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EXTENSIONS OF THE SKULL
A Collection of Poetry

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ABSTRACT

These poems deal in the gender dichotomy, especially pervasive in rural America. I attempt to subvert expectations of masculinity and femininity, all while utilizing my familial narrative as a vehicle for metaphor. To give the aforementioned subversion structure, this collection implements many formal techniques and poetic forms, such as regularized stanza lengths, blank verse, haikus, sonnets, a crown of sonnets, and a pantoum. Within these poetic constructs, the poems' contents try to jar readers into the unknown, though always firmly rooted in familiar forms.

Patriarchal violence also finds consideration in this collection. My poems examine power, and how said power can be reclaimed. While composing this collection, I realized the reclamation came about through the writing process. If nothing else, these poems aim to empower my readers, whose power (in some regard or another) has been striped from them.

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DEDICATION

For my mother, who sings language.

Dome

I worked to pitch the dome within the woman—
the one resembling the Shah Mosque, that beautiful blue
masterpiece of Persian architecture (the same as my skin).

I, with the rope
of life tight
around my neck,

can harvest no authority on my birth,
can't talk about the cavernous warmth, that oxymoron
of the womb. Can't talk about how when I breeched

the cold hit my skin like a falling icicle
from low hanging gutters. Can't talk about how
large the doctor's hands felt against my back.

I remember nothing of that day, not even the snow
storm that nearly killed my mother's family
as they drove to meet me, crawling in a little sports car.

My pierced lung
whistled like a hole in the wall.
I can't recall the sound.

Despite, I live;
they named me something
arbitrary and I now know

when I look upon books of architecture
that my mother will one day fall away
like a structure harried

by rain and snow, fall
away like Eurydice. Somehow,
I'll blame myself,

think of myself as the girl-child
Orpheus—silly singer, poet—

who can't close her mouth,
can't not look back
to the womb that bore her—
perfect, high-arched ceilings.

When Girls have Children

I hear maracas under the veil
of last night's drinking, a drum

circle on Main Street that makes
me think of your pills that rattled

to every beat last night & all nights
before. Like a baby's rattle, they rattle

fast—snake's tail—cocaine. You,
the amphetamine queen, buzz,

let your wings hum while nursing
your daughter. She, too, hums,

lets her lips wrap around the nipple
of speed & heat & speed. Drinks

the nectar of a daffodil—milk—
& I think of you in a 20s buffet flat.

How gracefully you would have bounced
your baby on your hip & dipped & filled

your jar with the bathtub's moonshine—
a queen's sweet nectar to mine.

Divine

Kernels of corn rain from our hands
and litter the clearing in front
of the house. We bait wild turkey
and deer this way. Once my father
fired a single bullet into a herd,
and in the dusty instant
that follows every gunshot,
two doe fell—the sounds of death
carrying through the woods.
Ricochet rang off my father's tongue.

My mother held the doe's jaw
open and beckoned me to look
at her old, burnt-umber teeth.
And when the knife slit their stomachs
—emptied them onto
mottled grass—the doe with aged
teeth had less corn spill.
One, the mother, starved
for the other, her daughter.
My mother's hand on mine, she said,
*the angle of the shot through
that fawn was divine; no mother
wants to live without her child.*

Nature's Laws

On the Fourth of July my father twisted
fuses for the show. Wanting his attention,
I tugged his tee shirt until he turned,
sat me in the swing-set, and said *this time*
I'll push you all the way around.

I gulped and grasped the chain link holds.
Up and up—I remember everyone
watching, holding hotdogs and cans of Bud—
my father narrated, behind and below,
“This time! This push!” and at the peak

—with physics unknown to me—
I let the chains go, and flew
over the group of gawking adults.
My face plunged into the newly
spread, pungent peat. I rose bloodied.

I see my father's disinterested forearms
full of the power that launched me—
like a freedom firework after nightfall
that turns the night sky brighter than the sun—
the power to defy gravity with his daughter.

