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Goddesses and Doormats

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Goddesses and Doormats

by

Elizabeth Kicak

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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“There are only two types of women—goddesses and doormats.”
—Pablo Picasso

With fierce love and thanks to my family and friends and, in particular, to the women in
my life—all of whom are goddesses.

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Goddesses and Doormats

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ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of original poetry written over a span of two years while attending the University of South Florida. The poetry is divided into three numbered sections, marking the major thematic divisions. Preceding the poetry is a critical introduction to the work which outlines the author's developing thematic ideology.

Goddesses and Doormats, is a collection of poetry written to fulfill the Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of South Florida. In addition to seemingly endless revisions to the poems, I invested a great deal of time selecting an appropriate epigraph. When I came across the line “There are only two types of women—goddesses and doormats,” by Pablo Picasso, I recognized a concise statement that reflects many of the oppositional sentiments reflected in my poetry. In fact, the two extremes Picasso establishes in this statement pair well with the contradictory depiction of women in my work. If there is a pattern in this collection, it is surely the nature and treatment of the female. She is suppressed and destroyed; she is also the ultimate creator and source of renewal. It is a group of poems that describes the many ways women are silenced as well as their restorative influence and divine power.

The opening poem, “Spellbound,” describes the lost magician’s assistant. She has disappeared and may be in peril, but her absence causes no concern. She is physically and metaphorically absent, without voice or agency. The collection contains a number of poems where the female subject is either physically or emotionally silenced and, oftentimes, experiences both simultaneously. The more I wrote, the more I became fascinated with the silencing of women through their physical destruction. Women are dismembered, drowned, eaten, hit by cars, and suffocated in my poetry. Animals and flowers are anthropomorphized and almost always cast as females. Bodies are broken by nature, machines, other people, and the supernatural. In poems where the female is under attack she does not resist—not with any real conviction or drive. There is a resignation and silent surrender to her destruction no matter how strong the inner turmoil or panic.

While the middle section of the thesis continues the themes of the first segment, it also begins to address the traditional roles of the woman as lover/wife and mother. Again, there is a dichotomic relationship between the female identity and the roles ascribed to her. Here the reader will find the rare poems where men die, but their deaths do not lead to any sort of fulfillment for the female subjects; in fact, they often lead to further confusion and distress. In addition to navigating the space between men and women, this section begins to look at the dynamics of motherhood. Without doubt, these were the most difficult poems to write and the ones that are the most self revealing. When I looked at the first draft of the collection I was confused by my own heavy use of fertility imagery (especially eggs) and abortion references I recognized my own words but did not understand where the sentiment was originating from. It was not until I compiled the poems for the final segment of the thesis that I understood the impulse for many of the fertility poems. The final section of the book examines the healing and restorative power of the mother and, as soon as I understood this theme in the third section, I understood one of the underlying tensions in the second. The fertility poems provide the space for grieving the child I have not yet, but always assumed, I would have at this point in my life. I was reminded of Robert Frost's famous quote: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." Sometimes an egg is just an egg. In this case, it was a symbol for a struggle I didn't know I was fighting until it was on paper.

The third section elevates the female because of her role as the creator, even to the point of rewriting Genesis with a goddess. If the destruction of the male fails to revive the voiceless female in section two, then her restoration must come in the final section

through some other means. Since the preceding poems reveal that this restoration will not come through having children, it is women—sisters, mothers, deities, nature—who shoulder much of the responsibility. Here the female subject finds sense of self through her relationships to the natural world and the women who populate it. Sisterhood and daughterhood are especially prevalent in the final poems. The women at the end of the collection have outgrown their earlier selves; these are no longer women who will acquiesce to a violent drowning. The final two poems, in particular, reflect this change. In “Militant Joy,” the speaker instructs the reader to gather and save the light so that on dark days it can be “broken into,/devoured in dark lapses until,/from sugar, we are sick.” In the final poem, “Since the End Must Come Let it Come,” the speaker enjoys a morning so perfect, she would welcome it as Judgment Day.

Ultimately, this collection of poems progresses from the silent and easily broken female to one of creative power. Both the “doormat” and the “goddess” have purpose. However, the most powerful and dynamic woman may be those who have passed between both realms. While Picasso’s quote suggests an either/or opposition, this collection of poetry explores the complex progression and overlap of these two categories as well as the revelations and self-understanding that is gained in the journey.

