A FENCE IN THE DARK

A Project

by

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Spring 2012

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DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my mother and my grandmother.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my family. This collection would not exist were it not for my grandmother, Ruth, whose stories have been an endless source of inspiration, or my mother, Carol, who gave them to me. I would also like to thank my huge tribe of parents: Carol for being an endless source of generous guidance, Bob for choosing to be my father, and Pam and Ken for being my pals. I feel so blessed to have such a vast system of support.

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ABSTRACT

A FENCE IN THE DARK

by

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_A Fence in the Dark_ is a collection of poems that explores the relationship between memory and imagination. The poet blends the literary conventions of poetry, novel, and memoir and explores what it means to love with hate, love with fear, love with desperation, and love with madness. Whether employing the lens of a young girl with no anchor in the world, a ghost and his daughters alone in a swamp, or the quiet isolation of nature, these poems seek to find connection and affection in the face of isolation and hostility. They blend beautiful, quiet images with an undercurrent of violence and challenge the reader’s understanding of beauty.
PART I

INTRODUCTION
Introduction

Themes: Memory and Imagination

The best way that I can think of to begin a meditation on my journey to this collection of poems is by examining an early memory: I am looking down at my shiny, black shoes at the end of my stockinged legs, dangling from my grandmother’s hip at my father’s funeral. On the day of my father’s funeral, I was not quite two-years-old. I have no idea if this is a true memory that my brain clung to because as a child I was desperate to have some memory of my biological father, or if it is my imagination trying to fill in the blanks of that particular story. Over the years I’ve decided that whether or not this memory is a “true” memory is irrelevant. This image of my baby shoes dangling above my grandmother’s shoes has been an important part of my development as a human being and, most especially, a writer, regardless of its accuracy.

Poetry is like that for me. Truth and accuracy come second to the emotional resonance of the scene and the tightness of the craft used to build that scene. It can take a singular experience and build it out into something plural. Rather than memorializing our trauma and joy, poetry breaks beyond the limits of the individual experience and crosses the line between memory and imagination, opening it up in a way that strict truth-telling can never achieve. Poetry explores the space between the memories of the deepest traumas, the highest joys, and all those moments in the median, of our lives and the lives that our imaginations tell us we can have if we can move beyond the singular experience.
into the plural. Navigating that space has been my primary project as a poet.

This collection of poems consists of three very different sections. The first is a series of poems centered around a character modeled on my grandmother called “The Book of Ruth.” It begins with her childhood: her absent mother, her drunk and abusive father, being taken in by her grandmother, and her grandmother’s profession as a Madame. It moves on to her later life as a wife and mother, learning those roles despite her childhood. All of these moments are the highlights of my family’s myth, passed down to me from my grandmother to my mother to me. I came to this project with the intention of writing one (admittedly long) poem. I wanted to blend the idea of family and ancient myth by re-telling the story of Persephone, using the details and settings from my grandmother’s life, allowing me to simultaneously fill in the blanks with my own invention. However, as I began to write, the formal elements of the Persephone myth fell away. I became more interested in my grandmother’s story than in the adaptation of the Greek myth and began writing short scenes from her life. And then I wrote another. And another. Eventually it became the twenty pieces that appear in a section of this collection.

What I’ve come up with in this section is a blend of memoir, poetry, and novel. Each poem is a self-contained piece of a larger narrative, a unified plot presented in a fractured manner. In this way there is inherent movement forward in this section of the collection. It follows a chronological path, yes, but there is also a movement in the development of the main character. It is no accident that the first poem of this section is titled “Sweet Hate,” and the final poem is titled “Love Notes.” Throughout these poems there is disorder in the way that love and affection are given and received, but the larger
point is that they are still found. It’s hope and beauty springing forth from a dark, violent world.

The next section of poems in this collection, “Alligator Heart,” consists of one long, multi-sectioned poem. I chose to keep it separate from the next section of this collection because of its distinctive setting and characters. This poem shifts in perspective between a third person narrative and the perspective of the three characters featured: Old Man, Agnes, and Starla. A ghost and his daughters alone in a swamp. Throughout these poems there is a sense of isolation and alienation. These characters interact with no one, but each other. They are surrounded by an environment that is hostile and impenetrable. Yet, despite the violence and isolation in this world the sisters, Agnes and Starla, find comfort in one another. They are not alone; nor are they lonely in their isolation. The poem begins with the declaration, “Old Man is dead,” but this loss does not leave them at a loss. Instead, “the girls / decide to eat him for breakfast.” The shock of this image sets up the rest of the poem. Throughout the other sections of the poem violence, hunger, and deprivation recur. They are inflicted by Old Man on his daughters, illuminating this initial act of consumption as the only moment that Old Man has provided for his daughters. This shifting between loss and consumption, violence and comfort creates the emotional tension of the poem and it is this tension that puts this section in conversation with “The Book of Ruth.” No matter how ugly the image of murdering and cannibalizing Old Man may be, it creates a connection between him and his daughters that would not have existed without that act. In both sections, the emphasis is on finding connection in a disordered, hostile environment.
The last section of poems in this collection, “Letters From the Brush,” reads very differently from either of the sections that come before it. Up to this point in the collection I’ve dealt entirely with characters in a progressive story arc. In this section there are no recurring characters, and these poems stand alone rather than building on each other. The voice, tone, and locations of these poems are fluid, but they are still in conversation with each other. From the third-person meditation on religion of “The Road to Somewhere” to the dramatic monologue written in the persona of “Eve” to the quiet addresses of “Letters From the Brush” and “Dear Ada,” these poems seek connection against all odds. That is the common theme of this collection. All three of these sections use very different tactics in craft, voice, and character, but they are all focused on stories of disordered love.

It feels odd to say that what I’ve compiled in this collection are essentially love poems, perhaps because we think of love poems as happy poems about happy people in love, and that, these poems are not. These poems are about a desperate desire to connect. These poems are about the violence that exists at the periphery of that desire. These are poems that examine what it means to love with hate, love with fear, love with desperation, and love with madness. These poems reject the limitations of the romanticized love poem and enter the realm of something darker, and frankly more relatable. These poems attempt to find a beautiful way to explore of the ubiquitous condition of pain.

Pain is a common almost clichéd topic among young poets. I first began writing poetry in high school. It began with haphazardly written, embarrassingly angst-
ridden poems about my own tortured soul. C.D. Wright put it best when she wrote, “my poems were filled with personal pain. I tried to make them beautiful and interesting. That is, I tried to be artful about my limited but particular experience with pain” (Cooling Time, 20). Balancing beauty and violence into something that is simultaneously comforting and dangerous has been the key to abandoning the angst-ridden, moralizing poems of my adolescence and pushing out into the larger world of poetic themes. I became less interested in declaring “this happened to ME” and more interested in declaring “this happens.” Having spent the last several years in one poetry workshop or another, I’ve heard my work described as pretty but violent, darkly beautiful, and legitimately terrifying. I do not consider myself a particularly morbid person, but I do believe that the best way to keep darkness in check is to mix it with quiet beauty. It is my greatest hope as a poet to employ form, music, and image to artfully present that blend to readers.