The Visitor

When you knocked on my window
I popped the tacks that held

my curtain in place, but I hardly saw
your face that night. You knocked

too loudly and Father came in firing.
You made it past the driveway,

then stumbled. I woke to the smell of flesh
and your charred corpse smoldering

in 'the burn pit' of evidence: burnt, sticky
pelts of fowl, fox and coyote. Nauseated,

I slept until dinner, where Father
explained the graininess of bear's meat
as muscles soaked in hibernation.

At the show

the magician placed his assistant on a bed
of nails, and I thought of my father, handing me a stack
of *No Trespassing* signs and a stapler. I tacked

fluorescent yellows to five hundred trees
while he hid plywood riddled with rusty nails
beneath the early patchwork of fall leaves.

Men and women on horseback left death
threats knifed into the wood they pulled

from their horse's bloody hooves.
Neighbors told me those horses froze
slowly with tetanus, each muscle seized.

When quad riders ignored the signs,
the thick black rubber around their wheels
shredded on impact. Kids who owed

their fathers hundreds for new tires dropped
sparking fuses of cherry bombs in our mailbox.

With sharpness he protected our family, though
we and our trespassers all slept on a bed of nails.

Garden

I tended jalapeño plants to impress
my neighbor. When they grew big enough,
I brought them down the hill in a sand bucket,
told him to *cook and we'd sweat bullets*.

Weeding until my ten-year-old hands blistered
and broke into pink patches, I let my skin turn
brown as dirt. The oil of the peppers
lit my raw hands on fire; they burned bright
like the sun spit into my palms. Sometimes,

I lay on my belly between rows, dug
my fingers deep and felt for the tendrils
of roots, pinching around for the thickest,
the thirstiest of all of them. Radicle:
the name of the first root.

I think of this now, resting under summer
bundles of hydrangeas, how the radicle
root is radical. When I imagine the woman
I covet, I think of that first root, the one
that hydrates, reproduces, anchors.

The Writing Spider's Ars Poetica

My BB gun targeted the butts
of corn spiders. I would shoot
them from their webs, let the juice
from their ruined bodies glisten

off their silk in sun. Armed
and arachnophobic, I would fire,
until the yellow body
burst—the lead BB passing

through—a small star
forced supernova. Its web
would hang, reflect sun
and resemble Edwardian script.

Just yesterday, walking into webs,
a bright bulb landed on my shoulder—
my face messed with silk
calligraphy and tangled words.

Haikus to Study Color in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania

i.

The silos here peel
white paint, just leaning towers
of feed corn and grain.

They sink into farm
earth, running toward the end
of their country lives.

ii.

Between garden gnomes
a target, a trophy, shines
in the yard's moonlight.

A piebald deer stands
still and I wonder: Stone? Flesh?
In what sculptor's hands?

iii.

Hardware stores shingled
white sell carpenters' pencils
with lead, flat and smart.

The straight chalk lines snap
on plywood, marking the cuts
for workers to make.

iv.

The white birch trees feel
as I do, wanting only
to shed their clothing.

Today they stand stripped,
half naked; a peach color
peeks behind the white.

Mom on Handling Rodents

You have to stand with your feet wide
and shoulders squared, take aim
with the BB gun, pump, pump, pump,

and shoot the bat from the high
ceilinged rafters. Don't miss or it might
ricochet right back into your face.

You have to corner the mouse, make it
cower. Put all the weight in your heel
and crush its thin skull between your boot

and the wood floor. You have to use the picker
upper to shovel its body out of the house.
You have to wipe your feet on the doormat

outside. Wash any guts off the picker upper
in the bathtub. Set sticky traps in the eaves
so the chipmunks don't eat the baby

clothes you want to make into quilts. Line
all plastic storage containers with aluminum
tape. They won't chew through this.

Never kill the black snakes that eat rodents.
Leave them in the house if they don't bother you—
unless you have a small child or a Chihuahua

or something, then, get rid of the snakes.
(Their shed skins make a flaky mess on the carpet.)
Don't drop any food on the floor. Don't eat

where you sleep. Make sure no stuffed animals
drop beneath your bed. Rodents will tear Teddy
right up. Don't put it past a raccoon to go

for your eyes, especially when its babies live
in your old wedding dress. Don't tangle

with skunks. Ever. Tomato juice won't work.

