

*Are you blood?*

Poems by  
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— Victoria Young

*For all the women who raised me  
and worked to give me better than they had  
and for Kitty who lived it all with me*

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## Family Bible

Wedge between  
the yellowed brittle  
table of contents  
and preface, jammed  
in the left margin,  
beneath the stains  
of Lancaster,  
above the smudge  
of Revlon lipstick,  
beneath a corner—  
torn by fingers  
trying to catch up  
with the inspired  
preacher—there  
in red ink smeared  
by penzoiled prints  
is her name, the holy  
mother, crowning  
our lineage in long  
cursive letters nailed  
into the page's tree.

## Heirloom

The chunky chain draped your thinning  
neck in gold, with interlocking links  
that left faint imprints in wrinkles,  
a maternal stole given as a remnant  
of family parted by sea in search  
of fields that gave more than hunger.

I can still see the way you held it  
with your fingertips, rubbing your thumb  
along its heart-shaped edge in cycles,  
grazing the crest fixed in knotted  
cords traced by your fingernail,  
a habit turned ritual in prayer.

And I remember crawling in your lap,  
tugging at the pendent, pinching  
your skin in the chain, its surface  
smoothed in my clumsy hands  
as you sat quiet, allowing me to find  
the words etched in its back.

Now I wear it around my neck,  
the old chain long lost in the bottom  
of a moving box thrown out by mistake,  
and my hand will find its way  
to the pendent at a lull in a phone call  
or the wait in a checkout line,

but my thumb toys with the back  
and reads the etching: ó móraí.



### Return to Granny's

We hiked up the hill,  
sinking our heels into mushy soil,  
hoisting ourselves forward  
as strained torsos led the way

Our knees fell when we hit  
the earth which swallowed us  
as we lay panting, wiping off  
our sweat with dirty forearms

There it was, halfway dipping  
into the ground, a perpetual limbo  
where the moss had taken over,  
its roof grayed wood

We circled the foundation  
noting the floor had given way  
and in its place a colony  
of clover had taken over

Stepping toward the open door,  
we heard the scratch  
of twigs and leaves  
so we turned our eyes to see

There she was with regal ears,  
eyes scolding, waiting,  
snorting chiding noises  
from her pointed snout

We turned away and gently  
made a slow descent feeling  
our way with rubber soles  
knowing she was still there

### Recipe card

A stain yellows  
the half-torn corner above  
an embossed rooster  
speckled with bits  
of a satin sheen worn  
by exchanged hands,  
and resting to the left  
in tangled cursive letters,  
that Uncle Joe has unfurled  
in print edged in a margin,  
is *Deviled Eggs*  
weathered in blue, faded ink  
that matches the scribbles  
where a cousin has changed  
1/2 cup of mayonnaise to 1/4  
and peppering the bottom  
are rusty finger prints,  
dusted in paprika,  
that double checked  
to ensure they did not  
forget the vinegar.

## Early Bird

I still remember waking up to hear  
a softened roar and crunching gravel skid  
beneath the tires of your Peterbilt.  
But I would never see the way you woke  
to a sweet nudge and smack from lard-greased lips.  
And I would never hear the sizzling sound  
of bacon and Mother lofting from the kitchen.  
The way your Caterpillar boots were set  
beside your breakfast chair, your blue Dickies  
coveralls clean and pressed neat for you  
every morning, all this I later learned.  
But I can still imagine how you shoved  
your knotted feet inside the leather boots  
and ate a bite of scrambled egg and toast.  
By then I would sit up in bed and watch  
between the curtains as you pulled away.  
But when you left our door and crossed the street  
to Lauren's apple orchard where you parked,  
you'd swing into the tractor's cab and start  
the grinding engine with a final wave.  
The sun would paint the sky with golden rays  
as your CB would squawk its way to life  
and crackle out *Good Morning, Early Bird.*

## Mountain gospel

When the final dish was dried  
and the last crumb cleared  
from the supper table,  
Nana nestled on the porch,  
her chair a rocking metronome  
keeping time on the window pane,  
her Marlboro lungs coughing  
on the down beat as she inhaled  
the sound of cricket strings.

