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NEW YEAR, OLD BLUES

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NEW YEAR, OLD BLUES

THESIS

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

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

NEW YEAR, OLD BLUES

This collection aims through the use of folktale and familial history to investigate the bounds of gender and memory against a rural Appalachian landscape. The work utilizes superstition, myth, and the commonplace to search the shadows for the forbidden and unspoken, in an attempt to redefine and reconcile personal dissonance through an observational and at times, voyeuristic lens.

KEYWORDS: Appalachia, Family, Folklore, Gender, Sexuality, Superstition.

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12/10/17

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Date

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I.

At a Glance

Random shotgun blast,
the starved dogs bound to their chains, do
not raise their necks.

She died in the bed,
they drug the mattress out back,
burning what was left.

The next time around,
She will be kudzu, melting
across sleepy land.

The Circus is Here

The circus came to town,
only it was more like a tarp
that swallowed up the whole town in its
striped bass belly for the day.
And above us, an acrobat who spun
like a tinsel jig over the packed denim crowd,
until a drunk gravel bark
rippled from the stands, *Take it all off!*
And as if she had heard it before, the sequins scaled
from her tight body and landed in the hay
below. A heap of red and gold guts that
would have glittered in the light.

Uncle Lee

Uncle Lee wasn't about to let Mary go, so
brimming with whiskey spite,
he shot her from behind as she made her way
to milk the cow. Mary bled out by the barn door,
the blast ricocheting from
huddled hill to hill.

When my great-grandmother heard the sound, she
knew exactly what her son had done.
She called out to the Lord and cursed the bitch. Too
drunk to run she hid him in the attic,
outside the family sowed pepper around the property to
gag the hound.

Some say the streams will carry your scent away, but not your sins. In

thirty years, I will stand with a cluster of reunited men,
gravel biting into bare feet and quietly marvel at Lee's bone white t-
shirt, the outline of a pack of smokes rolled in the sleeve.
He's slick and electric with blue bruise inked arms draped in
diamonds, crosses, and naked women.
I will remember all the pin-ups as mermaids, legs fused together to
keep them from running.

Needling

Based on Patient, Male, Unknown — from Owsley County, Kentucky, 1919 Part of the Linda Neville papers, 1783-1974

Photo I (1917)

You must have little, if any, perception in those haloed eyes, nubs of chalk snuffing out each iris.
You look toward the camera, but your mind is elsewhere, listening to unfamiliar voices.
You hear the doctor humming down the hall, a blur in starched white, through clouds of antiseptic.
You attempt to focus on some center,
your left eye a moon, your right eye a small star seeing beyond us all.

Photo II (some days later)

You've been given a haircut, the Ziegler dissecting knife carefully enters into the anterior chamber of your eye.
Depending upon the case, the number of cuts will vary.
Your muddled sideways gaze searches for something scattered, something small. *It's just a bit of pollen, only a bee sneeze.*
You smirk behind an ashen veil.

Photo III (1917/1918)

Nothing shocks you.
Your vision has greatly improved, but more needling will be required.
Bleeding into one another, iris and pupil become cracked black yolks.
Nocturnal brother, your exhausted stare is on the lookout.

Photo IV (1918/1919)

Today you look the camera dead on.

Foreign Language

Outside the girl rises into the spray of lightening bugs,
unfastens her hair, still damp from the pool
and bends forward — almost like she is reaching
for some lost thing: a marble, a hairclip, her reflection.
And lets out a keen holler that vibrates from her bones,
like the current of an electric fence,
soon the dog is howling too.
Her quaking body shrouded in the light
of a foreign language spoken between small things.
The sky streaked with yellow warnings and orange calls to come home and
between all this chatter, her hair is streaming honey crepe.
This is what the church women do when they catch the feeling.

In Plain Sight

A man hid at the edge
of the creek's sandy bank,
leaning against an old oak.
He seemed to be waiting for some lover,
the way he propped his leg casually against the trunk.
His head pillowed by bark, he beamed
as he stood sunning himself. A smile that washed
once he spotted me in the creek.
Deliberately he clasped his rifle,
making himself known. Someone else had been expected, for
a moment he thought I
was the big buck he claimed to be tracking.
Making up my own excuse,
I ask if he had seen my old, red dog and
kept wading.

Stone Dry

We came from Baptists, stone
dry and hard-shelled,
and a few outlaws, who always managed to
reappear after time served,
or serving no time at all
because granddaddy knew a lawyer
who owed him a few favors.

And a hardness was bred
into each of us from an early age, so
we grew up knowing to judge
a man by how hard he beat his dog, his horse,
or his woman, and never to step on another man's land
until we had made ourselves known,
because every trail to every door could
easily lead to some small war.

We carried the weight,
a pitted pebble sewn deep in our innards, only
recognizing our own coldness in the
indifferent faces when we returned home.

Halloween

On Halloween we think of Lottie
who miscarried in the bed,
and of Ben who pulled her from the mattress,
sending her into the woods to bury something that
could fit in the palms of her hands.

Later she would mail order a book of spells,
she probably wanted to kill him, a dry voice calls
through a cloud of cheap cigarette smoke, like it was nothing. It
must have been common back then,
to bury your shame in a narrow grave.

Where You From?

