

Exit the Way You Came

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April 21, 2015

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They overstay their visit

this one's quilt
in the stew, this one's quilt
in the heat with its

alphabet stitches. this one's dad
is sleeping from
mom, this one's toes made mold,
made mom. this one's cry

grew her flowers, dug the sea
from her eye by the hour and this one
with its quilt spins thread

in knots, ties her knuckles
in knots around the grocery
bag bonnet. and this one's

tot with the claws
slept next to the skinny
one, drew all the letters from the sky

on the walls. that one shoots
from the birds' eye and drags it
to the cold one's feet
and you, sir,

wanted to sing that one's kill
and this one's baby cousin to sleep

and that one's quilt, she set
patches on fire and these one's
quilts burned

Arcadia, North Carolina

Breeze heavy &
the lawn chairs rattling
with their plastic ribbons
torn loose.

Arcadia, North Carolina
is not a place.

It is your porch
when you are asleep.

Across the street,
a girl has been felt up
for the first time. The trees

were blazed for their ash
and there are 17 acres
stopping the scar.

I could not tell you
the number of inhabitants
and I do not wish

you more than soup cans
of potted pansies.

A neighbor with skin
that stretches tough across
the chest. Eyes stomped

with crow's-feet, blood.

Where blue is the blur
in dropped stitches.

The birds
when they line up, ready
to claim their rusted tools.

The seeds are soaking in sugar in the shed.

Pick up the phone. Beg
the other four generations
to get off. The sky will wane

with or without you.

Arcadia is not yours to keep.

In the Cadaver Lab

There lay the cadavers. There lay the cadavers and they settled with purple around their nipples like my father. There lay the cadavers and they sunk in silver lunchboxes in the lab. There lay my father and he smelled and scolded and shook. There lay the cadavers and they hunched all over and their chests unfolded like rinds and they looked pink under their ringlets from months of methylated spirit. My father convulsed thickly and boldly: the scalpel scraped the hook of his jugular without him bleeding a single word. And the lab was cold as steel and cloaked in bowed heads and above the white stung the fluorescents. There lay the cadavers and scolded and were scraped of fat. There lay the cadavers beside the ghosts and their carving blocks heavy with pork. And my dad with eyes of plastic and blue jays and me. In the back, the radio read obituaries. That is where the cadavers lay and settled with purple around their nipples and slanted spines. They settled. And I was starved in my fingers from peeling along the sternum and ribs and I knew my father would hear me try to stifle his thumps.

Swan at Trout Lake

I flick the syringe. The border around the lake
is your shade of aged penicillin. My brother's

allergic: cried for three days straight
when he was a baby. Lichens are snowfallen
this season. You knew and your horn

lifted to sing. Skinny hiss,
why do they call you mute:
is it your fear of angling?

Of not being able to scream
when your long neck collapses, floats
sideways, dragging eyes dilated

and white linens rung against
the cerulean?

A fever ago

Legs full of milk and wisteria: the cotton
should be in my mouth, choking a tooth
and salting a tongue. Seventh grade:

hair is hollow, finds a split and
roots the bathroom floor. Will I ever
find my vagina? All small

and spilling brittlestar. Practice
separating the suck of spines.
These teeth are redder than yours,

wear more tinsel crowns, and ramble
on to strangers. Coneflower
is my sex. Everything fragrant we breathe

and the iron sprouted in sidewalks.
Coneflower is arching, always above
the weather. And how many holes

am I supposed to find? Take it out.
Overpicked and dangling.

Skeleton

From the root *skeletos*,
meaning *dried up* like:
the sheets
we left piled in matches
on the bed, like
 the shore
at low tide that we
pick-pocketed,
stopping to startle
the fin scissored
in half, ignoring
the teeth
still chattering,
kneeling to lick
the bony
framework free
of scales, so
 the silvers
that collect on our tongues
hang heavy, and
out of our mouths,
dangles a hook,
dried-up, *withering*.

Build me a house

Brick is my mother's tongue: red
tracing the innards of cheek. Wrecked-
tender and heavy. Her lipstick

done in the rearview
mirror. Smacked bubblegum
no where in the seats.