I sprawled out on cracked  
floorboards singing under  
the weight of my back shifting  
over half-sunk nails.  
I watched her leathered chin  
bob at the swish of oak leaves  
sending word through dusk air  
that the sun dimmed.

Her hands lifted and swayed  
as if her fingers—in the cooling  
air—were sending gentle waves  
up to the thrush trilling in the barn.

Raindrops thrummed the tin roof,  
her fingers playing the hollow  
pounding like organ keys.  
My chest could feel the porch  
stomp like a choir loft  
as thunder rolled a melody.  
Sitting up from the clay crusted  
floor, I crawled to stretch my palm  
to catch staccato droplets  
and I could feel her laugh  
rising to the harmony.

### Cousin's play

We danced on orange carpet,  
pushing sweepers into spins

sucking crushed oyster crackers  
and face powder from the shag.

The corners of her bedspread  
were clutched between our fingers,

lifting up the see-through linen  
to catch a glimpse of sunlight

through translucent magnolias  
settling on the mattress.

as we jumped to cover it, our knees  
colliding with the bar of ivory soap

hidden beneath cotton sheets  
smelling of detergent and well water.

On the vanity a wooden box, carved  
labyrinth of vines, held the dusty

photos we laid out in rows, blanketing  
the bed as we named faces we knew

and faces we didn't, making up  
stories for the photos we were in

but were too small to remember  
before stacking them up

in order from black and white to color.  
And when Aunt Maud crept into the room

she found that casket still in the bed,  
my hand frozen, half-closing the lid.

### A cure for warts

Vials half full of rose water  
 she brewed over flame,  
 velvet juniper berries  
 scattered like bluegreen marbles,  
 and flaking lavender buds  
 clutter the top of a cherry oak chest  
 like the thick wood behind her house,  
 overgrown and crawling outward.

Everything was wrapped  
 in a fine sheet of dust that swirled  
 into the sticky storage-room air  
 as Granny rummaged through tins  
 and boxes looking for *those damned rocks*.

Braided gray curls whipped around  
 as she held up a rattling jar. *Gotcha*.  
 Knotted fingers gripped the rusty lid,  
 wrenching it unscrewed  
 as it released with a greasy squeak.

Then I felt a stinging cool  
 dragged over my palm  
 by a scraping dry touch,  
 as she scrubbed the tiny growth  
 sprouting in my toddler hand,  
 grinding it in, almost digging—  
 her fingers pestle, my hand mortar.

She stopped and blew a quick breath  
 over my raw skin then pressed  
 the white rock in my other hand  
 and said *bury it*.

When I drove by the other day,  
 the bones of her house  
 were shaded by a tree that took root  
 where I buried that rock  
 and a phantom scratching ached my palm,  
 thumb grazing over the stretch of flesh,  
 still smooth after fifteen years.

## Pocket change

We sat on cold blue tile, the backs of our thighs  
imprinted with blotchy hexagons up to our knees  
as he placed bulging Ziploc bags in eager palms.

Heads stooped in kindergarten concentration,  
we sorted pennies corroded green as river rocks  
tucked under blankets of moss, heads peeking through.

Nickels, dented like cracked lumps of burnt wood,  
were tossed into piles, scratching with every fling.  
Cool dimes' metal slipped from grasps and rolled,

as short hands searched beneath fridge and cabinet,  
shouting numbers as fingers grasped lost coins.  
Papa etched totals into notepads, but it was always a tie,

My sister and I never caught on to his game.  
Scooping it all away, boasting four dimes over two,  
I sent a silent prayer for a Maryland quarter next time.