Only pull out porcupine quills with needle nose pliers. Grab them as close to the skin as you can get. Save the quills. Remember

why you shouldn't tangle with a porcupine when you look at him. See if you can rig up a pen with one of the quills. Write about it.

Don't let the noise the mice make get to you. The traps crack out loud, but they will quiet down after their necks snap. Peanut butter

works best—the crunchy kind. Better than cheese even. Even if you're desperate stay away from the poisons. They kill

everything, your dog and cat included. Wash your dishes when you're done with them. Don't leave anything out; you'll have mouse

shit on the counter in no time. Don't shoot any foxes, or bobcats, even if you want to taxidermy a pelt or two. Go for the coyote

instead. And no matter what you do, never kill a flying squirrel. Kill the regular squirrels but leave the ones that fly. Bad luck to kill a flyer.

We've been paying for that one ever since.

Ghost Story

Margaret, with the longest blonde hair in Wyoming county, took over 30 stabs with a buck knife—her body swallowing the blade again and again. Her jealous man wrapped her in a burlap sack, stuffed her under the little bridge where I sip my first beer and swing my feet.

The boy who tells the story and cracked my beer wants my fear to curl me into his shoulder—his skinny arm to protect me from her cold ectoplasm. I don't believe this story—that she will appear next to me, shaking her head before throwing it in her hands.

The only high school class that finds funding to amusement parks is physics—centripetal or centrifugal, I'll never remember. But I'll remember standing in line for the biggest coaster, I'll remember my only conversation with Jeffery Wilbur, the one where he told me his great uncle pulled Margaret's moldered body from under that bridge, how her once young hair had grayed in darkness.

I am ten when my mother stops the car on the bridge, rolls down the window and asks *what the fuck is going on here?* The boy looks 17 or 18, and the girl cowering at his feet looks even younger because she's on the ground—her head

in her hands, her hands on her knees.
Now, when I think of this moment,
she looks as if in prayer to Mecca—
blonde hair run ragged down her back.

The boy says *nothing, nothing*
going on here. She looks to the car's
back seat, where, despite tinted
windows, she finds my eyes—
hers, just deep black hollows.

I don't believe in ghosts
that trail their spirits in wisps
of white light, I say. I drink my beer
and shake off the boy's arm.
I fear knives the way some people
fear ghosts. And I've seen a ghost
on this bridge, I say, but she
was solid like you and me.

Precision

—After Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Sister, when our mother screamed
for help, you left the house
and threw pebbles into
the open mouths of daffodils.

And when your practiced
precision let the rocks fly,
did you compare your crushed
flower heads to our mother

battered on the floor? I think
of you turning away
when he tacked her to the wall
like a painting, his thick hand

aligning her throat plumb
and flush with the wood grain.
I saw it all, Sister. And if you
had stayed *loyal to your sex*,

you would have seen:
*men's hands aren't always
as clean as they might be.*

I Dream that Sister Finds the Art of Carpet

Standing with you in the Victoria
and Albert Museum, we stare
at the Ardabil carpet—a series of knots
tied 500 years ago. The label tells us
the carpet carries 26 million knots
of silk, and laced by the carpet's
weaver, these lines of a ghazal:

*Except for thy threshold,
there is no refuge for me in all the world.*

*Except for this door
there is no resting-place for my head.*

Behind the ropes each inch ripples—
synchronized loosely—like ants
pouring from their hill. We stare
at the silk worms—real worms—
tied, bundled in Senneh knots.
The carpet writhes, alive, and you, Sister,
sneak a hand past the stanchions,

pluck a worm, like someone might pull
a loose thread. It wriggles in your palm
and in the haze of this dream,
you smile, tell me you'll always
be home when you're with me.
Feeling the art of it, you say, *the 26
million knots bind us.*

The Queen and A Sister Go Hunting

I. A Dead Stag in Pen and Ink October 1852

A hunting trip keeps us deep in the forest
 when we hear a trot, then complete silence,
 then three more trots. We knew Albert had got
 the stag at bay & we began running.
 Already the stag lay in the road. What a piece
 of luck! Such a magnificent animal! I sat down
 at once to scribble a little sketch. Ink flew
 from my nib. When the stag exhaled, its rib cage
 heaved and its throat whispered coarse. The beast—
 like a Clydesdale of our cavalry—drove such a hole
 into the ground that I wondered if the moon
 had been dimpled by a million falling stags.
 And its *very pretty head*, twisted slightly,
 had leaves between its antlers, a laurel crown.