The bathroom ceiling collapsed
three weeks after moving in,
The landlord sent a maintenance man who
reminded me of the rawboned and eager boy
who lived in an overcrowded trailer across the road
from the Stone Coal Baptist Church.
A scarecrow the color of faded ink and ragweed, satisfied
only to talk after he recognized something familiar in me.

Where you from?

He asked as he rigged the ceiling,
even I knew it was only a temporary fix and
the whole thing would fall again.
He knew the area, *I got shot there once.*
Then he squinted at me for a minute waiting for a reaction, but
my only response was to offer him a drink.
Wanting whiskey, he took the beer anyway.
He carried on, *You know in those real expensive places,*
you wouldn't believe the number of people that commit suicide.
I didn't, but still I nodded at the white carpet as if I did.

Later, I'd tell a neighbor and laugh when I got to the part
where we compared tattoos, surrounded by putty and tile.
When I saw the tangled confusion and unspoken assumption
dust across her unlined face, I'd wonder
where the hell she was from.

Five Fires

Five fires came and left nothing but you.
I don't remember the first, only my mother's bare
heels pounding like hail on hardwood floor.
Five fires came each leaving nothing, only a sick
dragon trail. A cat and candle took the blame
for the doublewide trailer that could almost be mistaken for
a home. The old storehouse went quick, rough trade
made sure of this. Never mind the apartment above the post office, or
how you keeled down the steps smelling of adhesives
and something metallic. A dense cloud of sweet, rotted fruit wafted
from the stairwell, and we all knew no grease fire could cause such damage.
When the boy broke into your father's house
and told the old man to wake up as he shook gasoline like piss, everyone
silently assumed your tinder tongue had sparked some malice, but still we
pretend it was a faulty breaker.
Five fives came and I am waiting for the sixth.

Skinhead

You shove a freckled shoulder into my face,
displaying your newest tattoo declaring your
allegiance to the Aryan Brotherhood,
and I am reminded of you at twelve. A rare flash
of red you would emerge, aloof and indecipherable,
after your mama called, beckoning you from a quiet room.
Carrying a fitness magazine, you would proudly cock
your head and thumb at the sculpted men posed on the cover, all
veins and oil. You wanted to be a real man,
a real tough guy.

Crooked Creek

The woodsman never came, that's
what no one remembers.

Choked with overgrowth and knotted devil's hair, the
forest wasn't the chosen path either.

It was just a girl, alone who waded the crooked creek, with
skirts that ballooned around her waist and curious minnows
beading out from the moss to inspect her flesh, so white she
could be mistaken for bread, for snow.

In the daylight, her grandfather tasked her with tending
to his forgotten wife. His work was done at night, delivered to women
who were not grandmothers. Women who could appreciate a man who
drove a Lincoln.

What do you give an old woman who once had everything?
Send her a granddaughter, a keepsake to fetch wood.
Something for the woman to busy her hands with,
a young body to milk out some remembrance of her former self,
something to keep the place cordial.

In the forest there were no wolves, only coyotes riddled with mange.
Nothing more than swaybacked dogs, scattered in desperation, eager to find a bone. At
night with likeminded men, the grandfather burned crosses,
sent messages, hung a harlot from a bridge – just to set her straight.
He swore he always felt bad that her children watched,
but there were just too many men who came calling.

In the daylight, he covered his arms, his black and red insignia. The
old woman kept a chill, so every day the girl fetched wood. The girl
wore a cloak knitted from shame.
The grandfather wore a hood proudly.
The grandmother, blind to it all, felt only the heat from the flames.

Zeus in Drag

On his way he trades gold for two roosters.
Ripping a star from the sky, he shreds the
strawberry flesh from the fowl.
In a burlap sack, he brings seven hens to keep the
seven bitches at bay.

Artemis is alone in the self-pleasuring pain
of secluded sleep — a sister who is not a sister,
who tries to be a man.
The nymphs wait, guarding themselves.

Zeus binds his waist,
fashions a girdle out of cypress and palm,
a dead fox matted with spongy earth serves as a cape.
He wrings out the juice, shakes from the inflamed fur
a confetti of maggots, thinks of Callisto, and says to himself:

*For you I will crawl like a slug,
For you I will pound cattail reeds and arrowheads into my side. For
you it is hunger and nothing else.*

He thinks of a damp mouth, obliging lips, leaves
hoof prints on the sodden forest floor.
He pounds shells and rocks together to color his eyes
silver, to remind her of the moon.
He rubs himself with grit and dirt creating shadows to
trick her.

He throws the hens to the watchdogs,
each bitch busy gnashing
and conceals his jaws with a coat of silver skin. He
takes honey and plasters the cockscombs,
violet and crimson, onto himself all the while thinking:

For you I will give the familiar. He

finds her naked and alone.
Pulling at the gaping holes in his side, he speaks of trespassers, hunters:
My sister, the journey has been hard on me.
His veil slips, golden horns glinting like knives in the moonlight.

Meanwhile, Artemis dreams of a girl who wants to be a woman,
whose son will be her undoing and is better off cast into the sky.

How to Kill a Man

My mother tugged the red Craftsman truck jack onto the grass,
and together we recited *Righty tighty, lefty loosey* as I gripped the grooved handle. A
Vantage cigarette in hand she cackled, *Now that's how you kill a man.*
See how easy it is to have an accident? So at six I learned how to kill a man
and how to fear a woman.

