My Endless Compliance

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Acknowledgments

**How to count to ten**  p. 47
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**One winter evening**  p. 48
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**Farewell poem**  p. 72
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**On being an object**  p. 75
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# Table of Contents

5  Proof of Feeling  
6  Distance  
7  Small violences in winter  
8  The hum of obedience  
9  An organized singing  
10  How to make art  
11  The rise of public grief  
12  Lurk and linger  
13  A tenderness for spring  
14  The enthusiasm of flowers and men  
15  Regret  
16  Associated grief  
17  The worship of flowers  
18  Love  
19  Impersonal festivities  
20  Forgive me  
21  The luck and patience of it  
22  Some time ago  
23  Mid-winter  
24  Hotel slumber party  
25  The architecture of desire  
26  A practical solution to desire  
27  Anatomy of a breakup  
28  Sunday swim  
29  The slow lane  
30  There is no end to longing  
31  I am the original person who loved you  
32  Pretty living room  
33  What we turn towards  
34  The necessity of hives  
36  Last night  
37  Something like love  
38  Memory or loss  
39  Proof  
40  The Anti-Romance Novel  
41  A consideration of need  
42  A kind departure  
43  What we lost then  
44  Cut-outs of the ones I’ve loved  
45  My endless compliance  
46  The evolution of touching  
47  How to count to ten  
48  One winter evening
49  Old fashioned flight
50  Affection for water
51  All I ever wanted
52  It is not my place to discuss the details
53  Small rituals of desire
54  A brief history of the past
55  The legality concerning public touching
56  Daytrip to Pennsylvania
57  Lower East Side Party
58  I am not here for your amusement
59  What we offer each other
60  Commitment to adequacy
61  Landscape
62  Pleasure world
63  What this has meant
64  Love hotel
65  Proof of choking
66  The kind that are reluctant to hurt you
67  June
68  History
70  The fantasy of love
71  Everything we felt was related to convenience
72  Farewell Poem
73  It’s the weight of my love for you
74  This is a romantic poem
75  On being an object
76  I am as close to Fetishland as I have ever been
77  Cake
78  Overnight
79  The day after they break up
80  A beautiful reactor
Proof of feeling

My heart, that afternoon anchor, that romantic center eating away at me. There is propriety in a flock of birds leaving after we have made our needs clear, here on the flowered bedspread, in the room I am planning on painting grey. We were never a couple, but I dreamt it was so, the pretty longing, images of soft porn hostile against a backdrop of kindness. There is a sense of hastening, the rise and fall of being alone, the night comprised of maintenance touching. Maybe the poppy knows what it is like to be alone, that glorious blossom that dreams of water and summer, such simplicity of desire. The ceiling, a place to put emotion. I spent my twenties staring up at it. There is a petition to grant me promiscuous waving around. I will not sign anything that makes pleasure rise from the bed like a stain. Sometimes I can feel you looking at me in the dark. The past, that soft terrain. Men I have been with litter my sleep. Even then, I am not as uninhibited as you, my love. If they should call anyone loose, a spare nickel, I would nominate your hands.
Distance

Or are all delicate things unhinged
in this way, the way you steer into me in the dark,
the landscape of indifference so close to sorrow.
The hospital for grief has readied itself for me.
Say sorrow, say grief into a paper cup.
Nothing can be made beautiful this way,
with speech standing in for feeling.
Tell me what you desire when you pin me
in the dark, when you are rubbing up against me
like anything that goes still. Now, we lie next
to one another, the sound of a vacuum
in the distance reminding me there is nothing
but this moment steadying us for the future.
Tomorrow, we will emerge, fresh as leaves.
Small violences in winter