Section One

SPELLBOUND

He whips off the sheet with a flourish
and the audience is horrified.
No applause, no cheering,
maybe a gasp. A mother shields
her son's eyes so he cannot see the horror
of the empty box. They knew
he was all smoke and mirrors
but his tricks should have conjured something.
Where is the magic in revealing a case
without a smiling, talented assistant?
What is special about turning nothing into nothing?

A man in the audience clears his throat.
The lights come up—no one cares where she is
only where she isn't. Busy demanding their refunds,
furious that they've been tricked,
no one considers that she might be lost,
her ears stuffed with quarters,
sawed in half and handcuffed,
buried under white rabbits and silk scarves.
She was supposed to be sparkling
inside a glass like a lightning bug
that's nearly out of air.

EVE AND THE DEVIL SHAKE; HE SNAPS HER HAND OFF AT THE WRIST.

Forget the fruit—haunt the whole tree.
Wait until she's sun-weary, reclining
in shade from branches exhausted
by cascading apples.
She's been warned, of course,
to steer clear of apples. To stay alert
for sly serpents. Resist the hiss
of teeth breaking apple skin, driving
into sugared pulp. Dodge the demon
looping through the garden on scaled belly.

Thank God for Eve!
Lilith would have never fallen
for a man's hands
growing out of the tree. How delicate
the bones in her wrist—how easily
she splinters. How her mangled stub
of arm disgusts Adam. Rotting woman
made of *his* bone spoiled by the promise
of touching the divine. He will keep vigil,
worship at the tree's base, water the roots
with the blood of lambs slaughtered as sacrifice
for a reperfected woman. He will reach up
to reclaim what is his. Eve's hand
will rip Adam's from his arm.

How could they—disfigured,
hideous—bear Eden's beauty
having desecrated the sacred soil?
Slither away, hide beyond the garden walls
but the children will be born unflawed.

GIRL EATEN BY A TREE

Mark Ryden: Oil on Canvas, 2006

So sweet! Like peach nectar. Even her
bobby socks tasted like candy.
Strolling among whispery pines, larkspur
and honey-scented clover. A trio of skipping girls never suspected
that innocuous alcove in the oak, where robins fought
to lay their eggs, would soon be stuffed with one of them.

He was ravenous—starving, rooted in place.
He never hesitated to wrap his branches
around her slight waist and shovel her in
his open mouth. She flailed and kicked
but he ate her headfirst so the screaming was brief.

Her golden ringlets tickled the top of his throat.
He gagged and almost spit her out but then he got a taste
of the candied flesh. His bark breaking into her body—the joy
of the feast surpassing his best epicurean dreams.

Her shoulders, still in their blue silk frock,
slid down with ease. Each pearl button of her dress
gliding over his tongue. The slight puff of her belly,
her syrupy hips and thighs—thighs soaked
in peach nectar, soaked in maple sap!

At last, he is completely full.
Drowsy and content—not the least bit sorry.

Her doe-eyed, porcelain friends stagger away
with the buckles from her maryjanes.

AN ELOQUENT DROWNING

What astounded me the most
was her certainty
that she would be rescued.

No fear or flailing.
Just big blue eyes
submersed and wide open.

The pool a diaphanous prism
tossing white sunshine ripples
dancing across the cement floor.

Sparkling webs of light
waltzing beneath the surface
and her open-wide eyes.

Fearless. Never doubting
strong arms would scoop her up
before her last bubble.

Perfect faith in her lungs
and the strength of his hands—
she never considered dying.

Content in her knowledge she danced
at the bottom with the sun
rippling through the water.

A sunken angel dancing
in a pool of light.

VENERATION

We shared a cigarette and a nectarine
and now I am stricken
with anguish in the bones.
I can't pray for relief—I have earned
this hurt but I can hate
not praying. I knew
the fruit was rotten,
ate it anyway with my eyes
closed, envisioning something sweet.
I used to believe
I wouldn't ache
this much—wouldn't
curl into the couch,
wrapped in my favorite sweatshirt
from a college that rejected me,
waiting until I'm less tender,
still devoted to those
that do not want me.