II. Arts and Crafts October 2002

Leaves between its spires, a laurel crown
 emerges built from yellow construction paper
 and staples. Your wedge your tongue
 between your teeth in concentration.
 I think of you this way, hunting in drawers
 full of junk for permanent markers,
 sifting through pocket-sized flashlights
 and oxidized wheat pennies. You always
 find what you're looking for, Sister. Finally,
 with marker in hand, you draw Corinthian
 designs on the golden crown, ornate
 like the veins on the underbelly of leaves
 or jewels set in sterling—the ink curls, spins,
 bleeds slowly along the paper's veins.

III. A Visit to Chatham Military Hospital
March 1855

Bleeding slowly along the sheet's wrinkles
there were about 30 wounded soldiers:
one much disfigured by his eye being pulled
down, the other was shot through his face,
another told us he had received sabre
cuts & his horse was killed, the other,
who had been shot right through the jaw,
had not the slightest mark. Had his mouth
not been open he might have lost his tongue.
 These cavalry men speak roughly,
 their mouths full of lead bullets and slugs.
 They tell their stories & watch me sketch them,
 beards so thick I lose their faces. "My soldiers,"
 I say, "Spring is coming, won't you be too warm?"

IV. Witchcraft
March 2005

I say, Spring is coming, you'll be too warm
 dressed like that, but you never listen.
 Your cape, inches too long, collects dust
 and earth as you glide around. The carpets
 look filthy; you want to dress like a witch
 this year. For your birthday, I buy a black
 caldron and watch you dump duck feathers,
 sand and apple juice into the pewter. You stir
 the potion with a paint brush. And when
 you lay the brush down, a beach spills out:
 sand, golden sun and seagulls. Nine years
 old and you brew elements like Thor
 or Thoth. The caldron begins to boil
 over the edges; the tide undulates for you.

V. Light Show for the First Born Son
November 1842

Over the water—the tide undulating—
we look upon *the "Thunderer," full of men,*
rowing, firing guns, the boats sailing backwards
& forwards, & the men dancing about on the decks.
Some other boats were even illuminated
& burned blue lights, all had the prettiest effect.
The crew all cheered to preserve our poor dear
little Boy, still looking wretchedly ill. The rockets
& salutes—gifts to our boy, too—shattered
off in the sky and rained down bits of ember.
Those embers, like golden wedges of alter
bread, look like they could give a small boy
life. They wafted to the ground, each landing
in the garden, where I collected them.

VI. Caretakers
November 2006

I collected them from the browning garden,
two cottontail, the only two left after
the lawn mower threw the late litter
into the air like confetti. I cared for one and you
the other. While I spent every moment warming
and feeding, keeping it alive, you carried on,
distracted, too often. Sometimes, I even caught
myself wishing the creature in your charge would die.
Instead, it lived and mine hiccupped for hours,
his limbs stiff and cold like pipe cleaners. Since,
I've learned these rabbits feed only once
a day; anything more and their stomachs stretch
to a silent explosion. Since, I've hunted to learn
your power. The search keeps me deep in the forest.

Ohaguro and Popsicles

The Ginkgo leaves of summer are the fans
of geishas, fans we wave while eating
Otter Pops on the back porch—our teeth
and tongues turning the deep blue of food
coloring and sugar. I think of the Japanese
who blackened their teeth with the Iron
Drink until the Meiji period—pitch
black, beautiful. Now, on this deck—wishing
for an above ground pool, or any kind
of pool—your teeth turn pitch blue;
our mouths become oceans—we, water
melted by summer. Soon the Ginkgo leaves
will float on our surfaces—kites waving
on our wet bodies, reflecting the sky.