Slip Knot
(for the old woman)

I like to keep a towel under the crack of the door.
Not because I get cold, but I'm afraid a
lizard or snake with slither in
with tongues lashing at nothing, and scuttle away
from the unease.
I do get cold though,
so I keep a fire burning most times.

I don't mind living alone,
but my memory ain't what
it was.
That's what's so bad – going out to get wood and
seeing all those tombstones on the hill.
A daughter is buried there.
I try to keep the flowers from blowing away in the night, so I
bind them to the stones tightly with twine.

I crochet,
I work next to the stove's ruddy grin,
here things tiptoe in –
grooved chains remind me of the cord coiled
so tightly around the baby's neck. We took
pictures of the dead back then. The photos
are here, somewhere.
Her downy swathes of black hair,
I couldn't stomach such things now.

I like to keep my hands busy,
but it's the slip knot that always gets me.

Bottom Feeder

I was a grown woman before I believed in the devil.
My grandmother always said he could sneak up on me, if I wasn't careful. He
always waiting to whisper something in my ear, if I was not mindful. So when
I frowned out the window of my old man's truck,
my young heart packed full of something I had no name for, I
checked my shoulder for something slick and black,
always felt for some five-lined skink lost in cotton.
The sleepy, racing striped lizards that always made grandma turn her eyes
and plead for someone to catch it, scare it away.
My fear would lie in the water, that's where the real devil hid.
I would recognize it when I remembered how my father's lips
were like the mouth of a catfish, wide and deep.
He had no cupid's bow just a big, shapeless ring ready to pull in
everything around it.
The true devil is a bottom feeder.

Illegitimate
(for the old man)

I pocketed a couple of your letters
from one of your women.
I suppose I should feel guilty
since just this past winter,
the frozen ground took you into her raw mouth, a
muddy cavern of siltstone and loam.

It's a wonder she didn't get pregnant sooner,
every night up dirt roads, stirring in hollows courted by
the deafening rasp of crickets, you name it.
She thinks it was a good time while it lasted, and
you must have thought so too.

It sure is a funny thing,
how even 72 miles away a cashier catches me
at the checkout, her phone flashing
a redheaded, pale boy:
You sure you don't have family in Alabama, honey?

Even stranger is how your letters could have been mine. I
never told you but I brought a girl home once,
drove her out to the old tobacco field, mantled under the kindling of
rustling wings, where you shot blindly
at a boy for waking the rows of faded burley
leaves, ocher skirts buttering out for a touch of
their neighbor's sleeve.

It's spring now,
there are things I'll always wonder,
but how they managed to till your grave in
that skin splintering cold,
I'll never know.

Cowbirds

If you listen closely, you'll realize the cowbirds are back, shredding the tin with their beaks while wind pummels the roof. My mother hasn't slept in 25 years.

She was a clairvoyant of sorts, and she recognized a warning.

The bird stole the strands of hair and fur she tossed outside to keep the rodents away, my mother has kept a headache ever since.

She read her tea leaves and anointed the house, following the advice of the preacher who taught her The Doctrine of the Serpent Seed.

She married a blue bull to give her children spun from gold, then put the bull to work, chopping down the trees so nothing could roost.

But the quiet bull remained, and a girl who was somewhere, everywhere, nowhere.

My mother could not sleep, there were birds and men slamming into windows, Didn't we hear the beaks tapping? The banging fists that jolted her back into her trembling body?

There were people coming into the house at night, stealing things. Didn't we believe her? Pieces of the family china had gone missing, outside the locks were scuffed by claw marks. Something wanted in, everyone else wanted out.

Outside the rain hammers down, the wind reminds me of static and panicked wings searching for a place to land.

Humiliation (is a thing with wings)

The crow first found her clavicle,
which he placed next to a cane of knotted pine.
Her jawbone came next, but still she uttered nothing. Remembering
the taste of humiliation, he dips a stone in water – dropping it into
the hollow pit.

He counts her ribs, clicking them between his beak.
Turning them over, marvels thinking of what they once held.
Stretching mottled snakeskin across her chest.

He faces her, but she doesn't notice,
so he brings an acorn cap and a penny to make her see.

Her pelvis in place, he faces her –
ruffling his feathers, he partially reveals himself, and
bows to her.

He rattles at her silence,
brings a small hairless mouse, just plucked from its nest and
places it in the basin of her cavity.
Pleased by this, he remains –
where he clicks and rattles at her memory.

Love Letter 1

I still accept the collect calls,
receiving charges like a blow to the gut.
You send photos, swollen muscles branded with
skulls, crosses, a heart that does not bear
my name. Across your broad shoulders the words
Fuck the Feds are stamped crudely. You're down in
Louisiana, no thanks to the DEA for hustling
something not quite fire so we called it flame, among
other things.

I still remember the times we baited one another in
Grandpa's barn. Not to mention the time
you and your brothers waited for me to break
from the school dance and jump blindly into a rattling S-10.

At the defunct hog farm you took me in slow motion, attempting to
scare me with tales of card games gone awry, swine bursting from
pens to devour the bodies and snort
the bloodstained ground, you succeeded only in spooking
yourself, so you kept a hand clasped under my shirt,
something real to cling.

The first time you were shackled, I wasn't there.
After a bad dose you announced you were God,
the grass and sky brimmed with geometric patterns,
prompting you to shake free from your clothes,
startling the whole farmhouse and the field flocked with uneasy men.