THE ISLAND OF STABILITY

1.

I have not written for weeks
because all I want to do is write
about frantic shadows and, my God,
the clichés are exhausting.

2.

I can't remember ever feeling so heavy.
Not big—very, very tiny but impossibly dense.
Heavy as lead. No—heavier.

3.

I have done the most vile thing
to you. Told the worst lie.

4.

Is there anything heavier than lead?

5.

That night, rain pinged against the window
and your leaden arms draped over my bare back.
I was so small—so heavy. Sinking
through sheets, into the mattress. I couldn't get out
from under your arms so I whispered
the only words I thought might make you move.
It may have been more humane to shoot you.

6.

The heaviest elements are all artificial—
man-made and highly unstable.

Named for the men who created them:

Lawrencium

Seaborgium

Or, perhaps, for future ambitions:

Einsteinium

Nobelium

They slam elements together to spawn
a heavier atom. It lives
a microsecond or two, before dying
of spontaneous fission—the nucleus splits
into two, more stable pieces.
Boys, some things don't want to be fused,
no matter how fascinating the decay chain is.

Scientists speculate about a field
where spontaneous fission is no longer a threat—
where man-made atoms exist for years.
They call it the Island of Stability—strictly theoretical
of course. Stability always is.

7.
Lead is used in pencils and bullets.
Previously popular in paint
but it poisons through the skin,
damaging the nervous system,
causing weakness
in the hands and fingers.
Long-term exposure leading to infertility.

8.
What could be more cliché
than tired lovers lying
and breaking apart?
There is even rain
and tangled sheets.
Thank God there were no candles
or dripping wax. No wine. No roses or
I might have had to shoot myself.

9.
Okay, technically it's not in pencils
but I'm telling the truth
about everything else.

THE GREAT FLOOD

Either Jesus was a liar, or war is never necessary.

—*Ben Salmon*

Glasses of viscid milk
lining the table.
A body strapped down,
tipped up.

Hands driving a metal funnel
past cracked lips, teeth
chipping like tiles,
steel settling
at the base of the throat—
the last bastion before invasion.

Milk pouring down,
wet cement watering
the shrunken stomach.
The dam breached—
Oh, how the body will flood!

SLAVES TO THE TIDE

1.

There's a certain kind of freedom in having no choice.

2.

I walk and watch a tiny bird—
a sparrow in the gale
beating her wings against the wind
in a stubborn fight to fly
north while being corralled south.
Stubborn little bird
fighting a force too big for
fragile feathers. Why not try
and be like the hawk?
The hawk who does not fight
but simply spreads its wings,
rides the currents, arcing and looping
through pockets of warm air.

3.

I walk and find a jellyfish washed ashore,
rolling in the receding tide
too weak to pull herself back to sea.
Though she looks harmless
she has never been more eager,
more hungry for a strike.
Passersby think she's dead,
kick sand in her face.
But what satisfaction is there
in stinging the sand?
All she needs is something
to underestimate her resolve,
get too close. How violently
she will lash out this last time!

4.

I walk as the waves pull back
revealing sand scattered with tiny clams

like a snapped strand of beads.
Ivory shells with tiger stripes,
violets, rippled greens and grays.
They scramble, stick out their pale feet,
shimmy down into the sand.
Frantic digging, wiggling to submerge in earth
before the next wave crashes
stripping the sand away.
At once there are hundreds
dancing on the shore.
At once they are buried,
leaving nothing but a blanket
of pinpricks in wet sand.
They have no choice
but to follow the rhythm of the water.
They dig and are unburied.
Dig and are unburied.

HIT AND RUN

The day before Thanksgiving—
her mother dressing a turkey. Maybe
changing the sheets,
buying her daughter's favorite foods
when they called.

My email from Campus Affairs:
“We regret to inform you”
and a student number.
I ran my finger down the roster
searching for the student
I would be crossing out.

So clinical—a press release
from the sheriff's office:
Not using a crosswalk. Taken
to a hospital
where she later died.
She was never “a valued member
of our college community,”
until the Dean was interviewed
by the local paper.