Finch

Fetch me some inspiration; this hill
is trying. My feet have found all
the Pennsylvania potholes.

I ran toward you, or away from you
depending on the way you flew.
I wanted the yellow of you

to light my face as you passed
through. Finch, forget everything
you've ever heard about women.

Forget the ways in which we weep,
and want, forget the way we make love.
No, remember that! It looks as you do

careening, catapulting yourself
into the dried, grey hairs of a late
dandelion—*florets*, Finch, the hairs

are called florets. Find me a better name
for the disarray of sex during the day.
(*Dandelion*—the sweat might roar). Finch,

I've never seen a less coordinated soar.
See, I run like you flap. If I fall, forget
the way I weep; the way I weep

after lovemaking; we'll never speak
of this again. No feathers have ever touched
my skin that haven't freely fallen for me.

But Finch, your feathers I know to run
soft, the patchwork of the quilt I love
under—so similar, so of a woman.

Opus 132

In the thick mist of violins
I think of your body thrashing
when the bows slice string to vibrato.
Birds fly on the backs of sound

and I think again of your body thrashing.
Beethoven in a small room, a balcony above
a quartet sounding quick like birds.
Should I think these things sunk deep

in a crowded room? A balcony above Beethoven—
deaf man's music ringing sharp like glass.
Should I think these things sunk deep
in a crowd? Violin strings wrapping us to sex.

The deaf man's music rings like glass, sharp—
your body's thrashes when my mouth sung vibrato.
In this crowd, I imagine the sex of music
under this mist of violins.

Snap

With sharp teeth, snap the skin of breasts
or the skin of a Macintosh apple.
It's September, let's snap back and fall into

last fall; remember suckling straws
of honey suckle, a nickel a pop
at Saturday's farmers market.

Malinda, Maiden's Blush, Macintosh, Mine.
Your name, my name, both lost to us
in a pile of maroon Maple leaves.

Marooned, on this island of light breezes
and fallen leaves, we snap sex on each
other's skin, hard—like rubber bands,

or switches, or spurs. September, forever,
will belong to us and this cooler weather.
Whether the cold shakes us, or the wind

makes us wait as crumpled drafts cross
the street, these fallen leaves speak out
to me and you: *Whoever you are, now*

*I place my hand upon you, that you
be my poem; I whisper with my lips close
to your ear, I have loved many women*

and men, but I love none better than you. Now,
this fall, leave me to snap my fingers and count
syllables, signs and syllabics, sex and sweetness.

Leave me to snap our silk skin with words, so red
with September. Leave me to snap a Macintosh's
skin and think of my teeth sunk in your breasts.

Maritime Telescope

This antique shop smells of sea
salt and algae, so we exercise

our lungs and search for a maritime
telescope to ignite the whole world, make
ships on Atlantic horizons swell large

like rising tides. In our motel you carry
the ice bucket back; the cubes surround

Moscato. I watch you through
the peep hole. The closer you come
the larger you get, and soon the ocean
of your eye eclipses the porthole.

When you step inside a sextant
shines in your hand, and I know you
will speak to the stars in the dark—
our bodies tangled to constellation.

Drunk Muse on the Walk Home

To answer the darkness I pluck you
a thick bundle from a blue
hydrangea—on its underbelly
the pale periwinkle stems weave
like tangled veins, veins
that make you think briefly about blood
red things. You open
the next mailbox and drop it in—
no return address printed
on the petals. We head along this way,
talk about how the hydrangea's
stems look like the narrow legs
of the little blue heron—petals
and feathers both endangered
by this plucking. How we learn
the equation: flowers,
mailboxes, and metaphor
sum to new muses.

Asymmetry

The big game has locked
himself around two saplings.

There he rubbed the forest's
velvet off his antlers.
And now the curved trees

grip his long tines. He shakes
his body, stamps his hooves:

leaves float one by one
to the ground. I wonder

about his will, wonder if the trees
or his antlers will give way

first. And soon, I hear before
I see one antler crack, broken
at the base and falling

to the forest floor. So there
he stands, asymmetrical

and beautiful; he doesn't buck,
doesn't grunt, doesn't shake his half
a rack like a fist of knives.

