies in the butterfly that rests between the two swollen, leafed hemispheres, spread from branch-like lines of a "demented" brain.

What if we had agreed to let them have your mind shipped off and packaged, separated into pieces examined and catalogued? Even then, I know there isn't a student that could tell me they know. They couldn't tell me that they found the pieces of all the people, the songs, the places you lost.

To me, the empty blotches that read like caverns on a screen spell out what a palm-full of flour looks like when I try to figure out the recipe for Thanksgiving dumplings, or the answer to my questions about when to plant peppers.

Somewhere in those dark wings, the secrets that proteins tried to hide come to the surface. They open up their wings, flutter for just a moment, show off for all those medical machines. They take a leap off the screen and fly their way back to me.

Imagined Diagnosis

They're called tangles, he says, his white coat
like a frozen field of snow. I can only lift
my eyes to the top of his neatly knotted necktie.
A tune floats behind my ear. *Tangles*

because of their shape. Twisted clusters, microscopic
bird nests on the brain. I think of my father, waiting
for me, hairbrush in hand after I'm bathed
and dressed for bed. *Any bird nests?* he says.

Mom leans in the kitchen doorway, silhouetted,
incased in a shining glory, like the warm housecoat
she wore on winter mornings. I feel her smile. In my ears
is the soft glide of a hairbrush through sleek, long locks.

Sing me a song. Something about stars and wishes.
My little voice follows the tune while the doctor tells me
they don't know the cause. Paired with plaques, like dusty
hazes, the nests will erase these nights before bed, my father's

clumsy, but gentle fingers. They reach for lost strands, try
to work out the tangles. I resume my song and look to
the top of the stairs. If I stare at the hall light long enough
the colors in my eyes swirl. Yellow-white light

covers me, covers my father, Mom in the doorway too.
We fade out to a blank, white space. I only have the sounds,
the smell of flowery hair conditioner, and the ups and downs
of stars and light and wishes.

The Store of Things

Memory, *noun*

1. the store of things (polka-dot handkerchiefs, plastic hair curlers, Christmas paper over the fireplace, a set of Star-of-David crystal, hymnals falling open across my hands, *let that grace now like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee*, the paper-thin, glass pitcher in the hutch, my wedding band) learned and retained from an organism's activity or experience (grip the weeds close to the ground and pull root and all, everything below, tip the old sunhat's brim back to see the mail truck cross the cattle guard, another sun-kissed letter from sea, slip my finger in by the crease and rip across the top, hold my babies close, read the words again and again, my husband—my soldier is alive, he is safe) as evidenced by modification of structure or behavior (I feel thin, like a helicopter seed wing, my voice doesn't know the hymns or the colors of stained glass, my hands forget how to grab on tight, my feet uprooted)

[Memory] **Loss**, *noun*

1. failure to keep (hold of my daughter's hand, she passed too soon, going in circles in an empty house, back and forth up the road, when will my soldier come home or my savior take me) or to continue to have (better days, prayers to someone—to maple trees, words to string together)

2. unusual forgetfulness (when was the last Sunday, the car won't ever start, someone's opened all the doors, why can't I find my silk scarf, I'm afraid of these faces in picture frames, they cover the walls and surround me at night, sometimes they whisper, but never words I understand, who are these people, when will they come alive and rescue me)

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