The world doesn’t belong to me, not the promiscuous snow
worn thin by despair, the spotted leaf that eats a hole in the universe.
The privilege of being human has overlooked me today.
I want to get back to the pale God of dry surfaces and the early
touching stage when you don’t know someone well enough
to love them. All I want is to be silenced by desire, the way a swollen
glance once made me lean into the border of a room. There were years
I could not stand up after attending a bar, I would be that filled
with swooning. Strange men did this best for me, the anticipation
of knowing small violences that are bound to occur. My friend Lydia
has the kind of mouth you want to kiss and men are always comparing her
to various flowers. Even the lily hurts if you get your hand in the way
of its blooming. I don’t discriminate beauty that is on its way out,
the waning type that resembles pushing off into the sea.
Animals do this, and I think we do, too. Sometimes on our way
to death. I don’t pity the past but I don’t look forward
to memories of the old house with its circular drive,
childhood a black spot multiplying in my head like ink on fabric.
The sun is blinding today across the snow, a squirrel building its home
from discarded newspaper. Where is the glory in being alive?
I hand you winter, that dull season. We are removed so easily
from one another. Even the wide field has known happiness,
the presence of flowers and bees circling, small particles carried
by the wind. We each have a heart, even the flower and bee,
the hawthorn branch touching down. No one is going to react
badly to this, at least I don’t foresee a gesture of torment.
I don’t suppose I care for a world abandoned of grief, but still
there is a way to discuss the coming of a violet rain that allows
for adoration to exist. This morning, listening to a record,
the unimaginable intensity of the fig staring up at me from its plate.
I was beckoned to gather proof that I was there.
The hum of obedience

They are dark stars hovering in the universe of her past, tiny plastic horses competing for space inside a snow globe. The last time it rained she was on her knees saying I’m probably not the closest person to God here. The heart closes over like a morning glory at night, a fluted instrument containing the aftermath of desire. The tiny wreckage of a long drive home when argument bangs against the insides of the car. They drive through lonely neighborhoods, but nothing can match their longing. That awful emptiness when you are not alone, when you are being stranded next to someone you love. She opens the window, asking for a sign. The bright needle of the moon creates a quiet gossip in her, the kind you either obey or deny. It is winter outside, stripped of the awful heat of summer. Heat reminds her of indelicacies, the moments in which a hand might make its way to her face. Usually, she goes along with the consequences of a fist but today her face feels like a flower, her mouth a gentle opening that offers no retreat from safety. She tells him she is through feeling like a skinned plum, through with the bent beauty offered by his boxed threats which, at any moment, might act like firecrackers and explode. Her teeth feel as if they are made of tinsel, rattling around in her. She pictures a Christmas tree making its way to her throat, its promise of kindness and concern. She is shining next to him on the seat, representing God in her emblem status. She briefly considers singing but does not want to alert him to her joy. A joy which will not last long—he leads her to the bed, the hum of her obedience letting him put his hand up her skirt once they have arrived, settled together like an eagle and its prey. She knows between right and wrong, her hair tearing in his hand because he cannot help but touch her in this way, pulling at her solitude until it is only a thin blossom. Anything strong in her folds as he undoes her blouse, leaving quiet bruises. She wants to be another woman lying beneath him, anyone else belonging to this unwinding.
An organized singing

I’d bake you a cake but I’m afraid to puncture the universe with my skills. Maybe a baked Alaska would be less showy. Or more. There’s a hush where all the shoes line up in the hall outside your apartment. It makes me wonder who you’re holed up with on this day of ruin, this day of resignation when we’re supposed to find someone to love. This was going to be a happy poem. So many times I’ve started off complete, only to let desire poke holes in me. The sky is filled with possibility and a new Donut Plant just opened down the street. I’m reflecting on the evening’s activities, how there was a pile of pillows or bliss and we were surrounded by everyone’s drinking but it didn’t matter. Someone said we all love New Jersey and then I was holding your hand. I’m usually the only one paying attention to how the room navigates around a girl, the one talking about Jesus with her dress around her waist. If this were an opera it would be rude, not a quiet driveway to pass through. The electric blanket is out of juice and it’s getting dark again. I’m always afraid of being startled in the shower, but especially on lack of sleep. This is meant to be held up to the light. If I’m going to gain perspective, let it be from a morning of locusts clinging to my hair.
How to make art

There’s harmony in permission, the way you allow me to walk across your back like a paid woman. I’m tired of hiding my wounds, dressing them so they resemble less obvious activities, like hives. I want to dedicate this to Jesus like the bottom of a Forever 21 bag or that part of a movie that stills to tell you who’s behind it. My apartment’s a mess, filled with mice that act like grenades. If I can ever get around to cleaning it out, I’ll put an ad on Craigslist looking for someone to love me. The only thing stopping me now is the condition of my rooms, the way my floor is so disorderly it looks like my friend’s face when she had sun poisoning. I’m donating what’s left of my liver, the clutter and sound of it, anything they’ll take. When I’m dead, I won’t be here anymore, in the sense my cat Matthew isn’t here, and most U.S. presidents. I’m full of false logic, sayings that build up in me until I go around to strangers, unloading them. Call me a hoarder, if you will, but know this: I’ll embrace the man on the street even a prostitute wouldn’t touch, will hold him the way someone in a painting holds someone else.
The rise of public grief