He just walks away, half his crown
left to trees that held him tightly.

Sales Experience

If I think to how many times I've sold
you the benefits of my company, I feel
sorry that you didn't bring experience
of used car shopping to our love
affair. I must have carefully sold
all 200,000 miles as character,
not wear. I must have said *look
at the speedometer. We can hit
120 and cruise across country.
We can crawl through the dust
bowl if you want, but let's
crack a window because the air
conditioner busted a few years ago.*
When I think to all the times we broke
down and I convinced you to sink
money into mechanic after mechanic,
I feel sorry we never made it
across country—air conditioner
busted or not—speedometer
reading fast or slow—sunroof
opened up to constellations.
And had we made it, Libra
could have taught us something
of balance and brokerage; the water
bearer might have cooled us—quenched
us in the desert, sending monsoon season
to pelt the outstretched arms
of saguaros, of our tongues.

In the Drink

Maybe the white plastic poker
chip makes me feel richer
than my pockets. Maybe the candles
of this AA meeting will tip
and lick my upper lip like you will
soon. I desire a drink when I think
of you. Maybe we will take a long cruise
and I will get sea sick. You, maybe,
will carry me home like you did when
bar stools rocked like waves and the portholes
of my eyes gave in to watery glaze.
Maybe when you say *wait*
for me you really mean it;
you're just docking around the corner.
Maybe when you say *never*, I'll give
you a long lesson on the meaning
of absolutes. Maybe if you ask
to play a game I'll throw that white
chip on the table, it glinting
like a moon lit by little wicks.
I'm always waiting for you
to ante up I'll say. Such desire
to win you, beat you, defeat you.
Such desire to watch you tip
and lick me like these candles.

An Obituary

-For Lisa

To write this poem, I hold the pen like a cleaning rag—writing, lightly buffing away her finger prints. I've cleaned like this for weeks: all of her clothes, each room, dishes and the rings left raised on tables.

None of these messes scar, all wipe away.

Now, months have passed. I have reached the stained walls, the touched-smooth doorknobs, light switches and remote controls. I wonder about her fingers, how long their oil will linger.

Just down the road the Distillery has crumbled,

and construction workers gather bricks at the same rate I dust and buff—the hesitation to erase memories, universal. But when I finally finish—every corner of her life wiped down—I'll fold the rag and keep it my dresser drawer,

a million memories wrapped like gifts in the fabric.

Young Grandfather,

the carpet of your living room
grew mottled with rum and coke
stains. In this room you swore
you invented inline skates.

In this home the ties you never wore
caught the sun when you threw
open the closet door—silk shining
like light on aluminum foil.

Once you wheeled in a cash
register, on a hand truck, said
it was a hundred years old,
a real bargain because it got stuck

*ringing out a quarter, God knows
how long ago.* Still unopened years
after your death, the register
stands like you, ornate, decorated

with carved copper foliage and a bunch
of numbered buttons, stuck at 25

and locked, all the notes saying
what you're worth still inside.

Electric Bets

Six or seven kids would bet
who'd take the fence's lit wire
in firm fists. A single volt would
travel along the arm and make us shout.
During this test of strength,
I noticed, in the farm plot before
me, a calf embossed in dirt,
its mother having rolled it
to the ground—drowned it,
suffocated it between her mass
and the mud. I studied the dead
calf with such intensity that I let
the volts waltz through my body—
a small parade of electric dancers.
The other kids thought I was just showing off.
I even raised my other hand
and like an eager sightseer on the rail,
threw it down on the wire, a full
circuit that gave the other kids a shock
and threw me off the fence—
heart loud in my ears. Lying on my back,
I wanted to open that calf, wrap
the wire around its heart
and watch it kick start,
jump up and jolt off.