### **Mothers lullaby**

Work the stove in the morning  
wake the baby from her sleep  
grab a pail for the cattle  
one for milk and one for feed

Pray, Mothers be careful  
shingle roofs lay in sheets  
steady hands for nailing  
iron hammers, ready beat

Take a hoe to the red clay  
make it yield another year  
pitch the hay to the horses  
sweep a stall until cleared

Pray Mothers be gentle  
at night keep rifle near  
listen out for howling  
pull a trigger when you hear

Split a log for the winter  
take a match off of the shelf  
wool blankets for the baby  
only cotton for yourself

### Mama's okra

The greasy popping, hissing, spitting  
shoots up to the lights above the pan  
sending sparks across the burner,  
blackened bits of cornmeal. Mama turns  
the dial down, slicing butter onto  
the vegetable bed, as sizzles rest and hum.

As the floured chunks sit fuming,  
their weighty aroma and sweet humidity  
waft in waves from the iron as the okra's  
flipped. Their steam breaks through the veil  
of fatty liquid soaking air with the essence  
of lard and yellow corn meal.

The dial's slowly lowered as the hum  
turns into whispers. Gilded bits are lifted  
gleaming like slimy emeralds dipped  
in sandy gold; then gentle scraping  
guides them down to her dinner platters  
to be covered so they're warm and melding.

## Hair

Ammonia suffocated my nose  
as I buried my face in the crook  
of her clavicle every time  
she picked me up from preschool  
after leaving the salon chair.

I sat and watched a teasing  
brush, each morning,  
puff her faux ringlets  
into brown webbed gauze  
she pinned in sections  
to the back of her head  
like a sewing pattern laid  
out and measured twice.

---

It grew dark in '98, after Kitty  
was born, like coffee grounds  
left in the filter after a full brew.  
A line of demarcation sprouted  
from her roots where honey golden  
met char at a saturated border.

She let me plait it as she breast fed,  
but her rocking pulled the scalp  
into peaks where my fingers  
gripped locks half-woven.

But she never told me *stop*.  
Her back kept steady rhythm  
as I corded strands into a maze  
of interlocking shades.

---

From the back of the bus  
My sister and I scanned  
a throng of heads waiting  
for running backpacks and empty  
lunch boxes to claim them,  
but the chocolate bun and gray crew  
couple never bobbed  
among the crowd.

Then I spotted blue eyes, scolding  
us through the glass behind  
a shroud of corn silk blonde.

Exiting the bus, little sister  
in hand, I pushed a path  
to Mama and threw a cautious  
arm around her leg.

We never asked why  
she was alone.

---

Spirals of sweat stained strands stuck to  
her forehead  
scrunched in pain that morphine  
couldn't numb away, and I pushed  
them back with lying whispers  
that *it wouldn't be much longer*.

With a washcloth Kitty  
swept Mama's brow in hummed  
hymns as drops trickled through  
her scalp like rivers cutting  
through a map. But the thrashing  
never stopped as a nurse  
failed to set two arms that looked  
more like tree roots, twisting  
over their own knots.

And as the nurse began again,  
I pushed a hand to my temples  
and pulled with her screams.  
But when they slurred into gasps  
and the nurse slipped away,  
I didn't stop.

---

She wears it at her shoulders now  
standing in waves as if she spent  
the night in plaits that she let unfurl

loose and wild but not unkept.

A paint brush is the only thing  
she uses to tie it back, a ritual  
she keeps like saying prayers  
before a child goes to sleep.

The gray at her temples is washed  
away by dye that hides the age  
her face never quite shows.

But there are nights when I  
sit behind Mama on the couch,  
comb in hand, doing the work  
her arms cannot and she rocks  
as the comb is pulled through.

## Mother

Her arms, that's how I knew her then, strong  
as sculpted stone fresh carved from washing boards  
and apple barrels that I used to sneak  
from as she hauled them from the fields, and there,  
the amber freckles shining from her dry  
and salty sweat that she would wipe clean off  
her brow with apron worn when kudzu'd start  
to spread, just like her veins, her ivy veins.  
They wound around her wrists and disappear  
into the sleeves of her seersucker dress  
she only wore for Veteran's Day  
or homecoming at Holy Coopers Gap.  
Those veins were full as river watered logs,  
and they would bulge then dip inside her skin,  
like oak roots laced in Carolina clay.  
Beyond the lattice ending at the base,  
were her leathered flower-petal palms,  
tinged red from mornings lifting iron pans  
from wood stoves missing all their oven mitts.  
And I remember how her roughened joints  
would scrape my doughy hands like river rocks  
that she had taught me how to skip and when  
she clasped my twiggy fingers, tightly clamped  
around a stone that she had placed in them.  
But she would watch it grace the water's glass  
then drop into the surface, as she laughed.