This collection is titled A Fence in the Dark. It’s an image that appears in the poem, “Ruth Goes to the Hardware Store,” and it’s one that I was particularly proud of when I wrote it out for the first time. This image captures the heart of the conflict played out again and again in each of the sections of this collection. It speaks to the barriers between the voices of these poems and the difficulty of even approaching that barrier. The fence itself is an obstacle, the darkness that surrounds it is a secondary obstacle, but in the end a fence is a fence. And a fence is something that can be climbed, even in the dark, beginning with the simple act of reaching out and touching it. These poems use the tactile to make sense of the insensible.
Craft: Locks and Keys

Most writers begin in the same fashion. We begin by being read to. We start as passive consumers of literature. We are told by our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, teachers, by some older, wiser voice that literature is valuable. Books are important. We begin to read for ourselves. We become active consumers of literature. For many book-lovers this is as far as their relationship with literature gets: passive and active consumption. Those of us with that particular quirk of the mind that compels us to join the conversation rather than merely observe it must push beyond that. A young poet, like any young thing, is born out of arrogance and raw, urgent self-absorption. We put the pen to paper and we write. We write with ourselves at the center. Eventually that self-absorbed young writer is tempered. We begin to inundate ourselves with writing, and writing about writing. We begin to think and read and write analytically. We read about and begin to subscribe to what other writers, established writers, have to say about what writing ought to be and do and say. We begin to think of writing as a craft.

To write poetry in a form is to impose upon it such restrictions as rhyme, meter, and refrain, and because of such restrictions I resisted the idea of form as a young writer. It required a level of analysis and restraint in the act of writing that didn’t speak to the feverish, haphazard way that I wrote. But the development of my writing into an actual craft pushed my understanding of form beyond the structure of the formal poem. I participated in a poetry workshop that focused on form. Every assignment in that class was to be written in either an established form or an imitation of less established formal elements used by an established author.
This idea of imitation really opened up the way I looked at structure. One of our first assignments in this class was to write an imitation of John Berryman’s *Dream Songs*. This imitation assignment required me to look beyond the simply unique elements of Berryman’s work and examine how and why those elements were important to the content of the poem. That imitation, “On Becoming Ruthless” was the first of the series of poems that I wrote about Ruth, and a much revised version of it appears in this collection. My initial draft utilized all of those elements of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* that I could identify: the six-line stanza, ampersands, dashes, ellipses, third-person characters. In the version that appears here, I’ve dropped most of those elements, all but the third person voice, which I had never even considered as a poet before that point. Adopting Berryman’s voice gave me the key to unlock a project that I had been trying to write with little success. I wanted to create a poem that was based on my grandmother’s life, but writing it from a first-person perspective had yielded drafts that felt forced and insincere. Berryman’s self-made form authorized me to step back and away from the subject. Calling Ruth by her name, the way that Berryman did Henry or Mr. Bones allowed me to describe Ruth without attempting to speak for her. It opened the content up for me, and with that single formal element I developed the first section of this collection.

One of our later assignments was to write a pantoum. This form terrified me because it was all about the structure. I couldn’t write a line without considering the effect of its echo in the next stanza. Creating a narrative scene is extremely difficult, so instead I had to focus in on the idea of image and music to carry meaning. But once that first pantoum had been written, once I had proven to myself that I could write a poem,
and even a poem I was proud of, in such a slavish form I fell in love with it, and it returned to me to rescue a drowning draft. “Madsong” began with drinking Sangria in Barcelona, but ended with morphine-induced madness in a hospital bed. That first image, “they had only been pigeons / falling off her tongue / circling, fat with lust,” I wrote down while watching pigeons spinning in mad circles as part of their mating ritual. This line about posturing and circling came back to me when I found myself trying to capture the cyclical nature of a mind intoxicated by pain killers. One morning, in a haze of morphine, my grandmother had a random, but urgent obsession with picking up a refrigerator that had been purchased a decade before. Other days she would repeat three or four ideas, with new cracks and fissures each time, but largely the same idea, over and over again for hours. Often she would reach out to touch something that wasn’t there. I wrote several versions of that poem, all beginning with this image of pigeons, but I wasn’t able to express it correctly. I needed to repeat myself like she did. I needed to break away from traditional grammatical patterns. I needed to harness her mad fragmentation. I wrote several mediocre drafts that failed at my intention. I couldn’t find the voice of this idea until I began writing it as a pantoum. The result was a poem that circled around itself in the same way she did:

they had only been pigeons
falling off her tongue
circling, fat with lust
cracked and cracked again

falling off her tongue
in no particular order
cracked and cracked again
on a clean, white floor
in no particular order
her shoes became boats
on a light, blue floor
she sucked up an egg yolk

her shoes became boats
her fingers became spoons
she sucked up an egg yolk
like she’s chewing on the sun

her fingers became spoons
she shoveled at her hair
like she’s chewing on the sun
her teeth grew dull and thin

she shoveled at her hair
circling, fat with lust
her teeth grew dull and thin
they had only been pigeons

The necessary fragmentation of the lines and the maniacal attention that needs to be paid
to the placement of the words fit the idea of madness perfectly. The form was not the
origin of the poem for me, but the vehicle that drove forward that single stubborn image
of spinning pigeons into the poem that I wanted to write.

Form has played an important role for me in my development as a writer and
the revision process for the poems that appear in this collection; but to say that I have
used form often, or faithfully, would be wrong. I have a tendency to ignore rhyme when
drafting, even if a form calls for it, because imposing that rhyme on my word choice
causes me to write to the rhyme rather than the purpose of the poem. When I become
more interested in what rhymes with “warm” than I am in how I can fully evoke an image
or develop a dramatic situation I freeze up and the poem becomes abandoned. Form
should never choke a poem. There’s a fine line between writing in a form and writing to a
form. When a poet writes in a form, the form is the mold for a fluid content. The structure illuminates the poem, reveals a piece of the larger picture in its physical representation on the page. Whether it’s the shape and spacing of a line, the repetition of a key image or phrase, or the beat created by meter these elements need to arise from the poem’s needs. When a poet writes to a form, the content is missing. Rather than illuminating the poem, the form defines the poem. A poet needs to be able to negotiate employing those aspects of a form that serve the poem without being held captive by those aspects of a form that do not.

One example of a poem where I have abandoned aspects of the traditional form that did not serve the poem is “Ruth Goes to the Hardware Store.” The sonnet has existed in many forms; this poem most resembles the Petrarchan sonnet with its eight-line stanza followed by a six-line stanza as well as the turn in tone and action denoted by the space between those stanzas. What I’ve abandoned is the iambic line and the rhyme scheme. I chose to present this particular scene in a sonnet because of the concept of turning that is inherent in the Petrarchan sonnet as well as a desire to subvert the tradition of idealized lovers in sonnets. It has always been a great source of pride in my mother and I that when confronted with a father who attempted to abuse her sexually my grandmother walked to the hardware store, bought a deadbolt, and installed it on her bedroom door. The first stanza focuses on the absence of Ruth’s mother and the abuse from her father, and consists entirely of images of violence and death:

Ruth plants her tongue in the cemetery,
along with his hands like phallic mountains
or a gin bottle erect and empty.
Pulls his fingers off in long scars, watches
as they burrow towards her mother’s corpse.  
She buries unsafe, a slick, warm tire.  
Dead things find poles, careful as a fence in the dark.  
She walks three more blocks all muscle and bone.

These images connote violence, victimization, and have a sort of cerebral quality in their relationship to one another. The next stanza becomes more concrete in place, and its tone shifts to one of defiance and inflexibility:

She empties her pockets on a glass counter for a deadlock. Cold, solid, gunshot  
a metal tongue cracking open her mouth, cracking shut her doorframe.  
She steals Papa’s tools and burrows a drill deep into the wood. Slides the bolt in rough.

This turn is embodied in the content of the poem as well as the physical separation between the stanzas on the page. The idea of turn is also reflected in the movement of this section. It is the last of the poems before the physical setting changes and Ruth begins living with her grandmother. Overall the concept of turn, the impending shift, is at the core of this poem and the Petrarchan sonnet as a form has this theme built into it.