You tell me you can forget the broken nose,
if I can forgive the busted lip, the carpet seared
by cigarettes that fell from the frazzled fingers of coked up boys. And
for a minute we laugh recalling the cheap lamp I broke over your skull,
after finding her jacket behind the sofa.

You just need something to grasp, even if I don't mean it. Some
pretend promise to help you hold it down on the inside. And I
hum in agreement until the dial tone sings with me.

Something Fixed

In another life I married just to prove
I could handle the claustrophobic closeness
of willfully sharing a bed. I spent my time smiling at
the mother-in-law and her vacation photos.
While you spent your days working in the woods,
coming home tired to a girl who could clean but not cook.
Your mother always was the best cook.
On Sundays we did not speak. This was your day and yours alone.
You kept it for yourself, behind a door, or down a road.
So I kept my Sundays lonely too. I had been warned, you
were too old, too wild, you'd been in some trouble. I never
cut my hair after you told me you liked it long,
it felt nice to be wanted like a quiet day.
I married you in a yellow dress, you gave me a pawn shop ring
bought with your mother's money.
I wasn't old enough to drink,
but we went to the Silver Mine Saloon afterwards.
Everything would be fine as long as I had only one drink, but I
had two and you disapproved.
There in the humid crowd, I would spot a rigidness in your jaw, and
gather I had gotten myself into something fixed.

Love Letter 2

At nine we married under a black locust tree, that
gave you a spray of white blooms whose
perfume was rain and Ivory soap.
Being the bride you instructed me to make my voice
deep, stand tall, and keep my shoulders wide.
You wanted it to be real.
With our backs to the house, I worried someone saw
from a window and silently wished you had opted for a
private ceremony.

At nineteen I kissed your body in a field, while a
boy with a dumb, glowing grin poured his eyes
over your tan skin by the campfire.
It was enough for me to be the secret ghost. I
was happy to play the minor role.

At twenty-nine you are married to a real man who
helps me hang streamers from the church
community room. He leaves before the women come
carrying pastel parcels, dusting confetti
from his forearms. Before the games and prizes, you
place my hand on your swollen belly
and urge me to feel the kick. Together we lay
hands on your abdomen.
This will be the last time I touch your body.

Small Kingdoms

a response to "Untitled" by Thomas Francis Barrow

Divide the land like Canaan.
No rituals, no deeds, no wills
for what remains. Somewhere above,
a blind woman with a blackened tongue
casts out her stones, onyx and bone, and
ruptures the land raking the terrain with
splintered, yellowed nails.

The sons of the south shall receive the
gravel road unwinding
into nothingness. This is their inheritance to dress,
their burden to keep.
Tell them nothing of the seeds that will smother
below the tilled soil. This is no Havilah, there will be no gold, no
hidden treasures to pawn.

And to the west, give the fathers the land of Nod, so
they may stumble aimlessly
across ground that can no longer endure the shuffling of feet, the
small mesas obscuring nothing,
only a few fruitless utility poles already stripped of copper.

Send the mothers to the east,
and let no man enter. Let their feet become rooted into the ground, as
they search for shelter, a barn or root cellar
until they are blinded by the sun. Let
them sew themselves together,
bind their legs shut, and may a fear of looking back radiate upon them,
until they are only figments of what was.

To the daughters, offer a few small plateaus to
stand upon, so they may spread their arms into
the hollow sky. And in each heart
plant a dove to bloom from gasping mouths, but
give the fowl no place to rest.
Let each daughter break every
neck, rip every wing, and twist
every leg.

Unpacking

The old woman refuses to make a will. She stirs throughout the night, a half-strangled hen scrambling from corner to corner, digging through closets, searching the backroom for something, then nothing. The daughters want a piece of land, a deed, and great grandmother's dishes. The son holds onto the sixty plus acres, busies himself with bush hogging, repairing the damage from the flood last spring. Next to the marsh he tacks a warning sign, fastens a cable in the field where the old gate finally gave up the ghost — all while carrying the quiet burden of being the last man left among all the women. The daughters call with scissors, ready to divide. The gingham dog wants the antique buffet, the calico cat craves the wedding set. Dog and cat come ready to claim candy red dishes and glassware. The house overrun with the aftermath of new money spent long ago, while the old woman is slowly turning blue. The son never slips, never acknowledges his mother's sallow hue, instead he steadies his view on what he can control, aiming at a bullet battered STOP sign. He never stumbles, instead lets the world center into itself, bending a girl over the rack of his four wheeler. In the house on the hill, the women are pecking at scraps as the old woman unpacks everything, the last great gesture. In the field below, the son concentrates Dutch clock steady on the blurred sycamore bark, grasping a bouquet of chestnut hair, something he can hold.

Bathwater

Under my heels the water from the storm gate scurries.
The metal grate catches litter, keeping mothers
from tossing their babies down the drain.

The pine next to me resembles a woman, all leg.

The snickering boys next to me leer into her canopy —
a skirt knitted of saturated leaves and a thousand feathers, looking
up they hope to catch a downy glimpse of hips hidden by thick
speckled plume.

The roosting starlings click with unease, as a quiet violence swells
throughout the sky, the smell of iron suspended in the air. Collectively, her
black blotted limbs quiver, I half expect the boys to kick her
over, in search of buried silver, buried gold.

If they did, I would not stop them. A
pine spreads far but not deep.
She's probably rotten to the roots anyway.