My skin was hot. How criminal—
skipping all the violence. How
insufficient a phrase:
hit and run. I imagine
it was loud—the echoing thud
of her body rolling over the hood.
Her blood stippled the windshield
in a hushed spatter. Bones splintered,
pushed through her skin. Skull split
as she fanned out across the pavement.

DEAL BREAKER

My hair falls around us,
a stage curtain. I abandon his mouth
to tie back the mess. His voice
hot as he breathes, "Leave it down."
Hands on my wrists.

A curl brushes my upper lip. A tongue
sweeps it into my mouth.
How I hated the taste of myself!
Perfumed and bitter.
I swipe strands from my mouth
and, damp with saliva, with sweat,
they stick to my face.

His fingers thread through the hair
at the nape of my neck.
A scream uncurls,
rushes up my throat. A full body
post-hair-cut itch crashes down
until all I can focus on
is not slamming the heel of my palm into his nose,
blinding him with blood,
with pain rippling over his face—
at least one of us would get to scream.

His hands around my wrists. He asks,
"Why are you laughing?"

CAUTERIZATION

I can't remember
when that thorn
pierced my foot.
My skin has grown
over the wound.

Every step
stabs, toenails
discolor, blood
pools into spider-
web bruises.

Hot skin stinks
like rancid
buttermilk, like
rotten plums in
vinegar.

Gangrene is nothing
to gamble with—
I could lose
my leg but
I could lose more.
It's in the blood
and spreading fast.

I'm hobbled,
a gimp
who badly needs
a crutch.

PANIC ATTACK AT 2:17PM

These cockroaches.
These cockroaches are scurrying
Under your skin.
Thousands of legs
Antennae making you
Tremble and
Twitch and itch.
They are everywhere.
Scuttling around in
Your stomach.
Swarming in your ears.
Rushing down your legs so fast
Even your toes itch and
You scratch the surface until it bleeds.

Your mouth fills with copper dust
Sticking to the tongue and choking
Out calm air. Try swallowing the powder
But the throat rebels—constricts.
Esophagus squeezing until the lungs contract
Flooding with adrenalin oxide.

Shriveled, raisin lungs make space
In the chest cavity for the rapidly
Thu-thumping heart. Arterial muscles
Swell with the beat. Soon this
Pulsing grenade will consume
All space and explode.

You are trapped with this
Time bomb in your chest choking
Down air that singes the lungs and
Cooking from the inside out. Heat
Rushes the face, melting skin, exposing
Cheekbones and eye sockets.

You are trapped and smoldering.
It's just you and the cockroaches now.
You will all incinerate in this

Serotonin drought. It's contagious—
Even the bugs are panicking.

Section Two

RECURRING

Silver blades twirl, spin
calm lake to murky foam.
I never fight the pull, never scream
until dark lake camouflages blood
while I toss and turn under propeller
blades. Cloudy, black water

rushes my throat. Watered-
down plasma sloshes in my lungs. Giant scalpels spin,
smack against my face, propelling
me deeper under the surface of the foam
frosted lake. Even though my mouth floods with blood
I still keep silent. *Scream!*

some part cries but what good will a scream
do now? Hungry fish cut through the water,
ravenous for gourmet vitreous—gems in bland blood
spilling out as I twist like a sheet in the spin
cycle of a washing machine full of foam,
full of knives. Fish rejoicing at propellers

snapping fingers like carrot sticks. Propellers
slicing and shredding. I am too drained to scream.
Moonlight hits the surface, sparkling through foam
bubbles. How beautiful to look up from under the water!
A surface-world backlit in silver, stilling the mind's panicked spin.
Bubbles like diamonds—like candlelight in blood

streaked locks where skittish minnows wait to nip at blood-
rare skin, darting into the hair cloud when propellers
smack against my teeth like playing cards spinning
in bicycle spokes. Maybe I should try to scream—
just once, but I swallow teeth and wash them down with crimson water.
Back to staring at the surface while famished fish foam

at the mouth for a meal softening in a foam
marinade. They fight for prime scraps, for bloody
morsels of muscle. Ravaging a corpse with waterlogged
bones dissolving under propeller
blades like ice cubes in a blender. One halfhearted scream
bubbling to the surface riding the spin

of the current. There's never a struggle. Nothing to propel
a fight for air. Foam infused water fills a blood-less body. One token scream,
once I'm deep enough no one can hear, as I sink in a slow spin.