There are also several cases of blending poetic form with other narrative forms throughout this collection. Beyond the blending of poetry and memoir in the section on Ruth, the final section of this collection also contains two epistolary poems: “Letters From the Brush” and “Dear Ada.” What drew me to the epistolary form is its inherent use of persona and address. Placing a poem in the format of a letter establishes the who of the poem in unequivocal terms. There is the speaker, and the addressee. In these cases, opposite ends of failed relationships. Despite being excluded from the actual exchange of the poem the subtle explication of using the format of a letter invites the
reader into the situation of the poem: separation and communication. The third section of
the very long poem, “Alligator Heart” is set up to look like a script. This poem breaks
away from the rest of the collection, not because it contains speech or dialogue, but in
how that dialogue is formatted. In other poems I denote speech with italics, but this poem
is meant to consist entirely of dialogue. Once again the formal elements of the poem
provide some subtle explication. There is no description of the dramatic situation, there is
only the interactions of these three characters and the title to set up the reader’s
understanding of the poem. The way that the poem looks on the page opens up the
content. In short, the themes of this collection are aided in their expression within form,
but the form is not the origin. It is dictated by the needs of the poem and the two become
inextricable. To write a poem into a form is to illuminate the intention of the poem to
write it out of that form would be to impose a new intention on the piece.

It is interesting to note that I am drawn to forms that repeat themselves. I’ve
talked about how I was drawn to repetition to help mimic my grandmother’s madness,
but another aspect that draws me to refrains is the inherent music of a refrain. Whether
that repetition comes from the confines of a pantoum or a villanelle or is developed by
carefully choosing words to front load a sound throughout the poem, music is essential to
tone. One poem in this collection that relies heavily on sound to illuminate the poem is
“Ruth Chews the Dark.” The poem opens in a dark room:

    The dark drips like summer chocolate,
a heavy soft that empties itself against

    the crease of her elbows and eyelids,
caked permanent, her fingernails ache.
Ruth in bed, chews the dark for a whistle, for the *hush baby, hush, hush*;
for the low moan and the sleepy wheels galloping hello in the night.
Ruth chews the dark, a soft bone, a bare dust, a sigh goodbye in the night.

This poem is loaded with soft, muted shushing sounds. The hushing repetition of the *s* against the long *oos* of the fourth stanza are all sleepy, comforting sounds giving the poem the tone of a lullaby. The “*hush baby, hush, hush*” has the same cadence of a train rolling into the station in the night. The repetition of sound speaks directly to the scene and lulls the reader. The music of repetition, whether it’s the mathematic refrain of a formal structure or a more organic repetition of sound, punctuates the scene. It invites the reader into the dark, quiet space of Ruth’s bedroom at night.

If form is the physical manifestation of the poem’s intention on the page, image is what brings that intention into the real world. Imagery balances spontaneity and purpose within the poem by bringing the emotional seat of the poem into the concrete and tangible. Poetry that is essentially cerebral becomes thick and impenetrable or overly moralizing, while poetry that is sheer wordplay leaves me feeling like I’ve been cheated as a reader. I believe that every good poem begins with a single image: a little girl wandering a cemetery alone, a couple fishing at the edge of a fast moving river, a man with a mouthful of pillow. All of these were the first pieces of poems that appear in this collection, and without that initial scene these poems would never have come to exist. They are the concrete demonstration of an intangible thought. If a poet begins with an
abstraction, with a lesson, with a moral, with a goal the poet will create a sermon rather
than a poem. Imagery is that moment that lends the poem sincerity.

The poem “Four Hands” blends warm, domestic, comforting images with
images of violence and death to provide an emotional connection between the reader and
the totally backwards notion of Ruth’s childhood. The opening lines provide a harsh
dramatic situation that is immediately followed by comforting, maternal images:

    Crashed against her parent’s wrack line
    Ruth loves a prostitute instead.

    Ruth finds the warm corners
    of Vionne’s room in the afternoon, soft
    sun-swollen wood and Vionne’s hair down
    to her thighs. Ruth untangles it with her fingers
    in the kitchen Vionne winds it into a braid
    and pins it to her scalp.

    The sun in the window behind her,
    her head appears twice its size.

The stormy violence of Ruth’s parents, all the cultural connotations of prostitution are
inverted by the second stanza. The prostitute in question is given a name, and she is
surrounded by things that are soft. The sounds of the stanza are muted. But in the next
stanza we’ve returned to the idea of distortion, and Vionne’s head becomes almost
monstrous. This shifting back and forth in the tone of the imagery defines Ruth’s
existence. The final image of the poem instills some of this ambivalence in Ruth herself:

    Ruth’s hands, finely toothed,
    further themselves like wolves.
    Reach out and link fingers with all her might.

Whatever else she may be, Ruth is still a little girl hoping to find affection. Whatever
else her circumstances may bring, Ruth still finds the connection she’s seeking, even if
she has to create it violently. Almost all of this poem consists of physical details. The kitchen, the knives, Vionne’s hands, Ruth’s hands, they are all inherently tactile, and it is only through this tactile world that I am able to communicate with the reader.

But this emotional communication through imagery is also troublesome to the poet. I rely on being able to guess how the reader will interpret the emotion in the physical detail. As such, the place from which imagery springs is simultaneously subjective and universal. The line “Four hands rest a pomegranate fetish / on the table between them,” for example, has created a huge amount of dissent in workshops. As a poet, I’ve always considered the pomegranate to be a highly loaded symbol. When one shows up in the poetry that I am reading, it causes me to pause and examine it more closely. Pomegranates connote death, fertility, and deification in all manner of cultures including Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, Christian, Persian, Hindu, and Chinese. When I see a pomegranate, I see Persephone forced to remain in the underworld for half the year. I see Hera holding it as her orb. I see the Madonna, her infant in the crook of her arm, offering him the open fruit. However, not every reader sees these things. I’ve received feedback ranging from “don’t touch it,” to “expand upon it,” to “cut it out completely.” Those readers familiar with the symbolic history of the pomegranate tend to appreciate and enjoy the image, while those unfamiliar with the symbolism are often confused by it. I have to navigate this range, and in revision I’ve made the decision to stand by my pomegranate and accept that, this particular image will shift from reader to reader.

I firmly believe that if you do not feel a certain amount of terror in creating and presenting a poem, you’re doing it wrong. We writers develop a craft. There
are set rules, and then there is a constant challenge to put a fresh spin on those rules. We, as poets, are afforded a greater opportunity to play with language. We write our words down so that they might separate and collide into something recognizable, but new. As poets we spend a considerable amount of time considering whether or not a word is what it should be. Whether or not it will be to a reader what we want it to be. Whether or not we have done damage to the poem by imposing a narrative or lyric voice on it. Whether or not we have done damage to the poem by imposing a form on it. We develop standards and from those standards we develop insecurities. The true mark of the craft of writing is to stubbornly continue to write despite those insecurities.

Influences: Honest Thievery

There are several things that I’ve stolen in my career as a young poet. Words, themes, places, dreams, structure, momentum, voice. My taste, my aesthetic, all that I have learned of the craft of writing a poem, everything that has brought me to this point has come from those poets who came before me. They have given me the rules of my craft and authorized me to break those rules. I have found new words, new voices, and new stories to tell by cannibalizing the things that I have read. There is no book that I have ever read, regardless of how I felt about the book itself, that hasn’t marked me and my writing in some way. Likewise there is no member of any of the poetry workshops that I have ever attended who hasn’t impacted my writing. The professors who introduced me to poetry, the students who shared their work with me, and who offered me advice on my own have been instrumental in my development as a writer. My friends and family in
literature have always been and will always be my first and most valuable influences. But when it comes to those established poets from whom I have stolen the most and from whom I have the most to gain there are four names that come to me immediately. John Berryman, Gary Snyder, Michael Ondaatje, and C.D. Wright.