As you know, I cling to things. Putting a thought into words involves translation, involves knowing beyond the mere lace of a look. I am discovering something unexpected about my own feelings. The word *plasticity* is never obscene. Penalties include gossip, exclusion or demotion. When you come upon a scene, try to divulge who you mold yourself after. The emotional regime of a society can take up space, even in the marriage bed. All devotion is indefinable in the sense that there is an awkwardness to it. The pause and thrum of indecision make knowing you possible. We have not evolved into a couple for the very reason some topics, like joy, should not be addressed. I am blushing, here, in the history of my senses, here on the subway platform with its change in longing. There are a few constancies in this small nation we inhabit, the one between sofa and bed, the clearing where we can become ourselves in a way furniture will not allow. A constative is an utterance that describes the world, such as “this table is white.” I am doing that for you, recounting the slow onset of happiness, how you would give clues of sincerity like crying when you felt calm. Which is not to say that happiness necessitates crying, only that the two are not mutually exclusive. I want to go back and change *blushing* to *somatic blushing* but the time has come to say goodbye to the uncertainty with which we make emotional vocabulary. Clinging to items and people without cause, especially in a community where this is made obvious, needs to end here. We are pushing through an expanse of ritual aloneness. In this city, all anyone can expect is an outpouring of sentimentalism.
Lurk and linger

There are those I’m holding hostage, little affairs I’ve tended to and left. All the suddenness of holding has me hovered over my loved ones, out of sorts in a way I’m afraid is impossible to repair. I’m enamored of my messy feelings, but I don’t want this to be so much about me. The question is how to hand it over, how to give up control so it doesn’t lurk and linger in me like a pen. I’m not loyal to anyone except you, the object of my desire, the one I cook with to overcome intimacy. If I were you, I’d comb this for clues, but that’s still not saying why it is you’re the one person I’m not disappointed by. I’d point you to a self-help book if I thought there was service in it, if you were more or less of a stalker than anyone I’ve known.
A tenderness for spring

Mourning isn’t beautiful but it is useful. I think of us, pressed together for convenience or pleasure, walking around with a lot of internalized trauma. I have a history of hives, sites on my skin like small lotuses pushing through. A common misconception is referring to the lotus as a water lily. I promise not to make any more mistakes, to write a memo of what I really think of you. There is no useful longing here, no periodic misery. I love the word swollen because it is the opposite of paper, that flat place for visible disgust. Nothing in me is related to how I feel. I want to hear the narrow sex of my neighbors and not know jealousy, the slow movements of the honeybee with its proclivity towards nesting and dancing. I know enough about desire to fill a hollowed out house, the kind where indecencies occurred like singing into the soft cave of a child. I can no longer recollect whether you are a honey eater or someone who likes sugar, but I know the meadow at the end of the yard is filled with ticks. My mother put them in a jar until they starved. I could see their little hardened hearts, the fever inducing mechanism likely to cause pain. When we hunger for the past, furious and filled with decay, let us remember how the river longed to be drained, how a tick becomes engorged on an absence of grooming. You can jump to an easy conclusion when you aren’t obsessed with breaking an object down into its component parts. Take water and lily, or tooth and ache. Take anything gaunt and reliant. This began with a discussion of mourning, that process that follows grief like the train on a gown. Or are they one and the same, pushed together in an ancient ritual only the poppy knows, nodding buds with four crumpled petals and a set of terminal pores.
The enthusiasm of flowers and men

I’m leaned over in the night, weeping when you come to me. You tell me you’re famous for loving badly, but I don’t see it, I see you as a rescuer or a cricket in the bathroom with its one loose bulb. In childhood, crickets had this beautiful sound and then when you killed them the hideous, lumping bodies. You know my fondness for snow, or anything pure, when you stumble onto me in the dark like a bee groping for pollen. I am looking at this from the point of a flower, something gentled by scent, all the comfort forgiveness offers in the form of tonsils being lifted from a giving mouth, or the concern my mother expressed over cutting. Some people feel phantom tonsils once theirs have been removed, the process of grieving that accompanies loss. I say stumble but what I mean is a forced adoration, a kindness that resembles being saved and destroyed in the same moment. Maybe all sex is like this, or maybe I’m just coming at it from the standpoint of someone whose world is collapsing into a paper lung. The details aren’t important and yet they are. Bees hollow out flowers and I’m muted to the point of resolution. The cup of poppies on my dresser bear witness to what we do to ourselves, inside a space created for the purpose of making audible devotion. Tell me you’re shaped like a paper cup to hold my understanding of God. Tell me the night is infested with stars.
Regret