## Conquering the Storms

*Painting, by Thomas Kinkade*

Her first alimony check in hand  
she walked through the gallery

and planted her heels  
in front of the one.

The one printed on a church fan  
tucked in her purse,

the one on a thank you card  
she sent after her birthday,

the one she planned  
her dining room around.

It was there, almost in motion  
capped crests splayed on rocks

spraying droplets in sun soaked air  
like tiny prisms catching rays.

She could feel the foam  
seep between stone cracks,

fresh sponges just before  
the faucet turns on.

Sea froth scattered in salty clouds  
so soft she could touch them.

And in the background,  
nearly vanished at the horizon,

a boat tossed through waters  
like a leaf stolen in the wind,

jammed between two waves  
nowhere to go but down.

But an edge loomed above  
the boat where grass is bayed

around a pillar formed in rock  
cutting through the grayed sky

with golden light streaming

through in purple glows.

But it never reached the boat,  
still anchored in darkness,

blocked from view  
of morning's break.

So she turned from the painting  
and left the gallery,

tossing the church fan  
in the trash on the way out.



# Marc Jacobs, Daisy

Head resting on Mama's lap  
in church, crayons sprawled  
across the tweed pew,  
a scattered rainbow,

I clutched a bulletin  
in fist, still tense in sleep,  
scribbled with spotty imitations  
of her and me—  
crossed out, colored in—  
with bored hands.

Arms tug me close  
engulfing my throat  
in perfume so bitter,  
saliva recedes my mouth  
leaving air stained  
by her scent.

Nose, throat plugged  
with scathing floral,  
choking inhaled breath  
before reaching my lungs,

but I grab her blouse,  
pulling closer warm vibrations  
ringing from her chest  
*How sweet the sound*  
cascading my ears  
with rocking melodies.

I turn my face to fresher  
air and oxygen returns,  
as my fist releases  
to latch onto her middle,  
my head lulled to sleep  
by her pulse matching time.

### Mama's Crepe Myrtle

Its thickest branch stretches  
from the tree with smooth bark  
polished by back pockets  
and calloused heels as Mama, shifted  
one foot to the other, shaking a shower  
of blossoms and ants to the mossy ground,  
scribbling homework answers  
on lined paper shaded by stencils  
of twining branches and fanning leaves.

But when the distant hum of a Peterbilt  
drifted up to her canopied desk,  
she let paper and pen float free,  
watching like a hungry crow  
until the white cab rounded  
the bend at the end of the road,  
horn blaring just like he promised.  
She leapt from the branch  
and sprinted to the edge of the road.

The branch still stretches out like a chair,  
buffed by my own Levi's and soles  
and numb calluses crafted  
by its gritty trunk and its shadows  
still imprint books' pages  
in lacing patterns like ink-spilled art,  
and I can see the line of divots  
in the dirt at the other side of the road  
where tires used to sit till dawn each day.  
But I hear no welcome hum along the wind.  
only the squeak of a screen  
and dribbled bang of door hitting frame  
and her half-hurried voice shaking me  
from the tree, calling up in chimes  
*Come on. We're taking Nana to church.*

### Watching paint dry

Her hands now knotted and swollen  
were once smeared in oils, acrylics  
Mama slathered on cotton canvases  
Sunday afternoons before the humid months.

Sat at an easel shaded under patio roof,  
she brushed my sister's toddler feet  
onto white space, trailing a bubble wand.