When I first began writing I followed the age-old advice, “write what you know.” And what I knew was a big backyard, made bigger by Bidwell Park right down the street. What I knew was the quiet isolation of my friend’s cabin on a private road outside Forest Ranch. What I knew was rivers and creeks and trees and summer evenings that smelled like grass and dirt. One of the first collections of poetry that I purchased and read of my own free will was Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island*, and I see the influence of that collection all over this collection. I rarely write interiors. My poems are full of backyards, woods, lakes, creeks. In short: the brush. I feel a shared history of place, and an intense love of that place that has infected my earlier work, particularly my poem “Creek Walking”:

Our little girl ankles swam upstream
in your father’s old Tevas, twenty-three years
too big. Loose ends of straps bit us, whipped back and whittled our bones to toothpicks red as the sudden sunset around us.

I don’t know if it’s magic or context
that made me believe I could crush
the crystalline stars between
my teeth, and be slated. I begged
you to stay in the warm air
and cold currents.
You declined my offer of star-fed woods.
My childhood traversing the woods in Chico and up the hill would not have been something that I would have considered writing about before I read *Turtle Island*. Poetry was bigger than that, it was more important. It was Gary Snyder who let me see just how much of my identity was tied into the soil that I grew up on, and how much of a role it could play in my own development as a poet.

I’ve already discussed the way that Berryman’s *Dream Songs* opened up my voice as I began writing poems about Ruth. He also handed me a vocabulary, a pace, and a speech pattern that I had been missing. Berryman entered a scene without hesitation or over explanation. He relied on the reader’s recognition of Henry or Mr. Bones. He didn’t shy away from colloquialism or dialogue in general. Berryman wrote his *Dream Songs* without any fear of the strangeness of his vision. I am nowhere near as brave as John Berryman. But I did my best to follow suit. Where Berryman began, “Henry, edged, decidedly, made up stories” I began “Ruth loved Mama with terror” (*77 Dream Songs*, 27). Where Berryman spoke, “--Hand me back my crawl” I spoke “says tough hands is a necessity” (*77 Dream Songs*, 27). There’s a disjointed way about how his words related to each other, a boldness in his use of speech that I found mesmerizing. I was and am still drawn to the intimate distance in Berryman’s work and continue to attempt to harvest it in my own work. These same themes in word choice and dialogue came to me when I sat down and wrote my first section of “Alligator Heart.” Berryman’s use of a dead character inspired me to imagine ghosts in my poetry for the first time. I found a dangerous man turned into an angry ghost. I wrote down the haunting of his daughters, and I felt no hesitation in the strangeness of the images that I was writing. Berryman authorized that
strangeness in me. He allowed me to take the wildest image in my mind and run with it in a way that I hadn’t imagined could be taken seriously as poetry.

Of those books that I have read since I began this project the two that I feel most indebted to are C.D. Wright’s *One With Others* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*. Both of these books play with genre. They refuse to lock themselves into any particular form. They employ prose, verse, history, and fiction. They blend the line between fact and fiction, memory and imagination in the same way that I attempt to in this collection.

The narrative of C.D. Wright’s book-length poem, *One With Others*, centers on Wright’s mentor, Margaret Kaelin McHugh, whom she refers to as V. She was a white woman who participated in the 1969 March Against Fear. The collection itself consists almost entirely of fragmented images and disjointed narrative from a fluid progression of speakers. Wright says of her own work, “this is not a work of history. It is a report full of holes, a little commemorative edition, and it aspires to the borrowed-tuxedo lining of fiction. In the end it is a welter of associations” (*One With Others*, 3). Wright works outside of the typical narrative format of history to evoke an emotional response that engages the reader on an empathetic scale that does not exist in the typical historical narrative and yet, her poetry owes such a debt to its historical context. Wright refuses to bind her book into a single genre. It is not merely poetry or biography or fiction. It is all of that, and none of that. Rather than presenting her narrative in any type of linear order Wright moves through time and space, choosing moments of the Civil
Rights Movement that occurred in Forrest City, Arkansas, V’s life, and V’s death in an apartment in Hell’s Kitchen, and circles back to them again and again, weaving them into a narrative. Each time she returns to an event something has changed, more information is revealed, or it is re-told from a different perspective.

The single event that appears most often in this collection is the mass arrest of young, black students who are placed in a drained pool, and held there for days. The swimming pool begins as a symbol of racial injustice without invoking the full magnitude of the situation, “her eyes flash/fill/clear: We were not allowed to swim there” (*One With Others*, 30). We are invited to see segregation and nothing more. Two pages later we’re told about “the year they put the kids under arrest and put them in the swimming pool” (*One With Others*, 32). The image becomes immediately more violent and disorienting because Wright doesn’t make a point of the fact that the pool was drained suggesting an image of drowning. Wright continues: “A pool, a dry drained pool, whatever else it is, is a big hole in the ground / A sealed truck whatever else it is, is a sealed truck” (*One With Others*, 113). This image resonates with me and my goals for my work because it takes an image that is horrific and disturbing and makes it impossible for the reader to fully disengage from the nature of the image while simultaneously avoiding becoming overly moralizing. She manages to use an internal perspective, forcing the reader to enter the minds of those terrified individuals and live a historical moment with them. Rather than presenting a mere chronicle of a well-known era, Wright pulls back and explores its full emotion.
Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* is very similar to my project in its content. He tells his family history as he remembers it and as it was related to him when he made a return journey to Sri Lanka. On the surface *Running in the Family* employs a much more traditional format than Wright’s *One With Others*. However, there are portions of prose that are written in the third person about his family. There are portions of prose written in the first person about himself. Then there’s a section of poems right in the center of the book. Rather than presenting a traditional memoir, Ondaatje uses distance and exaggeration to portray the myth of family history, which allows him to express the tension of his project. He’s dealing with the characteristics of his family that make them interesting. These are not flattering stories, but they are still affectionately written. Even the moments when he’s talking about his father digging up gin bottles buried under the front lawn, even when his mother is manipulating him in an effort to get his father to stop drinking, even when these people are at their most impossible, the tone of the prose is affectionate. I find myself asking if by remaining distant from my grandmother’s story, I am giving myself room to judge her. I wonder if I am doing her memory a disservice.

Ondaatje highlights this tension and its solution:

‘you must get this book right,’ my brother tells me, ‘you can only write it once.’ But the book again is incomplete in the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues, not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough, towards your stadium of small things. (*Running in the Family*, 201)

There is a misconception that writers do not feel this kind of tension. We are expected to expose our family, their secrets. We are expected to finish them off. This is not true of
my project or Ondaatje’s. We must trust that our love for our subject matter will be enough to temper any judgment that is felt in our words.

In each case, Ondaatje and Wright have offered me reassurance as I’ve approached this project. They have fuelled my obsession with memory and chronicle. Wright says of her mentor, “if anyone were interested in what kind of mud I was made or whose thunder I stole, I would point to her” (Cooling Time, 31). I am indebted to my mother and my grandmother for the content of this project, but I am also indebted to Ondaatje and Wright for the mode in which that content is presented. I may only hope to join their ranks.
PART II

THE BOOK OF RUTH
Sweet Hate

Only the trees heard Ruth’s stomping kin. Longing strangers

in the woods. Their ankles buried in the deep weeds they

push, pulled each other’s clothes each other’s hair, each other’s

skin, textured with cigarette burns and dirt. Their tongues tied

a plain wanting between them. Hounding need. A split, twist,

fade, salting the air around them.