TO MOVE A MAN

The first time I knew I loved you
was the night I planned exactly how
I would kill you.

Investigated alibis.
Found holes (such holes, you can't believe!)
But I was calm—played it cool.

I guessed your weight, your height,
the number of black plastic garbage bags
(three) to move a man.

Rehearsed my cry in the mirror:
“How tragic!
A romantic bath, the CD player—he loved
to set the mood with music...”

So smooth I nearly believed
my own reflection.

I hum, run the tub full of bubbles,
lay the stereo on edge. Candlelight,
wine—almost too perfect.

But I never planned on you
and your tearful remorse,
your guilt-ridden confession.

I listen, twirling the cord.

You beg. I consider.
You cry, swear never again.

We embrace.
I forgive.

But I keep the garbage bags.

Why he chose her father's gun
to disbrain himself that April.

How to prune efflowered azaleas.

How to balance
the chlorine levels in the pool.

How to live with widow's guilt.

LOVE ANATOMY

“The nerve cells, upon being excited by the proper stimulus, transmit an action potential down their axons.”

The light dims purple while a thumb brushes
an eyelash from my cheek.
Make a wish. You have the magic
to make my stomach elevator
between my heart and toes.

“When the signal reaches the axon terminal bundle it interacts with synaptic knobs—”

Kisses skip behind my ear, fusing
saliva and skin, as a voice
(yours? mine?) whispers
you are electric.

“—stimulating an influx of calcium through voltage-gated Ca^{2+} gates, triggering exocytosis of some of the vesicles.”

God! This sweet ache. I have dissolved
into your paper cup dream catcher.
We have contaminated each other.

SPRING CLEANING

To peel the skin off that foot!
Pressed against cold tiles
under blazing water—never
hot enough. Scrubbing
until each cell burns.
Scouring the skin buys some time
but the foot is neither forgetful nor clean.

Saturate the stains with bleach.
Blood, solvent lurching between toes.

How does the skin not dissolve?

So much soap, scorching water,
alcohol-drenched cotton
methodically tracing,
tracing and retracing. Disinfecting
each wrinkle, swabbing
between toes, under nails.

How does one small hole
cause such mess?

Peel the foot—swipe sterile
cotton back and forth
and back across the arch.
Round the heel.

Toes still twisting with memory,
knowing they are never quite spotless.

HOUSE EDGE

My father took me to Las Vegas the summer I turned twenty-one. Three-story curtains of strung crystals shimmered light across the casino floor. “Never put anything on the table you’re not willing to lose,” he told me. During the day he worked a tradeshow at the convention center while I walked an Ansel Adams exhibit, strolled among jellyfish tanks, ate a caprese and pancetta salad and drank white wine at a café overlooking multi-terraced botanical gardens under a Chihuly glass ceiling. I watched a woman who looked like she couldn’t afford to lose, hit on sixteen with the dealer showing six, and wondered if her father taught her anything. Our first night we played for hours on our original hundred while a leathery slip of a woman in a purple sequin dress with a smoker’s cough watched our table balancing a sleepy toddler on one boney hip. “Some women just aren’t meant to have children,” I said once she walked away. He didn’t respond. The next morning I saw a woman pull her second bet back at a Let It Ride table and applauded her father for teaching her to recognize when she’s beat but maybe she didn’t learn this lesson from her father. She didn’t pay attention and now she’s drowning ten dollars at a time—I just assume everyone listened when their father taught them when to fold.

AN EGG SCRAMBLED

I awoke with egg-frying ambition,
a primal instinct to make a divine something
from a hen's humble stone.

The edges will bubble, opaquing in sizzling butter.
A golden center warming, desperate to burst
beyond its delicate membrane.

It will quiver, just a moment, on the spatula
before splishing into the pan. Perfect
crisp edges will hug tender white folds.

How I will swell with the joy of transforming
that cold egg on a hot slab of frying pan.
But today I can't even make it to the flip.

Shell gnawed through the guard walls
surrounding the yolky heart. Shards scalpeling
through the egg sac. It all bleeds

together, a marbled mess snapping
in the angry pan. What choice is there
but to scramble the poor thing?