I want to take back what I told you about my childhood, those loose words my mouth had to forget its brief circle to say. "Language is really a collection of birds," my mother on the telephone, her voice the hush of a funeral home when family is lining up like lungs. I look up "family" in the dictionary and my sister is there, the finger that underwent surgery caressing her husband in the back room. The man in white is my father, dissecting the scene with the nail scissors he keeps in his coat. "Exhibit Three" he writes over the space where my mother should be. She is talking to the man preoccupied with weather, his hands ornamented with what remains after a storm.

I share this definition with you, my second mistake in as many nights. There is the possibility that you will let yourself love me, a list of women you have known littering our bed like broken pieces of a sandwich or dream. If this does not happen, if we pass one another on the street, the light turning to let us know we should forget our names in the design the distance makes herding us across like birds, I shall remember the way you put your hands on my chest to calm me, a small bundle of sage burning in the background, the light from two religious candles documenting the wall with what we did.
Associated grief

I will not submit to January for your bewilderment, the sad news gathering on the radio like a hush. A few birds perform tricks outside the window. There are feelings associated with living, and then the sores we house in our skin. Will I survive the winter without you, my love, the snow covered streets rising like a fiction. I will hand my heart over to you in the logic of a swollen branch. We reckon with beauty the way we do sadness, stilling ourselves before nature until we are just flat surfaces. It is not my business how light turns to dark but this, this heart of mine trapped in its cage. Will you look up to see my conscious need for you, how I long to right the way we met, the way you taught me to kneel and weep before you like a child. I should have shown you what I wanted that day in California with its dust and swimming pools we gathered around to discuss. You should be complete now, your daughter ready at your side, the only woman who ever deserved to be your wife pierced by this deep blooming.
The worship of flowers

I envy the tulips their lack of shame, the way the wind stirs them without worry. Color is stored in the stalk like a thick crayon. I don’t know how they reproduce, only that it has something to do with bees. I saw a blurred photo once, a damaged beauty tilting its red coat towards me like a sick fish. I have seldom seen the insides of a tulip, the delicate humanity that houses what we might think of as being close to indignity. And yet flowers don’t have feelings, at least I’m pretty sure they don’t. Tissue culture methods are a means of asexual propagation for producing genetic clones. The language surrounding sex is scientific. Beauty dulls when a flower can’t cuddle, can’t show up at a party designated for embrace. I’ve come to the field to witness this sort of love, this unwinding. I don’t know much about escape but I do know a waxy coating makes it difficult to love. I call one drinking cup, another small enough to hold you. I never promised I would not try to hold a tulip, only that they are incapable of doing this to one another. I put my demands on anything insolent and lovely. What I envy will someday adore me.
Love

We are paper dolls lying in bed, your hand over
the part of me I keep shaved so you will keep touching
me. I want to throw a match in the bed with us, to yell "stop" before we realize
this is not what we want, your eyes opening and closing like one of the home
movies my father used to play on the wall. I want to say something to hurt you,
throw salt on that beautiful face of yours because I know
there will be a day, not far from now, when you cannot stand
the sight of me, when I call you on the telephone and you let it
ring and ring because you are in some other woman's bed,
spreading her legs with your hand as you have been taught
to do, saying into the soft shells of her thighs "I love you"
Impersonal festivities

The motion sensor set off the alarm last night
Heaters, those impersonal festivities
At night we used to videotape our stuffed animals
The security company awakened my boss
His wife must have been next to him
I am the end of a triangle,
my rib cage figuring out mathematical equations
There is no one to lie next to me at night,
only the small red dog whose face is stitched
together with wool
Tell me there is nothing else in this universe that matters
Tell me I will curl into a ball and bloom out of it during the night,
birdsong waking me
Beauty breaks open our sleeping parts
until they are mere sticks pieced together
like anything that is pieced together,
like the side of a face festooned with small
pieces of bone to drain out pus and mucous
because I am trying my best to erect storm flags
where bite wounds resemble loss
Forgive me