Bat, Axe, Oak

My father taught me how to swing
an axe, compared & contrasted it
to the way he'd taught me to swing
a baseball bat. *With an axe*
your hands will start apart, then slide
together. Aim along the sides
of the log, not for the center.
Chip away at it; wear your batting
gloves. Head held by a neck brace,
he sat and gave advice he'd never
heard, pitching logs to a lefty
until nightfall. Told me ten times
to keep my feet apart—shoulders
squared—or I'd cut off my toes.

Whitetail

I shot my first buck through the heart
with a 30/30 open sights—40 yards
through brush: eight points,
21-inch spread and six inch tines.

That day, hours before dawn, Tom, my neighbor,
knocked on my window and taught me
to walk heel-to-toe. We sat a long time in that blind
before I shot and he shot after me—to make sure.

As we dragged it through the woods its antlers
snagged on blackberry bushes, lolling
tongue collected leaves and dirt. My father met us
with his gut hook knife to undress the buck's hide

as fast as you would a lover's. He told me to pull
out the bladder, wedge my fingers under
and carefully lift, like a water balloon about to burst.
He said if it popped I would eat piss for months.

He pried the ribcage open to find
the heart—dark blood and thin white
tissue caked to his elbows. He found
the bullet, my bullet, small, shaped

like a mushroom cap—the deer's wet hair
wrapped in the warped metal. Tom had told
him he didn't think I hit it. He said I blinked
all wrong and jerked before I pulled the trigger.

Russia in the Paper: An Evolution

The stray dogs of Moscow have mastered the subway. They travel, suburbs to city—commuters, who know the city center drops the most food. They nap while the tubes carry them, never taking more than two seats, their matted bodies balled to conserve space. If they miss their stop, they ride in warmth until they sniff out their destination—a nose toward city life.

On another page I read about Russian pedestrian deaths. They leap in front of cars, trucks, vans, looking to maim themselves for money. Imagine the dark coats on snowy nights, rushing out from thick flakes. Imagine finding their thick bodies with the hard, cold metal of your hood—both car and human crushed. Remember how you felt when your tires cut the flesh of the dog—blood and sticky fur, red-walling your tires for miles.

Echo-free

They pad the walls of the anechoic chamber
three feet deep. Forty-five minutes:
the record stay the scientists have witnessed.
Here, NASA prepares astronauts,
readies them for space. I crave this room,
to listen to my blood travel, my limbs alight,
to let my thoughts enunciate. In the chamber,
I would float above myself, look at the top
of my head and wonder, if with focus,
I could see my past shoot up and out,
play memories on the soft walls like a home
theater might—dust lit in projector's light.
My father would dance with my mother
to *Kiss From a Rose*. He would carve
sunsets into redwood for my sister.
Me, he taught to pin the water
snake's head deep in wet dirt.

Medusa

My mother would braid my hair every day,
 wet and dark from the shower.
 She'd pull it tight to my head—the skin
 stretching taut over my face. I liked it
 this way—resembling a boy,
 my eyebrows Sicilian, unruly.

The first woman I ever loved touched
 my hair more gently, ran through it with fingertips
 like flower heads. Touching her own hair,
 she said, *this is when I know my self.*
When you touch my hair, I'm giving you

everything. I cut my hair short, a boy's cut.
 When new women tug and pull, my spine sways
 like willow branches I used to ride.
 I give my lovers everything, but I want
 to throw my head in my hands, yank clumps,
 smooth cowlicks, scratch raised scars; I want to touch

myself, let my fingers burrow in, make homes
 in the mess of me, let them pinch sadness,
 trim split ends, pull grey hairs, let strands fall
 to the shower floor and read what they write,
 writhing snakes, bumping, biting my toes.

My Father's Addiction Comes to Me in a Dream

I beach on a dirty pond's
shore; reeds and cattails tangle me.

The spaces between my spread fingers
make perfect scalene triangles and invite

water snakes. Three rhinestoned bodies
emerge in the webbing of my hand,

and they sink teeth
into the soft tissue.

This fire beneath skin tattoos me
from the inside out, purple

and green flames lick through the maps
of my veins. Wind blows

and water laps against my body.
My fingers—now the heads

of snakes—fight among themselves
before my mother brings the chiseled

shovel down hard—again and again, fingers
of venom writhe deep into black silt.