HERITAGE OF THE UN-DAUGHTER

1.

I fan the fronds of sugar palms across the floor
leading to my bedroom. I burn camphor leaves,
drink warm milk spiced with cinnamon,
sprinkle nutmeg on the windowsills.

2.

It's not just for counter-spells of course—cinnamon.
It is the secret to your great-grandmother's meringue.
Her magic, my heritage to share with you.

Swollen knuckles make her fingers list
to the right. She holds up an egg.
Now is not the time to be gentle.
Her crooked hand sharply smacks
the egg on the counter corner.
She passes yolk back and forth
between shell halves, the white dripping
into the waiting metal bowl.
She spoons in sugar and I want to know
how to tell when it's perfect.
She points at the fluff pin-wheeling out
from the nexus of the mixing bowl. *You do it wrong
for a long time. Then you learn.*

3.

I keep sage handy just in case
you find a seal less airtight than I thought
because, somewhere, you learned the art
of being sneaky.

4.

I can't watch her
scraping down the sides
of the bowl with her spatula.

5.

I must still be casting the spells wrong.

Your fingers and toes,
grey and restless,
honeycomb across my ceiling in predawn hours.
Sweat breaks on my forehead—
you've found a way inside again
so it's another night of half-dreaming
about eggs, and metal bowls,
scraping spatulas,
sugar and spices,
and the spell I can't uncast.

ARACHNOPHOBIA

She says they are like “golden monarch butterflies”
when the cocoons in her throat burst.

My eyes water at the thought
of coughing up the insects
nesting near my trachea.
Spiders!

They are not butterflies but spiders—venom-less,
common, brown kitchen spooks
that do not flutter-float away in a cloud
of sparkling wings but scuttle,
scurry along baseboards,
hiding in the shadows for fear of the light.

A plague—swat at them with newspapers.
Turn on every light,
watch them twitch before stomping—
that tiny crunch they make underfoot is the best they have to offer.

RECIPE FOR THE DEVOURABLE

Blot the body. Gently
towel it down. Check the glassiness
of the eyes—clarity is key.
Rock the blade, sever the head.
How easy to debone her
when she can't stare back.

Hook into the gills, pull
the spine up through the skin.
Bones delicate like fiberglass threads.
Spill the smell of saltwater
from some far-off sea.

Slip your blade between skin
muscle, piling scales near the body. Scales
like a sequined skirt pooled beside a bed.
Now cleaved, pink and glistening
in open air. Blot her body gently.
Towel it down, feeling the weak resistance
of meat without bones—how easily it submits
without its spine. It is ready
to be consumed. Raw, urgent
hunger—lick the salty blood
from your fingers. You no longer need
to starve.

ODE TO THE DANDELION

Who would want you, weed—
common and ugly?
Bastard flower
with stubborn roots,
garish golden head,
pollen staining everything
you brush against.

Scourge of the pristine lawn!

You are the plague
of summer gardens.
Feral seeds shamelessly tarnishing
tilled beds of imported roses
meant for crystal vases
on hall tables and mantles.

You, unruly weed, are only tolerated,
so embedded in the soil
it is too exhausting
to purge the ground.

DESTINY, FLORIDA

What could the grazing cattle be eating?
Nothing but roadside spiky scrub brush.

Fire lines hoed into the ground.
Burned grass, parched skeletons of leafless trees.

A billboard reminding me a baby's heart beats
eighteen days after conception.

In Nebraska, these would be fruitful fields of ripened wheat
but here, just miles of death gone to seed.

An old tire, tethered to a fence,
with the words "Jesus Saves" painted around the rim.

Surely the cows are starving.

UPON DECLARING A POEM UNSALVAGEABLE

What if they *are* like eggs?

A predetermined pile stitched inside before my birth.

Scarce though they are, I have abandoned one—
words made by made of my body,
I have surrendered one to the abyss,

declared her irredeemable,
primordially flawed, destined to shrivel,

to rot on the vine
like fruit unharvested.

HIBERNACLE

How could anything live
after being buried
under so much dark
freeze?

I crave my mother's faith,
her trust that something
can revive after being frozen
in cold earth.

But even after the thaw,
how does anything exist
in the ground
that can cultivate bulbs planted
before chill cemented the soil?