A Trip to the Dentist

The dentist likes to play doctor and for
some reason I indulge him.

Behind his desk a plaque hangs in recognition:

Voted Best Dental Clinic in Town.

Why are you so nervous? You know I can prescribe valium.

I foolishly refuse and he instructs me to keep a
journal of my dreams to bring back to him.

*Our subconscious can tell us
everything we need to know, if we
are open.*

I realize I should leave, but some sick curiosity reigns me
to the couch. He asks to see the tattoo peeking
out from my shirt collar and he wonders aloud,
what the snakes across my chest symbolize.

Your all pins and needles, you need to decompress.

I am a grown woman but I remain frozen, Medusa in broad daylight.

Cleopatra Got it Wrong

Where the trees cast shadows even your shoulder can't shake, a
girl on a sandy bank presses rocks against her skin,
prays for drought and dusts scalding shale onto her burnt shoulders.
Against grit and sandstone she delivers herself to the unyielding, the remorseless. It's
easy to clear the pebble splinters, cover the rock scuffs.

Down the stream a woman soaks to quell the copper flow, and
where the water gains speed beating the limestone, the women
pound their laundry, another figure
eases into herself as it rushes across her open legs.

I'd like to think there is a hidden woman in all that green
who straddles a log until she collapses into the moss's parched and lonely
mouth, leaving the aftertaste of bark. Her thighs are the color of grass and it's
ok if something new and live comes from this.

I wade the creek, letting the heat pulsate into my skin, barbed
from thinking of copperheads and rattlesnakes, coiled
corkscrew, hidden in the shade. I lie in the sun on a rock, my fingertips dip
past the sugary edge where rock meets water, smelling cucumbers –
something green and flooded. Cleopatra got it wrong, it was never the bee box, it
was the snakes all along.

II.

Devils in Heaven

There ain't no devils in heaven, Preacher says standing over my grandmother's body. He holds his Bible, a tattered roadmap, sheer tongues spilling from a leather maw, I hear them all, fighting to be heard – John, James, Jude. In '61 Preacher came here and grandma was the first to flock. Singlehandedly, he saved great-granddaddy moments before he died, delirious, claiming to see angels at the window bearing their teeth, scraping at the window.

A trio of altos stand on the altar to sing of rivers and beautiful shores. Their unadorned faces, pinned hair, and chaste trust stir something inside Preacher who smiles and nods, *Yes, yes, yes*. Preacher tells us angels are real and angels believe, but so do trembling devils. He says a prayer for the family, to give us the faith to find and trust in the word of the Lord. I almost smile, three valium dissolving under my tongue — maybe there ain't no devils in heaven, but there sure are no wise men on earth.

Hand-me-downs

It's easier to tell the borrowed stories,
the ones that will make you laugh or shake your head.
You probably won't believe them anyway, so what's the harm in
laughing. I'll tell you about men and liquor, brass knuckles, Bondo
brand body filler, and how a man dug up his grandfather (ask him
today and he'll show you his gold capped eye teeth).
And on a night before my time, a distant cousin defiled a grave
and packed a skull like a torch, poking it into every window on the holler.
Everyone on the creek was related, even those we never saw
who lived where the gravel turned to dirt.
On walks this is where you turn back,
Crazy people live there.

We remember June,
by the tree with a hammer,
whose killer went free.

That's all there is to reveal of her,
to go any further would venture into the profane.
So maybe that's why there is still a part of me that pauses
at a blocked call after midnight. Never knowing whether to ready myself for
something dreadful, or a wannabe Nazi cousin
foaming at the mouth, full of mislaid rage and opiates.

But I still laugh and expect you to laugh with me,
laugh at me.

Late Night Snack

A car stalled once beside the gravel road and
we were never sure it was you,
but the way the flooded engine squealed
out into the night made me think of firecrackers:
whistle whirls and tricolor spinners – things that zipped loudly
then droned down, clogging the night and obscuring the air with iron
smoke. Things that could burn you, if you weren't careful.

Stuck to the back of my mother's burgundy robe, I embedded myself, a
tick in scratchy fabric. She locked the door just in time,
the wooden boards creaking, giving under the weight of
someone too drunk to slink softly in like larvae
in search of a late night snack.

Poppies Flood In (or A Trip to the Gynecologist)

Somewhere between the midpoint, and I wake to the muted lowing of
cattle. Some blustering thing, keens through cotton-thick molasses
sleep, but it's just me, half torn
from myself

finding only a furrowed hollowness.

I hear the instructions,
Be still, but see no sturdy-kicking babe,
hear no bleating calf to account for the groggy,
pulsating abrasion.
But still there is the bustling of people.

The room is the color of nicotine.
And behind me stands my mother, more dead than alive. A
pillar, lips tersely fixed into an immobile smile.

From a recess within myself I hear her.
Remember the neighbor's dog? How its belly swelled?
And now the doctor leans over and I see his wooden dentures. A
laugh catches in my throat, hive dappled and inflamed.
His mouth too wide for his face and teeth like hay I
remember a cloud of calloused, nicotine nails.

He clicks his teeth at me and whispers,
Dachshunds are known for that.
Behind me, my mother shivers and looks away.

The doctor taps the tenderest spot,
bloodshot poppy, wide-eyed zinnia, he
swoops close to me to tell me *The tissue*
has crumpled in the bud.