Hair tied back in a rainbow splattered bun  
digging a brush in mixtures of blue-green,  
she'd spend Easter at Nana's never quite  
getting the edge of the apple orchard right.

After my high school graduation, her eyes  
brimmed pride, as I cried over a landscape  
of our backyard she framed for me.

Those same sparks flare in the blue of her iris  
as she passes by a booth at the farmers market  
selling Blue Ridge landscapes, in watercolors  
bright as the Ginger Golds in Nana's orchard.

I want to shove a palette in her hand shouting  
*mix* as muscle memory ignites her finger tips,  
but I see her hand fail to grasp an 8 by 10.

So I buy painting, place it in her reaching  
fingers, hoping secondhand is enough.



### Father and son in a corner booth

I watch as their grayed beards  
chew in rounded cycles.

They will never see how  
their heads shake a tad

at the end of first bite  
before their ritual begins again.

Sirloin marbled  
steaks still sizzle

as two drops of A1 plop  
on each bloody slab

at rare cores coated in thin char  
before taking knife in right,

fork in left to slice a cube  
crusted in grease dripping fat.

They stick the morsel  
in their mouths, blade first.

The weight of two pepper shakes  
over mashed potatoes

and the sound of teeth scraping  
over spoon backs are white noise

to swallowed mouthfuls of sweet tea  
grunted clear in the unison

of father and son declaring they  
could fix a better meal at home.

### The worm

When my mind strays to you,  
I think of Aunt Maud back  
from two weeks in Las Vegas,  
grabbing the greasy rim  
of an airport toilet as her stomach  
spews pink shrimp with cocktail sauce.  
In my exhausted sigh, I hear  
her Pepto-Bismol gasp as an ER  
first-year utters the word *tapeworm*,  
before she rips an Albenza packet  
in half and pops the pill dry.  
Not me. Never me.  
I would have taken it to Bob Evans  
and ordered a large hot fudge  
Sunday with extra whipped cream  
that somehow would keep  
disappearing when I looked away.  
We would go see a movie  
on the weekend—  
because I had a day off—  
and it would want popcorn with butter  
but then I would want Twizzlers,  
so we would compromise and choose  
a cinnamon pretzel. And as the lights  
dimmed I would cry and think  
of you because at least the worm  
would compromise on a damn pretzel.

### Dana Point, California

All of it: blue, like liquid sapphire  
put through a steamer, frothed.  
The light danced like shells  
slipping through waves,  
rolling in mounds,  
disappearing through depths  
in sprouting fractals.  
I reached through that cold water  
water, fist clenching, grasping,  
trying to pluck the rippling blue  
from the salty garden like a daffodil  
to bring home and press inside  
a book, preserving its dazzle  
for overcast days when my eyes  
are blinded by June Gloom haze  
in my mind so far from here.

## The game

Its sheen was polish slick  
like bone bleached for hours  
in a peroxide bath. Its fabric  
clung to skin in layers,  
stretching over my shoulders,  
soft as velvet hide trailing  
down the aisle in rippling lace  
moving like tendons taut on muscle.

Its binding pulled my shape  
revealing phony dips and curves,  
stretching out the torso,  
my body ready for field dressing.

My face was stretched in smiles,  
the work of skilled taxidermy,  
eyes glinting from unhappy tears  
and darkened a postmortem murk.

Music macerated by silence  
closed the procession's end  
as I stood frozen at the man  
with a grin plastered to his face,  
never reaching his eyes. His hand  
reached out scouting for mine,  
and as his fingers locked, his grip  
tightened as mine went limp.



## Mocking Corvus

The dinner scraps I pitch  
off the back porch land  
ten seconds before sharp  
barking flies overhead  
landing in a satin mosh pit.

Sheened wings beat and push  
a crowd of knocking beaks  
that stab a rival nare in pure  
delight as blackened beads for eyes  
dart to find the half-chewed  
green bean lost among shreds  
of chicken in slicing blades of grass.

A straggler nears the flock  
bobbing a pensive head  
into the mass of slicked backs  
that wall the famine feast,  
blocking entrance to beggars.