Lips cold from cement. The chalk
was runny. The barn sinking wet.

An apple dropped hard. Palm
face down: waiting for it to rise
back into seeds and odors. Clung

to the fingernail of wood. A tree
tainted with mouth.

Talk of the first lamb. How
it should be cradled. Given a last
supper, a fire. Kissed

on a bed of straw.

German immigrant

My grandmother blues
in the mud. She lost three toes
in a lawn mowing accident

and the ants still move through the yard
in search of sugar. She's okay, but the stones

kept grabbing. She says she clawed
the gnome's neck and told him
to apologize. She is all nail

and little sift: a thousand rocks
that sink to the bottom of her swimming pool.
Dip in and out, Nazi woman. The town

clinks their glasses and she won't hear
the digging on the phone line. When the police

knock on her door, they won't
let her put on her shoes.

Build me a city

Shoulders shaken with moths: half-dream
in our mouths too limp and quiet
to blow into smoke, whisper well
into red bridges. Wings

in our mouths too limp and quiet.
Let's play god? Send birds to dive
into red bridges, wings
stuck on a ledge and always

let's play god: send birds to dive
in our bellies, hands
stuck on a ledge and always
praise the ones that got away.

In our bellies, hands
felt for a fever, mapped the
the ones that got away
and the meat in your mouth:

felt for a fever, mapped
the throb of blood.
The meat in your mouth
rattled their eyes shaded open.

The throb of blood
means there is something in the water
rattling our eyes shaded open,
allegiance

means there is something in the water,
your knees wet in all this green grass.
Allegiance
pulled your skin over rocks,

your knees wet in all this green grass.
Shoulders shaken with moths, half-dream
pulled your skin over rocks:
blow us into smoke, whisper well.

After surgery

I followed the limp in sea glass
on the sand and the unfinished

arpeggio the doctor sewed
across your chest. You remind me

of ledges and legs: how you always crouch
before you jump, the shy way your body

forgets to rust in the ocean. I won't forgive you
if you die young. You hammered

exhausted clams against a rock, if only
to strike fire, unhinge the jaw

and finger the graying flesh,
both of you unfixed.

Moving, Part I

Spirits have been restless
this time of year: making
birthday wishes in their sleep.
New house, new hauntings,
you wrote.

But cardboard burns the same
every time. The suckle of the stupid
ridges sulking into a black fever.
Might as well be shaved from
cow's hide. Brown leather dripping
into the blood. Tell them

I'm sorry I left their shadows
burnt into the carpet. They stood still
too long popping the nails off
the walls. Unbuttoning
the picture frames. Carving cracks
in the glass with fingernails.

Claw of the hammer. I wanted
the sailboat to swim alone.
How do you stack masts
and clocks and all their hands
loose? Nothing fits in boxes.

What of the letters I begged
you to send that time we were
gardens (and oceans) apart?
They've burnt petals in the grease
in my pots and pans. The tantrum
of the match when it licked
our boxes. Nothing lives in them.

When asked if your family was religious

You said your daughter thinks
the weatherman lies when he promises:

holiness is lightning frightened
by the sun. Your son thinks the milk

delivered each morning rises
like dead spirits. The way it curdles at the top

when it's tired and old. Don't we all rise
to the top? When we're tired and old.

The milkman sneaks into your room
when the children are at school. Kisses crosses

on your palms. Crosses kisses on your mouth.
You both end on your knees. Praying

the spirits in the brick of the house
stay. Silent. May they rearrange the wooden

shoes without knocking. Breathe fire into the brick
without puffing. Send us to Heaven. Without stomping.

Stay, static

Forget that treeline
bruised in the evening,
sputtering coyotes scratching
her cats' arches.

Forget muddy tongues
of the crooks in mother's
garden, red blood cells

lopped up by the doe. Teaching the sun
to come down for dinner, spreading
like ashes across the wooden ship.

Those stars and her
quivering:
bodies tugging the morning dew.

Forget the membrane
fires stirring the chimney

swallows.
Swatches of black: eyes
round bullets.