It hadn’t always been that dirty smell of skin. She had been

beautiful when she smiled. He had been charming

when he smoked. Until she wasn’t. And he wasn’t. And the pots

began to spoil.
Teeth Lost

Ruth loves Mama with terror: 
Mama perfectly matted, lonely, and lovingly unsure. Mama the wide-eyed unsaint chatting with God at the window. 
Mama the blind pilot pulsing a mad course across an empty daughter. 

Barefoot in the backyard, Mama uses the kitchen knives to furrow up worms and ashy casings. 
Mama plants Ruth’s baby teeth in a pale, fuzzy row. 

Ruth forgets to wash the knives before dinner. Papa pulls a moth wing from his grin. He makes it disappear right down Mama’s throat.
Lake by Moonlight

Moon-stutter in the lake. Mama rose from bed simple as a head unpinned. The sun rose on Mama, dead.

Tree branch kiss hello in a star-crowned mist, a soft moss on her feet. Moon-stutter in the lake. Mama rose from bed to sing-song, stutter along, with the warbling voice overhead. The sun rose on Mama, dead.

Unhinging her jaw, she let the lake-weed in to tickle her tongue alive. Moon-stutter in the lake. Mama rose from bed.

Her hair noosed tight and drooling with drifting leaves. The sun rose on Mama, dead.

Ruth kissed her fat eyelids. Ran a finger along her molting veins. Moon-stutter in the lake. Mama rose from bed. The sun rose on Mama, dead.
Ruth Catches Fireflies

Evening breathes wet air
in patches. She and the trees open
their mouths to taste it.

Shot glasses line the porch chair,
a bright mouth glares, and Papa
drinks himself mean,

meaning night has fallen.
Citronella bites her lungs,
she leaves him to his fumes.

His gulp like summer-thunder:
*_she hates him, she hates him._
A little red-eyed daughter.

Fireflies in a jar, she dips her fingers
inside. An angry flicker
bursts, stains her with murder.

Her fingers glow a death threat.
She holds it out and Papa
spits in her hand.
Magic

Papa was a poor enchanter,
his sticky-sour breath
miss-slurred incantations
and cursed when he dropped
his wand.

The rabbit-hole in his pocket
opened wide.
Papa disappeared himself,
leaving the white rabbit
shivering on the kitchen table.

It was a wood table and a dark,
naked kitchen. Hadn’t seen
a vegetable in months:
says the damned woman never
kept it well to begin with.

Ruth shivered, kicked
the black hat to the floor.

Papa fell out then. Rolled
between the table legs
in a wretched, glittery pile
and twitched his nose
in a dead sleep.
Ruth Goes to the Hardware Store

She plants her tongue in the cemetery, along with his hands like phallic mountains or a gin bottle erect and empty. Pulls his fingers off in long scars, watches as they burrow towards her mother’s corpse. She buries unsafe, a slick, warm tire. Dead things find poles, careful as a fence in the dark. She walks three more blocks all muscle and bone.

She empties her pockets on a glass counter for a deadlock. Cold, solid, gunshot a metal tongue cracking open her mouth, cracking shut her doorframe. She steals Papa’s tools and burrows a drill deep into the wood. Slides the bolt in rough.
On Becoming Ruthless

Papa drunk and Mama dead three years – Ruth chews her way to the cemetery. Chews right down her hair a nest between names and dates on teeth above teeth and hair and nails still growing, so says the old wives. She was charmed, I’m sure, with the cemetery.

Grandmother flosses her out with a whore’s red g-string, an attic above a house of ill-repute. Whisks away her sway toward the dead brings out the wicked world ‘round. Fleshy, flushed out men sweating down the hall, searching quiet doors. Ruth studies them from above. Learns brows, jowls sagging towards purchased breasts. Learns to white-wash her Red-Light-Disposition for passersby respectable says who’s your folks? says none, sir, none.
Grandmother’s House

The house breathes Louisiana,
bare wood, soft and warm.
Heels dripping sweat
down a hallway of closed doors.

Bare wood, soft and warm.
Women in powder and bare bulbs
down a hallway of closed doors
muffle a practiced sigh.

Women in powder and bare bulbs,
their scent like a cloud of sleep
muffles a practiced sigh,
maps a sharpened claw.

Their scent like a cloud of sleep
offends the evening air
maps a sharpened claw
against an iron headboard.

Offends the evening air
mixed breath and steaming summer
against an iron headboard,
their throats joyful raw.

Mixed breath and steaming summer:
twisted sheets, and wet.
Their throats joyful raw
whispering along the hall

Twisted sheets, and wet:
the house breathes Louisiana.
Whispering along the hall
heels dripping sweat.
Ruth Goes to Church

Every Sunday Ruth walks to the corner, alone. Grandmother says go on, go on, let them try to save your soul.
She turns her fists to open palms
turns her open palms together. Ruth
closes her eyes and drifts between
the bellowing melody and fractured light,
prayers against a stainwrought window.
Ruth sings poorly from the furthest pew.
She sits with an old woman all in green
who Sunday presses red-velvet cake
wrapped in wax paper into Ruth’s hand
before slipping out the door.
Unfrosted, moist, still warm
Ruth eats it on her grandmother’s steps.
Every Sunday the collection plate
misses the final pew.
Four Hands

Crashed against her parent’s wrack line
Ruth loves a prostitute instead.

Ruth finds the warm corners
of Vionne’s room in the afternoon, soft
sun-swollen wood and Vionne’s hair down
to her thighs. Ruth untangles it with her fingers.
In the kitchen Vionne winds it into a braid
and pins it to her scalp.

The sun in the window behind her,
her head appears twice its size.

Ruth loves Vionne’s chicken for breakfast
and pies for dinner. Loves her swift fingers,
the heaving heels of her hands. Rough with dough
easy with knives and heat. Numb,
her hands like pig-hide dunked in boiling water
says tough hands’ a necessity.

Steam kisses her forehead. Slips
down her cheeks a heat-blushed ache.

Vionne tells Ruth she was married for six months.
Overcooked a steak, and when he got tired of chewing
her husband quit breathing instead. Ruth imagines
Vionne’s hands bucking against a man’s heavy
sternum. In all their tiny strength.
Quick and desperate.

Four hands rest a pomegranate fetish
on the table between them.

Ruth’s hands, finely toothed,
further themselves like wolves.
Reach out and link fingers with all her might.
Vionne’s Chicken

Mornings, Vionne fixes chicken naked.
The other whores lie down
(this time on their stomachs)
and the house falls down silent
around her. She whips milk
and butter until her body is slick.

Ruth’s concave ankles dangle
above the floor. When Vionne
holds out her perfectly arched wrist
Ruth drops little glass vials into her palm.
Garlic, rosemary, salt . . . until Vionne
heaves the bowl to her bare heart
and drips sauce from breast to breast.
Uncle Maybe

Out of the blue. Or out of the north. Either way Ruth wonders at this man who calls himself Maybe (Grandmother calls him Robin). Who brings out records with a grin begging for mischief. Who dances with Grandmother in the kitchen after she’s seen the last man out. Who ignores the other girls. The younger girls. The girls for hire. Ignores the girls in general.

This man who stays the night and the morning, too. Ruth follows him into the kitchen. Humming he dances between counter and stove. Feathery and soft his hands make French toast and coffee. His laugh like a barking dog when Ruth points to a thawed chicken.