Aphrodite-eyed the nurse emerges –
glinting behind her mask, she holds a
needle, tubes, and crochet hook.

Fastened to the gurney, I think:
Let them butcher what remains – pelt, hide,
I don't care. Let them eat from these engorged breasts, this
folded belly. Take until there is nothing left.

Spider Bite

When my uncle married his second wife in fury of
mania, none of the family attended.
They honeymooned in a silent back bedroom for three
whole days, while coming down.

Years later, their son would come into my room,
my friends intrigued by a young man prone to violence,
they stiffened whenever he would enter the incense choked room.

He told me to fetch a straw from the kitchen
and I returned — full length plastic cylinder in hand,
he laughed through his teeth, as if to smother his amusement.
I went back three times, each time bearing a straw too long, too short, or just not right.

Finally, he would demand scissors and cut the plastic to
his liking. Now he bears an abrasion in the crook of his
arm that gushes green infection.
He swears it must have been a spider bite.

Kicking Up Dust

During the dog days of summer, we would finally meet.
The dense air punctured only by an occasional muted dragonfly.
I rounded the corner of the house to find you, the drunken pest
who could never hold his liquor, accompanied by a silent man with slits for
eyes. Someone had gone inside to get you a glass of water
to quench your cotton mouth. Even then, I knew you wanted more than a drink. The
man next to you remained motionless as you and I mimicked one another, our legs
posed in a stance that let the other know running wasn't out of the question. A
knotted and calloused finger twisted toward me,
"Come here, pretty little girl." And I knew to run kicking up dust from a lawn
where grass seed refused to take. It's good to know when you're outnumbered.

A Visit to the Clinic

The doctor tells me he has performed three already, and
I know he will perform three more after.

But what if I don't wake up?

The doctor kept my breasts exposed throughout examination,
positioned himself between my knees.

But I know this means nothing,
seven a day, all women look the same.

“Too many questions,” I hear the nurse mutter as I flicker out.

I try to dig my wisdom teeth from the garbage, a nurse ushering me
to a maroon resting room.

I'm no good with laughing gas, the last time I thought my soul leapt
from my body crawled about the ceiling, just out of my grasp.

Dowsing tools – a needle and some golden thread,
spun in a circle above my navel indicating I would have had a son. I
pretend I am a cadaver and cover my head with a gown,
inhaling antiseptic.

Did I lose my baby?

A tooth?

A poppy seed?

A grain of rice?

You would have been five in another life.

And your father? He told me bring home groceries
afterwards.

My grandmother told me once her aunt took her into the woods,
and pointed to a small pinnacle, showing her where a clubfoot stillborn
sibling lay buried – away from the rest of the dead.

When malformations are an issue, it's best to flush them out early.

Is there anything I need to tell you before we go any further?

That I bled before kindergarten and then later not at all?

That I thought I was a boy, wearing only sneakers and
underwear until I went to school?

That a hand resembling something like television static reaches out to
me at night, when my neurons are firing at the speed of syrup.

That a great fish is always circling me. I dream of muddy water and
think of Pinocchio, I wanted to be a real little boy.

Girls were strange creatures who slept too much, kept migraines and
called out for their temples to be rubbed.

No Great Earthquake

No one calls the coroner, instead the mother and father rest
with your body for a day. They feel no great earthquake,
they remember the emptiness comes slow, and for now the moment is vast and
nebulous, a mirage.

Smoking a Winston, your mother paints
a blood moon on the wall, an untethered copper womb
that reflects only metallic, bitter light. She hangs four wind chimes, one
for each evaporated son or daughter.
Days before she claims she dreamt about it,
now she smokes and wonders what to do.

The firstborn legitimate son is the last
to remain. A kind boy I was supposed to marry.
A family man now, we tie our arms together for a quick moment, and
I squeeze his shoulder. I am reminded of his weight,
how you made lemon muffins on Sunday mornings, and
what could have been for all of us.

After the burial, I sleep for two days in
the pale pain of the night. Stirring
occasionally as the clouds' ragged edges are
sucked into the black
sackcloth of the stratosphere.

When Encountering a Wild Animal

Never answer the door.

You never bothered to knock, instead you hammered fists until an uncle or cousin carted you away.

You didn't give up easy and the men would return choking on smoke as laughter rattled up from their guts, telling how you threw yourself on the cherry red hood and refused to let go, like a cutworm gnawing into a tomato.

Play dead.

One night you came after running your Pickup off the gravel road.

We saw you staggering and pushed the heavy television set in front of the door. The barrier provoked you, so we pressed our bodies into the wood paneling while the whole trailer trembled as you pitched your body into the aluminum siding.

Close your eyes.

An aunt called for help, but no one answered.

The phone might as well have been a tin can lassoed to a string, ringing hollowly into an empty flask. You didn't get in that time, but left your tracks — muddy handprints freckled across the trailer.

Lie.

We would say the warped siding was the result of a hail storm.

A Prayer for Rest This is

for my flesh.

This is for being done with the dead,
even if they aren't done with you. This is

for the almost baby that won't let go.

This is a prayer for rest, for both of us.

Sometimes in the spring before a storm,

I hear you squealing

underneath the azalea bush

I forgot to cut back last June.

This is for the nights I meet you. In

each dream you are different, but I

know you belong to me.

Even when you disguise yourself as a child, small

and gray, wearing the mask of an elephant.