Sell the silver
in the creek, the soil in her veins.

I wanted you

Bitten sogs of sap breaking an old tree:
the rings dripping sour mess, yellow jacket

stick. Your kind of mouth, jolting the storm
river-electric. The rain forming and the belly's

too full to put outside: I'll lap at it all morning.
Listen for the hot sizzle when the sky juices

its chewy pairs. No way they'll skin them first.
No way we'll skin anything we're supposed to.

The wind is teeth, sharpens a cliff, beckons
a country. Tell me when the ribs rumble

for the clearing: the bed bursting with bogs
and bridges. Sweat thickens the bone, feeds ice

to the wetland. Put a stinger in my tongue
and no way we'll skin anything we can suckle.

The only picture of my parents I refuse to throw away

Her breasts are soft:
Where am I

if not to be head
against them?

I'm still inside them. And
the bed is a hotel. The hotel
is their home.

Until the pink in their
faces rots.

No rings on their fingers.

Lamentations

I.

everyday

we find that
 on a scale: shade different.
 cases overlapping
 come within the purview

of exhaustion,
 she is

who is
 her own

confined as it is

ill-

word.

II.

nature
 appears
 record

The

estimated women
 alone

circulated to the
 county,

(Some evidence
is an understatement.) We may note
the total number

located

in question.

III.

This situation

mixed

parts
developed as the result

of female
experience.

the social
is sterilized;

use as an

activity.
look on

of the measure.

It is easy to
be carried over in people's

minds.

IV.

requested

all

free

and they have before them
praises.

She knew

her own,
said that

she had
poor

neighbors.

“People envy me.”

V.

the practice varies from
one county to another.

What happens depends
on

sympathetic work,

stress

evidence
Illustrating

the women
defective

She had consented to

furnished particulars,

blind from birth.

Moving, Part II

*New neighbor boy is slow,
mom says. He will
take care of the yard.*

This six-month rental
is all turf and fence: mud
stomped soft into the ground.

I imagine his room stuffy,
an imitation of the garden:
each rose blushes in a bowl,

nervous to shiver open. Thorns
clog the drain, wait for a back
to scratch. He will swim

laps backwards across the bath,
watch the water chug down.
His fingers prune

changing their soak once
an hour. I won't hear
the teeth of the Japanese beetles

and the holes they pinch
in their chitter-chatter. The snails
line the floorboards, suck

the oak dry. Peel their feet
and you'll never lick
another stamp in your life.

Neighbor boy, someone
will come home soon.

Registered organ donor

That summer the doctor cut out
your lung, you left it in a bucket
bedside, stacked against ice
and I stopped sleeping that night:
watched it wheeze flat,
your sails quivering loose.
And the bellows when the tides
broke— I'd kicked the bucket over!
Slipped out of the cavern
in your left over side and
for a moment, the lung crawled.
The slack mouth of the sponge
wrinkled and dragged naked pink
across the floor, a hurt animal
heaving as it counted breaths
and pills, six months left
to live. Did I know then?
When I nudged your sleeping
shoulder, you pointed
to the carving knife. Your heart
I kept stammering in a jar.

Father references fights with old addresses

Don't you think
living on a road with pelicans
was enough. They stole

enough fish from my mouth:
tongue lagging, half waiting for you
to come home, say it.

Don't you think
you never have a net
to say it with. You are

the pelican. You are my
lane. I will not come
home, will not say it.

Too many words
in your orange beak.
Too many plump

fish flailing, orange pulled
plastic and tails flopping flat.
Don't spill it now,

Dad. Drink your water.
It's time for the check.

Dear Sophie

It's easier to imagine you bald:
your scalp surfaced, disrobed

and scratched in rills. The orb
of your body is rounded

to a pimpled hull. Why not
add another—and you won't

get the damn rind off your face.
The orange you've been peeling

at for hours. Sitting in the corner
rubbing it on your red nose, swollen

cheeks. The windows are steamed
from the sun. The last bit of anything

wet was scraped into this room
and I'm supposed to like you, Sophie.