Ruth wonders at this man speaking to the kitchen window: a low-toned commentary on the house. Says too young, too pretty, too sad. Says cluck and tut to cracked eggs.
New Orleans, 1948

Ruth’s mighty teeth still as a cemetery
Angel. A blooming weed for her hair
A cotton waist all heavy with touch

she sits at a bar, underage. A red dress
cinched at the waist. A Buddha, cigarette
at her lips, formica at her fingers.

Oh, cheap laminate! She peels you in chips
rolled away to a brick between herself
and the elbows resting close to hers.

They pretend the bar is crowded
brush their legs against her stool,
these men all purple with lust.

She fills her lungs
    with smoke and nonchalance
    as the crowd rolls in.
Ruth Chews the Dark

The dark drips like summer chocolate,
a heavy soft that empties itself against
the crease of her elbows and eyelids,
caked permanent her fingernails ache.

Ruth in bed, chews the dark for a whistle,
for the *hush baby, hush, hush;*

for the low moan and the sleepy wheels
galloping hello in the night.

Ruth chews the dark, a soft bone,
a bare dust, a sigh goodbye in the night.
Ruth Takes a Train

In a tunnel of thunderous, halting breath
Ruth exhales. A steady stream of muffled,
slippery words rising through the cracks
between her floorboards.
Bourbon breath and sticky hands
rising through the cracks
of her memory. Ruth exhales
into warm-penny steam
erases summer sweat,
erases heel prints on the kitchen floor.
The familiar night-time sigh turned
to a heavy yell. Ruth reminds herself
she is forty miles in the wrong direction.
Inhales an extra thirteen hundred
for good measure.

Lifts her feet from the platform
and breathes in snow.
Snowfall in New York

I.

What do you know of snow? A pile of rags whispers from the street corner. A woman with her feet wrapped in newspaper hisses outside of the train station. She wheezes like her lungs are full of wool. Ruth steps around her. Her fingers wear the edges, a roll of bills. All she has.

II.

Ruth finds a job in a mortuary. Supervises funerals and the industrial washer. Linen, white coats, and the shirts of the bachelor who lives upstairs. A handsome man, with pale, freckled skin drops off his shirts and three dollars on Fridays.

Years later in a dingy, yellow kitchen Ruth says I didn’t know what else to do, so I married him.

III.

Ruth moves in above the mortuary. Cooks meals in a frozen kitchen. Her open palm above a warm stove. She carries her husband’s shirts with her downstairs on Friday mornings.

IV.

One month away from her eldest daughter, Ruth is presented with a beaming smile and a freshly embalmed infant. Ruth never thought she was the fainting kind.

Two daughters later, Ruth is still afraid of that cold, perfect weight in her arms.
Sunrise in California

Ruth’s husband hates tradition. Hates a hefty rack of lamb and a sleepy static of holiday exchange, called it *musty.*

Ruth hates the angry fingerprints of snow working into her bones and three snowsuits to button and unbutton and button again.

They hate the steaming want of winter.

*So they left*

Like a rumor in the night air, a slippery whisper passed around the family:

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no one was home
havent been to work
not at church
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Ruth’s daughters wake with three hours to spare and the smell of oil refineries mixed with the morning ocean air.
Dishes

Ruth does not wear gloves at the sink.

_Tough hands’ a necessity,_
she dips the calloused tips
of her fingers to drift and pierce
bubbles of soap until they’re
an angry red.

Ruth takes pleasure in the drain’s rush.

Wide-mouth wants of her husband
give way to soft thunk and suck
of water breached.

Ruth does not thimble her knuckles and pads.

_Very little money._

_Very little anything._

Flicks needle to flesh to fabric and back again.

Ruth does not wear gloves at the sink. She rolls her fingers around the steaming perfect edges until she finds a chip. She rubs against it. Breaking skin.
Ruth Rents an Apartment

In a two bedroom apartment Ruth’s daughters snore into each other’s mouths. As the woman next door, Barbara, who breaks dishes against the wall whispers her secrets to the wallpaper.

Ruth sits awake listening to Barbara’s maddened babble bouncing through the wall, watching Barbara’s husband pace the sidewalk, until his frustration puts his fist into a fence. Until a fence breaks his fingers.

Ruth leaves her sleeping daughters to drive him to a bar and then to a hospital.

Ruth knows his naked face, pelted with anger and neglect. Knows her eyes laced with lightning and clouds.

***

One night Ruth knocks on Barbara’s door. Her husband gone two months, Barbara alone with a jug of Clorox, a thin plastic bag.

Ruth drives to the hospital, Barbara counts the building fronts and sings: one’s all alright, two’s all alright, three. She never comes home again.

It’s bad together, but it’s worse apart.
PART III

ALLIGATOR HEART
Alligator Heart

I. Leather

Old Man is dead, sings
the wind in the sawgrass,
gleams a set of teeth
in a glass of vinegar. The girls
decide to eat him for breakfast.

Plucked and cut and boiled
hard. Bare bones remembered
onto the kitchen table.
Old Man becomes less,
than disappeared.
Salted and stretched and stored
for the winter. He thins
into a rough spot on the wood.

The girls tie him to their feet,
wear him out on the front porch
as the sun cascades
up, into the sky.
II. Drift

there is no matter

no jar of flesh to hold him in

there is only the open rolling spread of everything

he had ever been leaving prints up the walls windows

floorboards

he gathers what he can

his hate raining from the rafters in swirling motes of sunlight

his voice creaking floorboards beneath bare feet

his hands the splintered doorframe

the dead marble streaks of

his eyes

simmer in the windowsill
III. Cleaning Gater

[Old Man] Just a bottle of bleach and some sharp knives, girls.

[Agnes] Hand me that jar for the eyes.
[Starla] Hand me that fork and I’ll eat ‘em.
[Agnes] Shhhh. Old Man’s in the rafters.

[Old Man] Just some sharp knives and a silver pot, girls.

[Starla] We don’t exist.
[Agnes] Eat one eye, and if he takes count I’ll steal one of yours for the jar.
[Starla] Just give me the tail bone.
[Agnes] You’ll never fit that little bit of blade.

[Old Man] Just a silver pot and some rolled up hide, girls.

[Starla] It’s just a grouse and a slaughter and food for a week.
[Agnes] You can dance, but stop singing.
[Starla] He’s got no business with the tail bone.
[Agnes] Just a clean bit of blade and a hard luck.

[Old Man] Just some rolled up hide and a boiled skull, girls.

[Agnes] Notch that claw, and watch his belly.
[Starla] We don’t exist.
IV. Sleepwalker

The night air haunted thick
as swamp water the moon
struggles, clouded sky swallows
its light like sour milk.
Ghosts like lead-based paint peel
from the windowsills.

Sleepwalking, Starla’s naked body
joins the phantom footfalls.
The kitchen, the porch, the sucking
mud. Sweat-soaked and reaching.
Her bare flesh lightning
reflected in a murky pond.

Snapping a dead flashlight in morse code,
I follow. Lips chewed and feathered,
I follow. My worried-dog face
Cut and cut again
By hanging branches.

The flame of her body
Drops to all fours. Strong, supple
as a hunting cat. She empties
her stomach, wakes. Her hands
black as tar, she peels a palm
down her throat, her shoulders,
her heavy breasts and hip
leaving a trail black and tough
as a well-worn skillet.

She waits in the hard-won moonlight
for my hand at her shoulder
lips on her temple. Her face
in the curve of my neck.
My sister’s kisses like handprints
on the insides of my eyes.
V. The Mischief

Agnes sits: an open-faced rioting wait. Her tongue like her teeth like her lips are pulled over and over again. Gummed tough and tight as a whip. But instead of cracking, she folds in and over again. She sits, a wave in a mourning sky.