A passive thought enters  
my mind as the reject hops  
in circles beside the frenzy.  
*Give them the stale bread.*  
But I stay until the grass  
is picked glutton clean.

### Self preservation

The mirror in my bathroom  
hasn't been cleaned in a while,  
sprays of toothpaste and spit  
coat the bottom portion  
like blood spewed out between  
lips busted by drunk knuckles.

And long black lines of mascara  
streak down the left side  
like something crawled  
its way from behind the glass,  
scratching as it pulled through,  
fingers stretched out at me,  
promising restraint.

Or maybe my trembling hands  
tried to push through the mirror  
to escape those vise grips.  
Feeling for a weak spot  
to give way in one quick blow,  
my pensive fist struck,  
planting ripples of splintered glass  
that crumbled to an exit.

But before my arms reached  
through the shards, they stopped,  
muscles frozen in adrenaline,  
frightened that it actually broke.

### Stuck in cycles

She takes a brush and dips  
into a pan of midnight blue  
and pats three swipes  
of powder on eyelids  
pulled taut by fingers dried,  
cracking from Hibiclens.

Tweezers free strays  
one hair at a time  
beneath her brow bone,  
counting them on a napkin  
between plucks, lining  
them in measured rows.

A plum pencil turns seven  
times inside a sharpener  
before its tip grazes  
her lip in an *x* across her bow  
filling between the lines  
in cater-cornered quadrants.

She spritzes makeup remover  
on her fingertips before dipping  
into cream, dotting dabs  
of flushed cheeks onto her face  
in rounded triangles,  
always moving upward.

Her pupils peer, searching  
deep into the mirror, starting  
at the nose, moving clockwise,  
*eye, check, chin*, on both sides,  
pushing a sponge to contoured  
temples to match gradients.

But with a hasty blink  
of half-wet mascara, flicks  
speckle the left under eye,  
so she pulls a wipe up  
to her face and drags her work  
away to begin again.

**Breathing after leaving you**

Cresting waves,  
iced with salty foam,  
tumble  
as  
they  
break  
and sprawl,  
pushing up the shore:  
behind them, one  
at its labored peak  
stills one beat  
before folding  
at its seam  
falling back  
into the blue  
diaphragm, flattened,  
the tide gathering  
to begin its asphyxiating  
respiration anew.



### Fragments of sister's childhood

She reaches through the glass  
to touch the reflection facing her

in blank contemplation, eyes  
scanning deep into the wrinkles

of her forehead branching out  
like roads on a crinkled map

in the rain. As her hand sweeps  
a round, undimpled chin, she peels

a latent scar from its surface  
like a pink sticker off a new page.

Careful fingers pluck through  
crevices peppering a thinning lip,

like river rocks grazing over water  
before plunking in its surface.

As each blemish is removed  
she presses them inside a book

embossed in gold, writing:  
monkey bar fall, first bike ride.

## Her

There is a photo that enters  
my mind when asked  
*Do you have a sister?*  
I want to pluck it from my  
memory and say *Look*.

See her mouth stained  
with blue from icing  
and trace it to the corners  
of her smile, faded like storms,  
blue turned gray,

and follow her upper lip's curl,  
scrunched leaving peaks  
where Cupid's bow should be  
—halfway a smile, more a gnash  
flashing all of her teeth.

Notice her pupils dilated  
from sugar or annoyance  
but red with a flash that caught  
her underneath the bowling  
score with X's by her name,

and mind the shoulders  
raised in bluffed defiance,  
fist knotted in ball shaking  
at the camera, daring  
its shutters to close

but look there at her nose  
twitched to the right,  
its bridge lifted as if pinched  
by glasses left on too long,  
almost laughing.

*This*. I want to shout  
and point to the ornery child  
smeared in embarrassment  
and dyed frosting *This is her*.  
This is my sister.

**People say we look alike**

Chins measured like salt  
pinched between fingers,  
cheeks rounded halves  
of Concorde pears,

and noses jut into slops  
with bulbous cliffs  
*Clear for skiing*  
Mama would tease.