Pregnant. Drug Addict. In Rehab
for the Second Time. I'm supposed to

learn from you. But all I see
are the clawfeet of your bathtub

that have been coaxed alive and the baby
that will play where you raised magic.

Chanted with a fever, spilling stones
into something finer—perhaps, something

finer than yourself. Did you look
for your powder in jail: dripping

from leaking faucets, churned into
the grout between the tiles? Your orange

surfaced—disrobed and scratched
in rills. Sophie. Pregnant. Drug-Addict.

In Rehab for the Second Time. Your orange
is my half-time at soccer games. Sliced

into wedges. Clamped between my gums
and the orange is my mouth: hiding missing

baby teeth and bloody gums. Sophie.
Will your baby play soccer? Will you cut

her oranges into wedges of the world?
Halftime teething, Sophie. Pregnant.

Drug Addict. In Rehab for the Second Time.
My orange is your pregnancy in jail:

a ball for you to disrobe, scratch into rills.
Missing teeth and bloody gums. They fed

your veins, weaned your baby off your magic.
My orange is your fear you weren't getting out

before labor. The baby girl handed
to a security guard before you.

The quieter one

Where the river plunges
there's a part that can never

be heard. How its sound
could be trapped in the red

of a bird. What if that's it:
your heat was flattened

into grasses, the softer parts
strung with the vowels

of my name. The fish
always plunge the fastest.

The hook dug further
into my breast. I'm rounder

and louder than your trees.

Lessons on Marriage

I'm going to tell you a story:
before the rehearsal dinner, Oberon slunk
into his brother's pin. I raised that horse
better. But the hunter—I'd shoot him

today if I saw him. Anyway, Oberon slunk
into his brother's pin, dressed him
in a magnetized bib. Said, Aghba,
it's time to smile. The light flashed

and it was sunset. But in the dirt
laid an x-ray of his jaw line,
so we know it looked good before.
Oberon chewed at him, tore his jowls

sloppy loose. And in his chest:
Oberon carved the initials B-G,
like we monogrammed everything
for the wedding. Now, listen:

you cannot put two stallions
in the same field. They will fight
till the death, death won't do them part.
Don't look a hurt horse in the mouth.

The mares dug in crop circles. The mares
shimmied in circles: sewing their hips
together, braiding their tails together. Hiding
Aghba with their hides. Oberon tapped

the knife on the wine glass, and said,
it's time for a toast. Let's bless the newlyweds,
bless the ground they stomp on and the ground
they breed on. May all of their corn shrivel

to fescue. May all of their blonde babies
know their yellow and red. Nightfall and the mares
sung sleepy. Oberon went to thank the hunter
and Aghba collapsed. We strung him with lights,

IVs and magic tricks. Begged a spell around
his neck. Blood: quiet your pitter patter. Husband
and wife: quiet your pitter patter. Don't look
a fucked marriage in the mouth.

Rocket

While you sleep
the rocket is a beggar
on the static:

all the legs huddle,
croon, and count

that they're going to pull life
out of there. Shake

each magnet for all it's worth.

I heard it when you
left my bed this morning:

You said I was warm.

As if needing a reason
to keep scooping me
onto your chest. Frankly,

I'm running out of ways to wake you up.

Borrowed a silver can, spilt
your coins into a pale fire.

I want to fall asleep
sucking blue into my fingertip,
twisting gold around the knuckle.

Won't you snip it loose nightly

won't you leave

come back, shriveled
and shouting

Evolution means we were once uglier.

Elegy

Last week,
the toothed way
you yelled

for messing up
your banana stand.
You see:

I only like them
when they are green
sucking yellow.

Strangers
that don't commit
to a season

or weather or taste.
You probably thought
the first bite

was the worst
but I won't tell
your family

how much I thought
you lied: how pretty
you made the stand

fumble
into each other's bad spots.
So all we saw

were the yellow boats
bowing in their stacks.
How all we wished

was to pull one back,
plop it in our seas
and ride

until our cheeks peeled
chalky. Your cheeks
were never chalky

and your wife:
I bet her hair
was still golden

the day you died
and she won't eat
another banana again.