Starla runs: a refused, shifting escape. Fences and hedges her fingers against the corners of Old Man’s skull. His eyes empty, crusted, his teeth sharp and still. She limps her fingers through patches of hair. Old Man’s skull whips back towards bare heels, disturbing a mischief of rats.

Old Man shoves: an aged, tired hate. His body against the door, but his weight and flesh are rotting with his crashing yell. He echoes from beneath the porch. And the lights in the window turn green then black and the wood wrenches itself into stillness. Behind him, Agnes sits. Her silence waits like a murderous riot.
VI. Sawtooth

Got nothing left for you, Old Man.
Not for your stolen leather, salty eyes,
swamp lights in your teeth.
Not for your shadow slinking
between floorboards and into drawers.
Not for your steak-knife fingers,
your rat-toothed grin.

Got nothing, but a lifetime.
Agnes and I chasing snakes
with a bologna-skunked
pillowcase and a knife
too dull to cut my own hair with.

Nothing but rows of drowning trees
and hungry swamp. Key holes
of angry bark in warm-butter mud.
Blood hungry depths.
A pond that looks like ground.
Nothing but bare feet swallowing
every inch.

Nothing but this will hurt,
Agnes said,
pulling sharp grass from my feet.
Didn’t hurt at all.
Nothing but her hands, a shapely vase
blooming swamp weeds
and barefoot blood.

Got nothing, but my toes,
a candied pulp
you couldn’t get your teeth through.
You tried just the same.
Maybe you’d prefer a cigarette
burn? Or an tree-island swallowed whole?
Go ahead, Old Man, and take it.

Take the water and freckled light,
take the hulking shadows,
the drooling moss.
Let me fold myself into the wet
and steaming island of your back.
PART IV

LETTERS FROM THE BRUSH
The Road to Somewhere

On the long ride to nirvana
Buddha and Jesus trade
insults in the backseat:

\[\textit{you lazy soul} \\
\textit{you ferret runner.}\]

Words spread like disease.
Claw through the upholstery,
climb the leathery console
into the driver’s lap:

\[\textit{don’t make me turn} \\
\textit{this car around.}\]

But it’s useless. The car to heaven
is not equipped with reverse.

In the rearview mirror
they become chimps
taught to speak
with their hands. Fingers
like wild birds
captured in a black plastic frame,
hung low with beads.

They dig through the stale air
between them, through
the same circle of shoreline.
Waiting for someone
to reverse the sky.
MadSong

they had only been pigeons
falling off her tongue
circling, fat with lust
cracked and cracked again

falling off her tongue
in no particular order
cracked and cracked again
on a clean, white floor

in no particular order
her shoes became boats
on a light, blue floor
she sucked up an egg yolk

her shoes became boats
her fingers became spoons
she sucked up an egg yolk
like she’s chewing on the sun

her fingers became spoons
she shoveled at her hair
like she’s chewing on the sun
her teeth grew dull and thin

she shoveled at her hair
circling, fat with lust
her teeth grew dull and thin
they had only been pigeons
Moth Love

there is no mouth
moonlight and scent
  like fishing line
  like blooming weeds
  like dark dewy blankets
  sift air for more
bodies
  like trees
  sway
there is no food
  touch
  like forest floors
  curled roots around
underwings meet
  night
  threatens morning
  sun
  eats out sphinx glare
yellow eyes
  unblinking
  close together
steal-kiss
  open music
like butterfly nets
  like a week to live
  like leaf fall
Creek Walking

I.

Our little girl ankles swam upstream
in your father’s old Tevas, twenty-three years
too big. Loose ends of straps bit us, whipped
back and whittled our bones to toothpicks red
as the sudden sunset around us.

I don’t know if it’s magic or context
that made me believe I could crush
the crystalline stars between
my teeth, and be slated. I begged
you to stay in the warm air
and cold currents.
You declined my offer of star-fed woods.

II.

These days I imagine you a moated gull
washed up in watered-down constellations,
you’ve forgotten how to use your wings.

When you finally dip beneath the surface
I will drink your ashes from the bay.
River Water

I. Fishing Trout

Slow click of morning barely begun
you woke me: a hand through my hair,
clean shower scent against my cheek.
You wanted me
to see first light on the river.

We entered the pines, cold.
My backpack light, brown paper bags,
thermos. Tackle box against
your leg, fallen branches tongued our ankles.

You aimed to teach me patience. Instead,
you taught me to hold a pole. Braced
my back in your open palms, watched
the flickers against mud and rock.

The air grew warm around us, roaring
in an over-sexed summer.

II. Cold Spring

The snow threw itself down the hill, rushed
the river swollen, swallowed the rocks,
half-masted trees, ate up the familiar slope.
I dared you, but entered the wailing
current alone. Bones heavy, body smooth
in the arms of grieving snow, I couldn’t
carry myself away.

My knees locked, I pulled myself free, frozen
toes learned to furl into crags and clefts.
I roughed myself up against tree branches,
bare foot on barely thawed earth. You
waited for me to hike back.
Your fingers autopsied my hair: tangled
dead leaves and fish dirt.
The Robber Bridegroom

*after* Anne Sexton

A bargain was struck, her hand held out. The miller’s daughter became freshly engaged. Her father said *respectable* again and again. The bridegroom walked backwards into the woods, the fault line in his fist dripped ashes as he went.

She was ordered to follow. Toe by toe ashes ground into her soles. The trees grew taller, the leaves drew denser. In her nervousness she picked her fingers until she bled lentils and peas.

The ashes stopped at a run-down house that smelled sour with stale blood. A tiny bird with a tinny voice cried out, but the daughter did not hear. It beat its wings against its cage, but the daughter did not see. It battered itself in desperation. *Darling, it was only a dream,*

said the old woman on the porch as she shook her head and hid the daughter away. Said *Wait, darling, wait and see.*

The bridegroom arrived in the dark, but he wasn’t alone. His arm around a pretty virgin, they sat at a candle-covered table. He smiled, she blushed, and the wine was poisoned. When her heart stopped, the bridegroom washed up for supper.

His band of merry cannibals rode up licking their chops as they went.
A careful group they combed her
neck, ears, fingers,
every piece of jewelry removed, stored
in a small clay pot. The last ring,

A gold band on her right hand
clung to the bulge of her knuckle.
Rather than risk cutting his gums
or chipping a tooth, the bridegroom
snapped the finger from its hand.

A hollow snap and skittering:
her lone, delicate nail tossed
alone into a dark corner.

Stripped and cleaned she is sprinkled
with salt, put in a boiling pot.
Tender and steaming, her smell simmered
through the room.

The daughter reached out her hand,
took the forfeit finger.
She held it to her breast and listened
to the men chew. She chewed
her own tongue until finished,
and full of fresh meat they slept.

She slipped through their hulking shadows
to follow her trail of lentils and peas home.
When the bridegroom came for her,
she wore a broken finger around her neck.

The bridegroom said respectable again and again.
The daughter unhinged her jaw
and swallowed him whole.
Darling, it was only a dream.
How to Clean an Ear Canal

It takes a stick, expertly wielded, to knock it all out. Head tilted over a bowl, everything loosens. Soap, dirt, shampoo, and finally the unverifiable story of who and where and how. Clumsy love notes to Nabokov and Ondaatje; Artaud and Beckett scratched out on a steamy mirror. Freshly steamed cabbage served alone, an aversion to salt. An unsteady voice reading aloud. A whitewashed smile flashed too often, and too loud, and too close. Your twenty-fifth year without a cavity and your tenth day in a row without a shower. It takes a stick to roll all the edges in on itself and a shake to knock it all out.
A Dry Year

He had something of a tiny, sleepy gift. An ability to predict his planet’s foxy, foxy future. It took root somewhere in his frontal lobe and he wept for the earliness of his birth.