There's something I want to talk about.
Last night, I dreamt about dreaming.
Her hair, thick like the bottom of the lake.
It loosened in me, or loosened a part of me.
I would miss the spotted owl had I ever seen it.
The things I long for are not the ones I know.
Rhetoric delivers its blow when I am at the blue
table learning to speak. In group therapy, where I met
Rose, the therapist was always drinking.
The way it crushed me, the immorality of her
action. It all adds up to an excuse to behave
in a certain manner. Those were the years of men
I didn't know. And flowers lining the window
like organs that will soon shut down.
This is an advertisement for a heart.
Forgive me if I have given you nothing
to hold onto. The severed animal, the portion
we do not eat, what becomes of that.
I am always wondering. The year fleas invaded
our vacuum cleaner my mother kissed me
with a grape in her mouth. Anything that leans
can touch the past. It is actually expected,
not to mention what you might learn.
I am heading towards therapy again,
that condition of trust that makes others
knowable. If you see Rose, send her my love.
There will be no friendships formed this time
around, no men to kiss in the small
bathroom with its tilted sink. But I could
have an accident, even in this room
with its propriety. Even devoid of any
unsuitable dates. Tell me, is it going
to be a lonely reckoning. If there is no one
to love me, tell me now. So I might plan
what to do in consequence to this, so I might
counter what is in store with anything else.
The other day, telling a friend I was sad,
my mouth that tiny ocean in which to lose
things. It doesn't add up the way I want.
The math of being alone is reckless.
I want to believe it happens to amuse me.
You resemble violence in the way you push my dinner towards me, the chipped sunlight against the dog's slumped back as you walk it towards Suicide Hill, that isolated continent where you can see children sledding, the dots of them moving up and down against the landscape. The record plays over and over, sounding like wreckage from just outside the West house. I wonder if the family that used to live here suffered like we do, carried in the original way towards heartbreak. God knows I'm disappointed in this, the unnatural bird pecking at the window. You would think nature happened easily, but I'm convinced even the graceful variety have trouble learning how to love. Last night, the phlox bloomed and their trajectory towards beauty was made clear. Still, my father with his delicate sorrow. I feel so much tenderness for sleep. The covenant aches to keep us here. I can only guess how lovely it would be to swim today. There's a fluttering of swallows only not anywhere near this house with its weak foundation threatening to shake us up like inhabitants of a snow globe. Nothing we felt was related to black holes, the convenience or is it indifference of learning to separate from those we think we know how to love. I am tired of honoring the past, be it swollen with desire or a hanging, useless thing. When I was in the hospital, the careful appliances, the wire I used to make necklaces providing another woman's escape. It all comes down to the narrowness of what we have been given, the luck and patience of it. When you part with a beloved object, the blurred distance becoming a sycamore. August gets dark before you know what's happening. Even the crickets know that.
Some time ago

A bird flew into the law school building
so we put bird shadows up.
The bird was stunned for a few minutes
and then flew off. I don’t want to tell you this,
but legend has it animals go somewhere to die.
A few girls were giggling to handle their grief.
Mine sat in a Styrofoam cup, the type popular
in those days. You could have guessed
there were tears in there, but it was really the projection
of all I felt. I was far from home, from the parents
who had raised me if not well, then with intention.
That tiny bird, its frail bones and feathers
like a loose dress. Oh, my difficult loneliness.
You could argue all loneliness is difficult.
I am not going to talk you out of it.
Mid-winter

I’m in line at the bakery and the woman in front of me has a noisy stutter she’s using to make the counter boy uncomfortable. Everyone is wounded in way. I dated a man who had to document everything we did. I wanted to be supportive, but even couples therapy had to be videotaped. That wasn’t serving anyone, except maybe him. It was like obsessive hand washing, but different.