Eyes grayed blue,  
yours a shade brighter,  
sit in sockets maybe  
too close together.

But as I sit and stare  
at hollows carving  
your cheekbones  
into sunken slices

and see shadows  
sinking sockets  
behind the bridge  
of your nose.

I wonder if it's  
possible to still see  
you staring at me  
from the mirror.



### Your first Oxy bottle

Place it in a shadow box  
and nail that to the wall  
beside my bathroom mirror  
under the vanity light,

so every time I flip  
the switch on, light  
cascades in soft waves  
over the yellow plastic

labeled with the name  
of someone else  
then screw a plaque  
at its base engraved:  
*Help me.*

**Blind to every sign**

Pupils are blown wide  
like too full balloons  
as your lids droop lower,  
two dark crescent moons.

I continue to stare  
at the dishes in the sink  
As your gaze lands everywhere  
except on my clenched face

And I scream about the clothes  
you never put in the dryer  
as you raise tracked hands to stop  
my voice from getting higher

## Stitches

His fur is matted into flat curls  
still soft from dryer sheets.  
One plastic eye hangs loose  
on loops of thread pulled out  
by nervous thumbs in sleep.

Sutures circle each paw,  
faux scars invisible  
after countless scrapes  
across floor rugs  
after tumbles from bed.

The soft spot atop his head  
sinks in from where she  
tucked him under her chin  
on nights she heard  
creaking floors and hushed  
arguments, which was most nights.

And despite laughs thrown  
at her back, she brought  
him along when she switched  
high schools, because anything  
familiar helped.

But now limbs sprawl,  
at the bottom of her closet,  
hurriedly emptied  
on graduation night  
—after insincere threats  
were hurled through  
her slammed door—

but the zip of a suitcase  
and the hum of an engine  
were the only goodbyes  
she gave the bear.

### Scarred siblings

A white line nestles  
in the tail of your brow,  
a hollowed stretch of skin  
no bigger than my fingernail,  
shaded by brunette hairs  
that were scrunched  
in panted shrieks the day  
the wound opened.

The flesh was torn by basket  
swung while dancing  
unchaperoned in the yard.  
I can still feel its weight  
smack against your forehead  
the same way I still feel  
my hands blocking out screams  
reverberating from bay 4  
into a waiting room,  
my mind playing the scene over  
like flipping a cassette tape  
to pause and pluck  
the basket from the air  
or move my face over yours.

My eyes lower at every  
laugh that stretches  
out your forehead,  
and I itch to lick my thumb  
and wipe the memory away  
like sprayed clorox  
cleaning a hospital floor.

If I spoke this aloud,  
you would say  
*it was childhood,*  
and it was.

**V**

## Blood

The way our necks  
will dip and tilt  
forward at a question  
our hands turning  
somersaults in the air  
landing unnecessary  
exclamation points

the way our pupils  
will explode like pin  
popped balloons  
when our words  
aren't understood  
before our heads  
begin to shake

the way our lips  
stretch into smiles  
as hollow as their words  
*are you blood?*  
and we slip a pause  
then sigh an answer  
*can't you see?*

### Lola's peanut butter sandwiches

Jellies, jams, preserves never touched my peanut slather with their gloppy juices. They never soaked my Sunbeam into a soggy sponge with a bruising stain breaking through the crust. No, it was honey. Honey turned that dry choke-hazard sandwich into a slap-a-snack-together-so-we-can-leave-the-house kind of picnic. That tangy sweetness melted with the nutty spread into a creamy dream only Lola could make. She'd spread that thick paste—the crunchy kind—and poured viscous amber before topping it off with one more slice. The snacks, wrapped in cling film, were placed on ice packs in a beach cooler thrown in her car and driven to the waterfront where we unfurled our lunches, before climbing the wooden playground. Kitty and I perched on the monkey bars, bitten sandwiches in hand, as we chewed wads that stuck to the roofs in our mouths, as Lola threw our trash away.