I snatch you up each time with a greedy thickness and

let your trunk guide my milk into your mouth. You have

not forgotten me.

This is for the relief after waking up alone

and the guilt that recedes quietly into the following day. I

have not forgotten, not yet.

Before Eve

Duty lies in the beginning,
before Eve and all other conscious apes.
In a steam room for nursling souls, old and new.
Imagine the first mother scuttling from the sea –
webbed, her gills contracting as florid pearls spew from
her lips, expelling the last forth –
froth still clinging. On all fours she scrambles on rocky ledges,
spitting afterbirth and foam.

But mother of pearl is just a shell, a smooth
sarcophagi that encases.

Pearls cast like die, set sail through briny waters.
Discarded dandelion seeds bow through the air on bended knee
only to become ensnared in webs of resin.
Some finally taking root to be nurtured by a distant humming –
weak petals plucked clean by red lacquered nails.

It's just nature, really.
Even a stray dog knows to move her pups from rising water.

Together

The mother went mad, but not really, she just got pushed out. Behind the home place her sisters-in-law took her to the well and crowded about her with their stocky builds and heavy chests. Their smothering voices overlapping one another in a babble of nonsense, until one finally stated, *No one would ever think to look down here.* So the mother exited and the aunts entered, nursing a hoard of blonde children with lemon juice because *the sour will keep you sweet.* The women stayed busy but kept the children close to their breasts, giving the little girls identical lockets, *Now don't tell the others, this for you. You're my favorite.* And the little boys were set free with bats and balls and later, cars and guns with the warning, *it's better to be beat than buried.* Didn't the women see how confusing it could all be? Being together all of the time, sweating on the porch: thick thigh sticking to thick thigh, knowing only each other. Did they know how easy it was for aunts to become mothers and cousins to become sisters and brothers? Had they learned to shrug off a distant relation who would say, *don't worry we ain't that close kin?* Did they see it would always circle back to them, to all of us – always lonely and always together.

Dogfish

I know there are many, but I only see one.

I am a nervous dogfish in an ocean of whales,
and there is one who lumbers toward me bearing stray spears,
bearded barnacle roots. He surges up from a spray of white, his
corroded hinge unfastens, sucking me the hollow pit.

Assuming I don't drown or freeze like a block of whittled pine,
some crudely sculpted marionette, there would be ways to occupy the time. I
could count the strewn remains, the torn suckers – scorched, beaten plum
blossoms, the tentacles, and bruised mussels, wheeling back
only to start again. I keep moving.

It's easier to be swallowed whole than remain still.

Wading a carpet of shells, I circle and search, overturning discarded mollusks.
Until the host exhausted from the racket, heaves my gilled body like
sour medicine.

Drift

“A bird,” that’s what my great-grandma would
always answer when we mused what creature
we would be in the next life.

As a child I could never imagine, never
grasp the desire to glide perilously above the mountains. I
would understand years later,
long after she was buried and the humble
clapboard house remained soundless among all the acres.
Looking out into the endless fields, the hills seemed to loom
inward their shadows bleeding over the land,
covering even the kudzu. Only then would I understand the
desire to drift.

(Mis)memory

There were no walls around the village, no
fences around the fields of the father, the
backwater always rising,
and we were all related some way or another.

I thought my aunts were my mothers,
escorted in by uncles - mostly blonde, over processed.
They stuck around for the money, humored me, scratched my back
with acrylic nails, painted my mouth with red lipstick.
Tia let me wear her pumps around the trailer living room,
Billie gave me an opal ring.

I thought my cousins were my aunts.
They always traveled in a gaggle,
pockets heavy with cans and bottles.
One always pulling me into her greedy lap, The
whites of her eyes already turned yellow. Telling
me to have a sip,
it will help your bladder.

My memories are inbred and vague,
but I remember how the sorry hills stretched out before me,
grey and low, but suffocating and inescapable like family,
always near, down the road, or two counties over.
It had just rained or was going to rain and everything smelled
like a wet dog and I thought of drooling muzzles while she held me on
her knee spreading my valleys.

Now those of us that are left pine away
in our inequities and those of our ancestors.
Sometimes you swim up to me just before a dream state -
sour breath, coated tongue, yolk-eyed.
I shut you out quick and choose instead to remember my
body, my land.

Hey Mary

I've been told you wanted to leave and take the children,
others said you wanted Lee to get rid of his wild woman, but
loyalty always has a way of blurring the truth.

In my mind, I'd like to imagine that you came home
quoting some Loretta Lynn song. Maybe you told Lee
that he could feed the chickens, he could milk the cow, and that your
woman's liberation was going to start right now. I'd like to pretend
it was the fear of being deserted with two small children, that led him to
pull the trigger. I scour this faded memory, now just a story,
in an attempt to find some redemption, but how can it be gray when a
man killed his wife, who never even saw it coming. It seems pretty black
and white to me, when we don't even know where they buried Mary.

Bringing Back the Dead

Bringing back the dead is no easy job.
And there is no guarantee of who will answer anyway. No
one covers mirrors anymore, that was something the great-
great-greats did before me, out of a
fear that death was still near.
Now I leave the glass open, welcoming souls sprung
newly from still bodies. I do not ward off the dead.
Instead radios are tuned to channels of static rustle, for
the want of a stifled message.
My words call out and from time to time a lost thing replies.