How does she sustain belief
in things long-shrouded
in frost?

Section Three

GENESIS

Eyes closed, she spun the stars
into earth. Cradled soil
in her palm. Whispered,
"Awake. It is time to create
a paradise."

Earth awake, alive,
sprouted her first thought.
She thought: white.
She thought: sun rising
out of a field of white.
She thought: calm breath.
Lilies! The earth gave her lilies.
She lifted the dirt to her lips,
"Thank you for white with rising sun and calm breath."

She thought: joy.
She thought: crisp, hissing joy
and the earth gave her lemons—a tree
ornamented with lemons. Her delight
was a burst of swaying red.
Earth gave her poppies. Glowing
with giddy poppy-love,
earth gave her daisies,
gave her kiwi, gave her cocoa plants,
red grapes, cumquats. Earth gave
and gave and gave
her every imaginable delight.

Eyes closed, she spun the stars into earth
and sprouted heaven in her palm.

TRESPASSING

My sisters and I flop into the sea
of floral comforters
scented with furnace dust and our father's cigarettes.
We bury our faces, smothering
our giggles. Oh, the back closet corner!
Home to everything
silk and lace and glitter.
We jam small feet into glamorous heels
we never see her wear.
Behind her draping fabrics
hides a cardboard treasure chest.
One of us pops the flaps—inside we find
baby teeth. Photos of men: some our father,
some not. A plaster handprint none of us remember making.
Two unlabeled cassette tapes. A dirty white t-shirt
wrapped around a black bible.
She's coming, Rachel whispers. We duck
behind her wedding dress and winter coats.
Holding our breaths hiding behind ivory lace and grey wool
as she opens the door, rustles the clothes and sings
Where have my little girls gone?

MIDNIGHT DIAGNOSTICS

I'm up again in the middle of the night turning
on all the lights, staring at walls.
Photos of my sister transforming—
becoming like those of other long-dead
relatives haunting my living room.

I can hardly stand to photograph her
anymore—like the picture itself is to blame.
Delinquent blood and marrow!
No, berating the pictures is easier
than cursing her body.

Tonight it was a black and white
from last spring: Samantha and I in the garden
behind my aunt's house,
arms looped around each other,
sunglasses and toothy grins.
This could be the one
we look at someday,
say: we should have known.

She and Rachel and I dancing
at a wedding, skirts spinning,
heads tossed back in laughter—
her bones already growing drowsy.

The first Sunday she was light enough
for Rachel to piggyback her lanky frame
around the house.

A week before her first surgery
the three of us in lawn chairs,
Fourth of July and fireworks.
Skin shined with Florida heat.

Any moment someone might take the one
I will find crammed in a dusty drawer
some distant Saturday afternoon.
Her last Christmas.

Her last trip to the beach.
Her last birthday.

We do this with our dead—flip through photos
of the their lasts. Bodies displaying signs
that are only clear in hindsight,
on film, in frames. We were blind then
and now we have timelines,
photographs.

WALKING WITH THE ORBWEAVER

The wooden planks of the boardwalk push up into the soles of my bare feet. The wood is worn smooth—the only inconsistency the seam where one board meets another.

I haven't talked to my sister in weeks.

Plank after plank they lead me out into a tunnel of oak and Spanish moss.

I never knew how many spiders called the rivershore home. In the afternoon rain their webs appear sewn with strands of tiny Christmas lights, stretching like hammocks between branches, swaying in the pale breeze. There is a venomous-looking spider perched in the center of a tire-sized web. Her legs and back are streaked with red and white.

Don't ask me how I know it's a she—I just do.

The boards are cool, damp from the rain and slick where yellowed leaves have fallen. Bright molds grow between the slivers in the wood. I'm dying to know what kind of spider that is.

I really should call my sister.

Rain is falling harder as I follow the wooden walkway threading through the woods. The sound of raindrops striking leaves, dripping down, and splashing into the waiting lake is the most comforting noise I've ever heard. I'm in deep enough that it's just me and the birds and the water.

I wonder what the doctor decided.

A pair of ibis pulls worms from between the mangrove's tangled legs. Mangroves look like such team players—as if ten or fifteen saplings were all vying for the same bit of earth and finally reached détente, closing ranks and fusing into one another.