What We Leave

My father built steep stairs
all across the state, but he loved
his spiral staircases the most,
thought they should sport only hard
woods: mahoganies, red oaks,
black alders, elms, mesquites,
and shell-bark hickories.
When we left, our home
abandoned, our spiral stairs spun
in place and we scattered like buck shot
across the country. Mom left her great
aunt's quilts. I left a thousand
books. My sister left a mess
and my father left antique
wood tools. The tools lined
the library, sitting on the thick
lip of crown molding. They wore
dark wood stains like capes—
planes, levels, hack saws,
and chisels. The last time I went
home, the dog door had caved
in to a boot. Someone had taken
the tools. Still, the tongue and groove
panels above my parent's bed dance
with knots. My father fit them
together looking for faces.
He even took a pencil
to the ceiling, drawing long
beards and deep set eyes around
the dark spots; sometimes a wave
in the grain became a bent,
gnarled nose. I think to the old
men he left on the ceiling,
how they must age
there, how they might
have wanted to leave with us,
pick up, walk away.
All we've left behind

can only tumble down our spiral
staircase, the hard wood
bruising the old men to blackness.

Girls with Porcelain Hands

The shelves held a hundred dolls,
and each waved a paper fan
with the dust of three generations.

In the colors of fifty nations
they spent the seasons fading
as the sun passed through the house.

My sister—last to tend them—let
mice search their dresses, the hemp,
the tulle, the cotton-wool bodies.

I held them, damp with excrement,
in my arms, mask tight on my face, before
shoveling them into 44 gallon bags.

Outside my mother stoked a fire
to burn away a hundred dolls,
the stench smoldering in the air.

They left behind black faces, toeless feet,
and porcelain hands to pull from the pit.
When the fire cooled, I shook their infant fingers.

NOTES

“PRECISION”

Takes lines from Susan Glaspell’s play, *Trifles*.

“I DREAM THAT SISTER FINDS THE ART OF CARPET”

Takes lines from the ghazal stitched into the Ardabil carpet, featured in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

“THE QUEEN AND A SISTER GO HUNTING”

I. A Dead Stag in Pen & Ink - October 1852

The italicized text and referenced illustration is taken from Queen Victoria’s Journals: Monday October 11th, 1852; Princess Beatrice’s copies; Volume 34; pages 126-130.

III. A Visit to Chatham Military Hospital - March 1855

The italicized text and referenced illustration is taken from Queen Victoria’s Journals: Saturday march 3rd, 1855; Princess Beatrice’s copies; Volume 39; pages 138-145.

V. Light Show for the First Born Son - November 1842

The italicized text is taken from Queen Victoria’s Journals: Monday November 21st, 1842; Princess Beatrice’s copies; Volume 14; pages 203-205.

“SNAP”

Takes lines from Walt Whitman’s poem “To You,” featured in *Leaves of Grass*.

ACADEMIC VITA

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ACADEMIC PREPARATION:

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HONORS AND AWARDS:

- Recipient of the Graham and Sandra Spainer Renaissance Scholarship.
- Recipient of the Eisenberg Grant for a 2013 prose project.
- Recipient of a 2013 Penn State Summer Discovery Grant for work on a collection of poems.
- Winner of the 2013 Edward Nichols Award in Creative Writing for a fiction piece titled *In and Out of the Oven: Six Narratives*.
- Second place in the 2013 James "Jake" Cranage Award for the poems *Seven Gods of Luck* and *Teeth of Honey Combs*.
- Second place in the 2013 Mathew Mihelcic Poetry Award for the poem *Teeth of Honey Combs*.
- Received an honorable mention in the 2013 Katey Lehman Award for Poetry for the poem *Precision*.
- Read at *Buffet: A Series* hosted by Maria Barron Chelko.

PUBLICATIONS:

Fiction:

- "In and Out of the Oven: Six Narratives" featured in *Kalliope* 2013
- "A Lesson Plan" forthcoming in *100 Word Story*

Poetry:

- Poem "Snap" forthcoming in *Wilde Magazine*.