I sleep with your handkerchief under my pillow
and in the confines of a dream, you or something mimicking you cuts
through the darkness with a crooked finger.
There's three things you need to know,
you begin, bothered to have been fetched to an empty street
where all the lampposts have long expired. Before you can finish I wake, but
still I keep your photo amid a makeshift shrine of waxy lipsticks, glass
perfume bottles, and a peach organza rose.
I throw salt for good measure, but I still try to pull the dead back down.

The Birthing Room

I have unfolded the kerchief
and discovered in horror the bright secret
hidden within labial lips and swollen hips: the
wet birth of ancestors.

The incessant droning of their voices
moan and gurgle,
both infantile and ripe,
calling out from obscure darkness.
Flying over deserts and writhing in the dirt
with blind earthworms, unsighted and shapeless.

Their incoherent songs –
tribal voices invoke the longing and fear of
that humid embrace,
this is my Hades.

The dahlias have inverted and browned,
dead tips hang useless like a lame leg.
The infant's pale skull glistens with wetness, the
same liquid pools on plush lips.

Now I stand still, in the midst of water, the
light's scattered soliloquy
fragmented, speaking in tongues I cannot understand, but
only appreciate.

There is a sliver of remembrance: the
dead-eyed women stare,
and I boil with the same sweet, sick desire to
impale the dark concaves of my womb.

The same sequence still schemes, the
sow on sterile sheets
giving birth into the garbage can.
And then all is still.
The darkness encloses, the
refrain has passed.

Dot the i's and Cross the t's

On her deathbed she asks me if I can still play the piano, and begins to sing of jasper roads.
I search the linen for forgotten crochet needles she swears are under the cushions.

Her hands never stop moving, trembling out letter after letter into the air, spelling something intangible, something liquid. Never forgetting to stab her finger at the end of each line.

After she is buried, I hang no basil and pray to a god I do not know, but fear.
Receiving no answer, I pray to her instead, and finally to something quiet and unnamable. I imagine a silver cord still exists between us, not yet buried by the snowfall.

~

Somewhere between here and there, I find her in a mildewed trailer, next to Highway 30, heading east.
I tell her I have my car waiting out back, you don't have to stay here.

In the backyard my father is dowsing for water, she has a headache so my palms begin to spill salt over her gray hair.
I try to take her cold hand into my mine, but she does not reciprocate, they remain fixed melded into the porch banister.

Instead her eyes, milky and bewildered, stare into the darkness searching the dim hills, looking out into the distance somewhere.

People I Have Met in the Woods

The people I have met in the woods keep to themselves.

The creeks and the fields belong to us all. We may have lived right off the main highway, but our backyards were all the same. The same field, leased to the same brothers for years, and the creek belongs to everyone so there is no use complaining about the plastic choked trees or the boy who shot the crane and left it on a pile of garbage, the halfhearted offering of heedless youth. To complain would unsettle the promise of being left alone.

A Dream about Birds

Birds were a bad sign, so grandma tore the nest
down, leaving the blue jay in disarray.
Then kept it locked in the shed, like some found
treasure, but warned the children not to look.

In a dream I watch grandma pull the
stinger from my heel again and again.
I should know
better than to go
barefoot.
Especially around all the barbed roses and bees.

And at night I will sing to myself and think her cool
hands while the winged man collects my hair for his
nest:

*There is no creature under the
bed, but something hidden in a
shadow.*

*Who
comes
quick,
quick
comes to me swiftly,
swoops down from the
ceiling, hatches from the
corner nest and bites my
knees, my arms, the scruff of
my neck.*

*Then leaves softly,
tiptoeing on padded
feet.*

*Singing me some something quiet and
sweet, as he close the door he tells me to
sleep.*

And when it is done, I will return to the cool shade
where we hovered speckled eggs, blood gathering at the
bottom of the woven sticks, the scraps of paper. And I will
hold
each egg in my hand, until a fist formed in my
stomach convinces me to drop them one by one on
the concrete.

New Year, Old Blues

This year give me a woman I can butcher like a
rabbit, one I can break down and suffer.

Let me carve inward at her
seams, not to divide but to
conjoin.

Let me be Adam counting the rib
bones, surveying my dominion,
peeling back the silver-
skin to reap the pulpy fist.

And some year let me be a man blanketed
by the leaden brow of a broken-down
barn,
casting the ruby of his cigarette into the jaws of the
night only to snare some young thing.

Vita

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Eastern Kentucky University, *Magna cum Laude*, BA Philosophy and BA English, May 2013

Senior Thesis Project, “The Myth of the Southern Self: A Phenomenological Existentialist Examination of Identity as constructed through the role of the Other”, April 2013

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Related Work Experience

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Publications

- “Superstition”, *Aurora Literary Arts Journal*, Nonfiction, Eastern Kentucky University, (2012):14-16

Awards/Scholarships

- President’s Award, Eastern Kentucky University, Fall 2009
- Department of English and Theatre Writing Award, Creative Non-Fiction, “Superstition”, Eastern Kentucky University, 2010
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- English and Theatre Department, Donn Johnson Endowed English Scholarship, Eastern Kentucky University, 2010
- Becknell Study Abroad Scholarship, CCSA, Eastern Kentucky University, 2010
- Department of English and Theatre Aurora Award, Best Poetry, “The Birthing Room”, 2012