This seedling grew into an apocalyptic truth: he was aging and his abundance of sharp-edged, erupting teeth were growing soft. His hair was thinning, and the shape of his joints yielded more and more to the pressure of his finger.

He knew that it was over because all over and everywhere women who hadn’t even been born had already left him behind.
I was not an improvisation.
They say I came from him,
and he named me.
Swollen flesh anchored
to frame. Bones bent lightly
all born from a single rib.

They tell me my life
sprang from this pool of other.
that the soil beneath
my fingernails was trespass,
someone else’s property.

Wife-shrouded I wandered
through Lillith-shadow.
Heart of wood carved
with instructions of obedience.
Its heavy weight did not give way.
I reached. My chest splintered.
Great swollen gash
soft pink,
borrowed flesh.

Pain was mine, mine was his,
I shared that splinter with him.
They call it fall.
As if my feet left solid ground.
Letters From the Brush

I.

Losing the skyline by inches
I remember the commas
of our sleeping bags, reflecting
the rising thumbnail rippling
in the mirror of the lake.

Moonrise belonged to us then.

II.

I break the mirror that morning.
Split my reflection in the stillness
of sunrise. My body becomes sharp.
Cornflower blue blooms
like blood over my eyes
each lap of lake I swim.

This is not a watermelon summer,
the kind you spent picking, spinning
flowers into bracelets you wrapped
my flesh in. I slept in them
until they sloughed off
like stars.

III.

Midday the world begins to shrink,
flowers take less time to slip
from pink to orange. I hide
myself beneath the pines,
and the birds sift
through the sky.
Summer Mother

Grandmother wrapped white gauze and lavender sprigs to my wrists as a bedtime ritual. Unraveled them each morning, braided lilacs in my hair. She welcomed wilderness through her door: frogs dwarfed in teacups rimmed with daisies. Jays perched in the chandelier. She never-minded the mess.

She stole every silver trashcan from her cul-de-sac, piled them up before the rising sun to spreading pavement. She saved corks perfect for throwing at neighbors and neighborhood cats stalking mice in her yard. Held one between my palm and hers to absorb our scents.

We ran after summer mountains and foxtails. Sprinkled ourselves with earth, the furious force of a seed. A braid of horsehair at my cheeks, she told me a horse could show me the passage to heaven. Told me to dream of God crouching in tall grass.
Fever Dream

Sleep starved and bitter,
he bit down
on her chin,
an effort to wake her up.

She never was a light sleeper:
she never was.
He made her up. Pulled
away a mouth full of fabric
and cartoonish feathers
drifting from his lips.

Maybe if he chewed
hard enough
the pillow might turn back
into a woman. End
an anemic need
drifting down his throat,
dissolving into his stomach.

The only salt he tasted
was his own. Seeped
from his sleeping flesh.
Nights unbearably warm.
A Morning’s Request

Let the string break, let the beads shatter.
Let the swimming pool drool along
in the background.

Let the dogs howl. Let them piss on the carpet.
Let it go moldy and rancid. Just
sing it to me slow, for fever’s sake.
For your barrel-chested lust,
for your glass face.

Let your wide open mouth crack
your teeth. Let my tongue slide back
into the cavern of your throat.
Let yourself choke, and choke,
and choke.

Let the eggs burn and the oil smoke.
Let breakfast in bed just die.
Let it dew and honey and dew.

Let the world go on without us,
Let it grieve, or not. Let the phone ring.
Let the phone ring, and ring.

Let me slip beneath your skin,
Eat you alive from the inside. Let us
set the bed on fire.

But could you just, would you just
for fever’s sake,
sing it to me slow.
You kicked off your head. A rolling laugh: whinnying rather than winning. Or more like a dog than a horse. Or more like a flatline than a pulse. Tick-tocked your teeth on the shoes I forgot to put away. Or the plates you left on the floor. I always forget which.

You couldn’t play the guitar (although God knows you beat those strings to death), so you tried painting instead. But canvases are expensive and when you ran out of money, you slept. And when you slept, you dreamed of eating two-headed cows. Uncooked. With your bare teeth. You sang with your mouth full of dreams until jellyfish tentacles of drool dripped onto your pillow.

When you ran out of sleep, you hated me. A heat-sleepy hate kept at a proper boil rolling without boiling over. A silver pot to sterilize the hammer you kept in the kitchen to peel a hard squash and a difficult vegetarian. I sang sad songs with a swifter fuss than you knew how to allow.

I used your paintbrushes like chopsticks. Your silhouette by the door strummed a dusty guitar. In the kitchen fresh-picked apples rioted your silver pot beyond all recognition.

You didn’t want to hear no sad songs, so you ripped off your ears. Played me like a light pluck or a flat hand. Or maybe it was a piano and not me. And maybe you played it with the hammer.
To Peel

There’s an ancient sort of verb in peeling:
oranges like lovers, devoured bitten bitter rinds.
Or nervous tick. Peel flaky
edges, thumbnails back
to their weakest point. Or peel
skin across smooth surface
a single, piano key. Intimate as waking,
body in wanderlust, breathe
a burning bush, ferocity
of tongue and ears. Wordpinned
rely on tactile. Basket-weaved flesh
Dear Ada,

Jack Daniels and I caught a ride on twin rails, pain and pleasure, to seek ourselves, an adventure that included everything but you. The kind of thing you used to call a dick and fist party. This is not news to you, I know, but you don’t know that it landed me here: Anywhere, California. The kind of synonymous town nestled in mountains split down the middle by the logging truck that dropped me off.

When boots met pavement I found: a wrinkled face, stooped shoulders, sly smile, a woman with the look of your grandmother, without love’s veil to soften her perception. She offered coffee and a warm shower, the kind of immediate intimacy you, dear Ada, were always afraid of. I thought how little you would approve.

I accepted her offer. When I finished imposing, I asked to be pointed to the nearest pub. Her blue eyes got bluer as she shook her head. There are no pubs here, just a café that serves as home to the only transient Anywhere, California hadn’t seen fit to broom from its front porch. I took this for the warning it was. I thought how well you would approve.

I collected: my change of clothes, five dollars, empty friend, Jack.
Wandered down the road to the Star-Cat Café,  
where I found:  
long gray hair twisted with flowers,  
    a face sticky and mottled around colorless eyes,  
    and a surprisingly healthy set of teeth.  
I sat before this man and his chess board,  
the kind with a hinge.  
Time and wear had traded:  
a white knight for a bottle cap,  
    a black bishop for an empty thread spool,  
    various pawns for spit-shine stones.  
This all seems right somehow:  
whoever heard of a war where the sides were even from the start?  

*What advantage d’ya think you got?*  
The old man asked me.  
Those colorless eyes met mine  
with a darkness so engrossing  
I was afraid of losing the little self  
I’d come so far to find.  

I have the snaking sands stranded through New Mexico,  
fantastical reversal of snow.  

I have the pure balance of rock and grass,  
fighting for its place against the sky in Flint Hills, Kansas.  

I have the deflation of the Oklahoma-Texas border.  

I have a change of clothes, five dollars, and nothing more.  

I have the cherry-dark curls you blew from your forehead,  
    thick perfect stripe of your eyebrow,  
    deep gold-flecked brown of your eye,  
    soft line of your wrist.  
    The clown act you performed  
    with the hat and coat you stole from me.  

I pushed back from the table and chessboard, back  
I had already lost.  

Yours with all the love I forgot to give you,
WORKS CONSULTED