I will buy the ones
accidentally green,
plant them

in tinsel
in the backyard.
I won't talk

to the rotting
in the muffin pans:
yellow chests bruised

and tithing.
The ones that stick
to the roof of my mouth

but she cried less
than you wanted,
rubbing your bald head

to sleep
and screamed:
Fuck off.

How could you
fuck off. I have ninety pictures
of you with cardboard boxes

and fuck off. Couldn't you
have let me buy
the bananas in peace.

Couldn't you
have grown old and
died in peace.

Intention

No ghost blushing,
no a girl before. But limp
dresses, buttons snapping

in cast iron. The stage was dim,
the year of the beetles, and the lighting

fed a wild egret. I came here
to say: the river was strained with a spoon
and I broke your watch

on a rock. No kitchen small talk.
No smack about hollow shells, how they

always land with their feet
pointed up. The hymn was starved
in a field, the beetles hissing

before you spat and rolled away
from my body.

She said I live in Arcadia

There are no butterflies. We're born with hooks
on our heels. Dogs come home for dinner

spitting feathers. Slide the wattles over.
I slide back the ace of hearts. I'm a glass bottle

you cut your big toe on in Arcadia.
I hum in ditches, split your seeds

in the dust bowl. Dried blood on your spine:
roll around with me and you'll never

sit straight again. She said there are no butterflies
in Arcadia. I bit my tongue and swallowed in Arcadia.

Plenty of buckeyes afraid to blink. Blue eyes
leak orange open, make toadflax and racists

sag fat in Arcadia. Church moms
sing sulfur cloudless, want queer kids

in school safe in Arcadia. We scrape away
layers of farmhouse paint, make mourning cloaks

fight to keep their gold tin. Some of us
ask the painted lady to prom. The rest of us

chew cabbage white like cud in the back. We'll sway
against the brick, bow when you call us

giant swallowtail: afraid we'll dart at your citrus
like a bird in Arcadia. I bit

her tongue and swallowed in Arcadia.
One day we'll grow sick of chrysalis. We'll stem

to a bigger stick, make a skin of ourselves,
and crawl sticky out of Arcadia.

Why I won't buy this postcard with a heart on it

Because the heart's anatomical and it's been punctured
and you know I love shit like that

and the sink was full
and the fire was numb and we said, *let's*
clean tomorrow, check the weather tomorrow.

Since you loved her, we talk about sex
the way I imagine neighbors talk about shrubbery:

the coolest spots we've found it, how it's better
if no one knows, and why it's always more beautiful
in the daylight.

The lightbulb stammered a storm and I loved you
like a siren licked awake, smashing

my secrets as trophies
in a parking lot, their heads spitting in circles.

And I haven't written
because the mailman's allergic to azaleas, won't deliver
its hungry- cold-footed-always-falling-asleep-on-your-couch-shivers.

Fuck the mailman.

And without the mailman, we are flailing.

The bathwater is a cold
slinking of village and should you suddenly write

from the last country, you'd signed with scribbled hills
and gurgled snowpuffs. They tasted dirtier than you could imagine

and all of this, you told me to expect: dial tone clucking

in the mountains.

An avalanche, and in my head

we use our mouths. The lightening flits us full.

Notes

I was able to write *Exit the Way You Came* through the love and kindness of my family and friends, especially the family of UNC-Chapel Hill's 2014-2015 Honors Poetry class. Our lineage starts with Gaby Calvocoressi and I am forever thankful. A big thank you, especially, to Austin Berrier, who listened to many of my first drafts at two o'clock in the morning with eager ears. Another thank you to Mary Alta for never failing to hug me and ask how I was doing. A last necessary thank you to Bradley Allf for his love and himself. Praise the goddesses for you all.

"After surgery" is for Andrew Crabtree and Sam Thomasson. I miss your love and laughs.

"Lamentations" is an erasure of the 1949 article "Sterilization and Social Welfare: A Survey of Current Developments in North Carolina" in honor of the 7,600 North Carolina residents that were forcibly sterilized from 1929 to 1974.