### Reading Amelia Bedelia

Lola cuts dates from March  
 into yellow sponge cake,  
 letting them float in  
 first  
     second  
         third  
 folding them in with a spatula  
 like fresh washed sheets.

From the Frigidaire, she pulls  
 a chicken dressed in a black  
 pepper suit and egg washed vest  
 that she wrapped in a coat  
 of White Lily Flour  
 before dipping it in the fryer,  
 gilding the glossy edges.

With the chicken platted in full dress,  
 she takes a can and dusts the house  
 in talcum powder  
 sprinkling a pinch between my bed sheets,  
 showering Papaw's fishing boots,  
 speckling the guest room closet  
 in July snowflakes.

As she wipes the work off of her hands  
 with a blotch-stained apron,  
 she finds me swinging a squeaky tune  
 on the porch hammock.  
 As she nestles in beside me,  
 I read her a book  
 as she drifts off to sleep.



## Grays Hill Baptist Church

Amens chase the cries  
 of infant wails escaping  
 the arms of pastor's wife  
 sat next to us, balancing  
 a bible and a bottle. Pensive  
 maternity shakes her pale  
 fingers that graze the tan face  
 expecting her whispered coos  
 like ears braced for a *hallelujah*  
 to ring out the front pew  
 as choir sings Victory in Jesus.

Turning to look at Lola's hands  
 raised keeping time beside me,  
 I feel ghosts of butterscotches  
 fished from Sunday purses  
 pressed into my palm, memories  
 of slight tugs retying my bow,  
 and visions of dollar bills gifted  
 to throw in offering plates.  
 But deacons and wives see  
 browned knuckles clasping white  
 at *She's your grandbaby?*

Pastor reads from the pulpit  
*You will be my sons and daughters.*  
 pulling *glory* from congregation  
 like bow grazing violin to hum  
 but two women sit mute.

### Written in the sand

We walked beside the rolling water,  
the salted air and wind  
drying our tangled hair as we left  
tiny mounds of kicked sand

Frothing waves cast out  
jellyfish, squishy and clear  
*Your Papaw got zapped*  
*by one of those last year*

I nodded and asked  
if it had left a mark,  
knowing that the story  
ended in a visit to the ER

Her mouth repeated  
*Papaw really learned that time*  
As we lingered where waves stopped,  
at pools left by the tide

She named each stranded creature  
*Look at that conch move*  
my heart clenched at long purple  
spikes glinting beneath the pool

Linking arms, to keep her feet  
from slipping into the water,  
I guided her, Skin So Soft elbow  
like a stiff and rusty rudder

She lifted her free hand and spread  
the fingers, pressing them down  
one by one as if the air was something  
to be played, while I pulled her on

Back to our grainy towels  
I scooted hers closer  
to the umbrella and saw  
words the waves had taken over

When they retreated,  
*Lola and* were still left shallow  
on the sand before another  
washed up, taking the *l* and *o*

*Why do people even do that*  
I heard beside me *It never stays*  
But she kept smiling at the waves  
clearing her words away

**Catching fiddler crabs before dawn**

Wet boots sink  
in cement marsh  
tripping hands  
that grasp night  
missing the rustle  
of exoskeletons  
stampeding claws

A lone flashlight  
forcing pupils to dilate  
as the beam corrals  
the miniature herd  
into the gallon  
bucket, sloshing  
like bean-filled maracas

Sweat falling stings  
a clamped thumb  
caught cold  
in a tourniquet  
as the hand shakes,  
flinging the pain  
into murky water

## Dementia

Lola stares at the menu: wrinkles  
 scrunch her dazed brow,  
 mouth open like blinds  
 pulled up, letting in the sun

as the waiter's question  
 reverberates through her ears:  
*Anong gusto mo po?*

Answer:  
                   water?  
                               likido?

Mouth testing  
 unspoken syllables,  
 a word slips through  
 her mind like a whisper  
 exiting a silent room,

flicking off the tongue,  
 a line cast out to sea  
 with no bait:

*Tubig.*