I give damaged people a lot of slack. The cookies, when I finally buy them, make me forget for a minute my responsibility to go easy on everyone who isn’t me. My father spent his life trying to learn how to love me. I’m tired of dulling the pain with images of small animals grazing. It’s getting impossible to pretend I’m the only one not affected by snow. When weather becomes difficult, I retreat into my overheated apartment. My friend who doesn’t have breasts anymore calls to say the chemo is like a horrible hangover. The day is slow to turn over, the bottoms of my feet stained with what the dog leaves. My face in the mirror, broken out and framed in the distance by a box of surgical gloves I use to clean the house. When it’s this quiet, you can hear the woman downstairs weeping. She has a nice collection of shoes in the hallway which I trip over regularly. Language can put winter inside you like a shot would. I imagine her on her sofa, staring at a speck on the wall. We’re not so far apart that I can’t translate how she sits in the near dark, her mind clumsy in its acacia grove or wherever it is goes to move away. I want to put a lemon in her hands, something to snap her out of it, but I know we are all responsible for our longing.
**Hotel slumber party**

I don’t dream when you leave, standing in front of the fish tank, taking it apart and somehow breaking the bulb. The fish scurry amidst the broken glass and I wonder what becomes of anyone who lives in a hotel, their whole world right there for the taking. Seduction has nothing to do with usefulness and I’m not good at being new, so I turn towards the metal convenience of the tank which is now filled with complete indifference. It feels like you were never here, leaning against the dark like an accident, a kind place to collect myself for a few hours. Later, we will learn how to hurt each other—there will be time for tiny slumber parties to turn into warring factions where you want to leave during the night. Nothing is broken between us now. The fish are swimming sideways in the tank to avoid shards and I’m too tired to do anything about it. I’ll sort it out in the morning, pore over the contents like a thief. You and I will talk about crickets, how only the males sing.
The architecture of desire

I am drawn to suggest something beyond blood worms. The Betta is becoming dismembered, his fins rotting beneath their blue exterior. I lean, comfortable, towards the tank to watch him, thinking about my own deterioration, how it is my birthday today. There is no advertisement for happiness above my one small window, no guarantee that I will spend this day any differently. I wish I could take the Betta out of his tank so he could talk to me, a small friend amongst only a handful of friends. He does not like the architecture of desire, or at least that is a feeling I assign to his tiny blue body, hiding amidst the leaves of the water plant I have placed for his enjoyment. This is what happens when you try to own something beautiful, to cure your emptiness with a shining creature. I am alone again in my apartment with a fish that will not look at me. How strange to anticipate the return of his gaze. I did not guess this would be my lot, waiting for a Betta to consume a few blood worms bloated and floating at the top of his tank. The few disturbances in my night are caused by lack of willingness. How close we all are to longing for what will restore us to our former selves, the fish I saw in the store that day not long ago, content in his Tupperware container with its loose lid for guiding him to what I thought was safety. I have miscalculated desire again, not my own, but that of something I have no control over. I walk around the apartment, guilty of bringing another early recklessness.
A practical solution to desire

I want to be in the middle of a fish tank, pushing towards plastic plants that welcome me because they do not know what else to do. I love birds, because of their small win over gravity, how the universe accepts rather than denies them. All of this is getting at the shining feeling of wanting to be loved. A silly hush comes over me when I walk through the subway, as if inviting those strangers I bump up against to reach out their arms and cradle me. Yesterday, a man preaching said *Thank you for coming to church* and I thought how this was as much a church as anywhere. This is me watching the road as the train moves towards a concrete example of bliss. When I get where I’m going, I’ll be the sweetest, most pliable person on earth. You can ask me anything, like in those moments before sleep. Truth is an anecdote for need, or maybe it’s just the way we comfort those we want to suppress.

I pushed my hair back today to be more of who I was and the exposure made me realize February is a poor excuse for a month, fickle and broken like the fins of a fish that has rubbed too long against the false inhabitants of its world. It is not yet night, but I imagine the dark already, how it will bloom around me like a blanket. The injured Betta is swimming through the tank, looking for a way out. I admire the scenery, not yet knowing that the tiny fish is in ruins because of it. To me, the view is perfect, a watch wound just right, a tin of cookies that have not yet been touched. By morning, the fish will be barely able to swim. I will bring it to an early resolution, projecting pain onto its compact body. It will feel light on the way to the bathroom, more like a spider than a fish. Once I have disposed of it, I will be left with a wet napkin, the only evidence of beauty I will be able to find as I hover near the tank, deciding where to put my longing.
Anatomy of a breakup