She once told me, "Being human is not for sissies."

Suddenly I am glad for the sturdiness of the boardwalk. The solid planks still pushing up into my feet. I lean against the rail and stare down into this dark water insulated by the leafy blanket creeping across its surface. When a fallen tree obstructs its growth, the blanket splits, wraps around the obstacle, knits itself back together.

An enormous great blue heron prunes her feathers to free them of the rain. She runs her beak up and under one wing then the other. Droplets umbrella off and splash into the lake.

She is balanced on a fallen log that's quilted with tender algae ridding herself of the afternoon's showers even as the sky darkens again.

Two days from now I will know

the spider is called a Spotted Orbweaver.

IF ONLY I COULD SWALLOW LIGHT

like a snake
swallows
a bird:
slowly
deliberately.
Every muscle
focused.
The body
becoming
one
long
throat
gulping
through
an unhinged
mouth
pulsing
it down
into the belly.

Once swollen
and glowing
I could
stretch out
on a warm
rock
idle
and illuminated.

GRAVITY'S FATIGUE

She is a chaos wrangler.
accountable for galactic symmetry,
for keeping electrons in their fields.

For holding Saturn's impulsive rings in check.
Jupiter's moons are disorderly toddlers
aching to dart to and fro.

It is so heavy—this burden of order.

Imposing structure on the tides exhausts her.
Comets challenge her every request
and the gamma rays
are always pulling at the leash.

She midwives nebulas, keeps the cosmic string
from becoming a tangled ball of thread.

Quasars pulse with hungry energy
just waiting for their chance
to gobble up unsuspecting quarks.

If only she could let them go.
Just a second of rest: a planck or two.
But constellation mergers can be so messy
and she hates the cleanup.

The matter must be quarantined
from the antimatter until the moment is just right.

Energy never lasts long in a vacuum.

SUNKEN GARDENS

1.

The air there is thick, slicked with dew.
Newly unfurled palm fronds curl
calmly upwards. Ponds stocked with spotted
koi sparkle alongside cracked stone paths,
past a lone thorn-thick bougainvillea,
an orange jasmine homesick
for India—wind in the branches scarce.

2.

Pairs of flamingoes idling and bees buzzing
wildly in flame-throated orchids.
Blossom-bloated branches growing
so high they're wired to posts
designed to keep afloat
those flower-heavy heads.

3.

Manicured beds of Brazilian Red Cloak throw
broken shadows on oak tree trunks and a million
pink honeysuckle blooms. Trestles wrapped
in well-groomed marbled ivy muscling
into any place with room for roots.

4.

A breeze rustles low bushes flirting
in the dirt, pushing up glossy skirts
of leaves tossed across a thousand trees—
all leaning towards the same sun.

DEMETER'S KITCHEN

My mother spun sugar flowers
on the head of a pastry nail.

A plump bag of frosting in one hand,
the nail twirling slowly in the other.

Peruvian roses materializing before my eyes.

Her garden grew from nothing
but sugar, water, and drops of color with names like
Champagne Spiced Pumpkin Desert Plum.

She dusted tier after tier with African violets.

Transforming

empty kitchen into thriving nursery. Tables sprouting

wild daisies Singapore orchids Casablanca lilies

fashioned from gum paste.

I held my breath and stared

deep under the spell of her

fragile forget-me-nots periwinkle clusters of lilac

all cultivated by her hands—
hands that hold the secrets of creation.

MILITANT JOY

Taste the light today—sunshine crisp
on the tongue.

Feast on this militant joy
marching forward,
striking down everything
standing against the cause.

Gather glass jars,
tight lids to catch and save it—
canned strawberries in December
to be broken into,
devoured in dark lapses until,
from sugar, we are sick.

SINCE THE END MUST COME LET IT COME

When the peaches are perfect.
A vase of tulips with still-sleepy stems,
a tired kitchen table,
sprinklers sputtering, ratcheting
across a drowsy lawn.
The tender scent of coffee
drifting towards the sofa,
carried by the slight breeze
stumbling through the curtains.
My dog sighs, nudges his head
into my lap. So content
he does not strain
to lick the dripping peach
juice sliding down my hand.
I rest my palm on his head.
Since the end must come let it come like this.