You are a beautiful addiction, someone who copies the faults of those you love. The fish you bought crash all over the bowl, swimming into the sides because you taught them damaged physics, the mechanics of being alone. This is what I remember about your feelings. Cupcakes aren’t suicide notes but they demand attention. I press my face against your clothes when you are not there, an act of respect or sorrow. There is the emptiness of a clipped bird between us, that rattling that occurs when you are anywhere near. I long to get on my knees, my mouth an apology, but you are sleeping in the next room these days of indifference. Not even hesitant touching takes place. October is lonely without you, more so because you are here. I want something to separate us, a firework display or a hedge of roses. Soon it will be winter and we will gather at dusk like shy horses. The living room will be filled with what we do to each other, all the places we put our mutual heartache. Years from now, we’ll wonder at our sadness, look back as if on a great snowstorm. The calendar softens grief but not before it rips us apart. This is a time for being cleaved.
Sunday swim

I am crying in this universe of water, this soft pool with its men echoing my loneliness across the lanes. Last night, I stroked your arm until it became an object of forgetting, a gentle reminder that the night is filled with clothes until we take them off one item at a time, the flowers you gave me glowing in the lamplight like fireflies or some distant solitude I am not yet ready to surrender.

I would not say the stars are sad, only that they are a force to be reckoned with in the sky like that, thrown into the heavens like a pair of eggs or anything without cause. I would say reckless but I am feeling just a little happy and words like that hold too much. Like a balloon with its proclivity towards wanting, or is it too full to know this.

I do not know the distance we crossed last night, how little is left to guess at. I wonder who you are easing my pain for even a few brief minutes, the interval of bodies dictating where my mind travels away from its usual function. This morning, the smashing of tears in the pool, how eager I was to let out my grief. It is then that there is room for the opposite – when the sun leaves, only then the moon.

I am collapsing again into nostalgia, this delicate happiness waning. There is nothing I can grasp onto for too long except the remembrance of hands across my body, how there was once someone to hold me. I am not saying there is love in comfort, only that the familiar wins each round. The southernmost star makes me think of a bird, close enough to trick. The sky is crammed with frightened things, only you won’t know it from here.
**The slow lane**

I don’t remember anything about God.
We were swimming and then we weren’t –
you were on the side and I couldn’t see you
for a minute. The beauty of forgetting
all the pain you’d been through.
I like old mistakes.

The next time we swim, let’s be in the center
where no one notices us. I’m practicing
detachment these days, trying to separate myself
from my feelings. When I pray, I’m pretty sure
I’m doing it wrong. You’re not supposed to pray
for yourself so I think of you, how you gave away
everything you loved.

Sometimes when I’m in the pool it feels
like I’m falling, a piece of candy from a piñata
or anything that doesn’t belong here.
The moon is going to rise again tomorrow
and I’ll have a response. I’m ashamed to say
I think the stars are some kind of distant
experiment, the sort of unintended prettiness
no one knows how to appreciate. Or maybe
I’m putting words in everyone’s mouths,
creating tiny little victims. I think I’m going
to go home and lie down until winter passes,
or until it’s time to go back to the pool.
Everything that happens there is pure,
swim caps moving like flowers.
Or maybe it’s just the lane we swim in,
how we know the little that is required of us.
There is no end to longing

The fish swim beneath an artificial
bulb. There is endless jealousy
with the dog. He experiences his feelings
alone. As do I, lodged in the sofa’s red
mouth. The dark expands like a stomach,
the fish congregating in the red
plastic foliage. I want to linger
amidst their sluggishness, to invite
myself into the bowl until I pass out from beauty
or drown. Maybe I need to be a little more
drunk or less aware of God. Why can’t love
have less to do with tranquility.
I put a plastic horse in the tank.
The fish ignore it. I have created
a lovely carnival. Nothing makes sense
anymore, not birdsong or the purple lotus
that clings to the side of their tiny
universe, the way I envy the fish
their anonymity, how they have forgotten
to arrange themselves to my gaze.
I am not the God of anything.
I am the original person who loved you

My heart is breaking because of the truth of all this, a set of crickets blooming in the next room, the memory of a memory of having loved you on a table with a pair of salad tongs rubbing up against each other. You can do this with anything – make wood sound like music – if you try hard enough. I crave God so much I sit on my knees every day at seven. This lasts only five minutes, but it is five minutes away from you. I need to remind myself there is no us anymore, no lying down next to you at night, your hand hovering above me like a Reiki master or someone who is afraid to touch someone. I am too tired not to believe, too tired to remember why we are not for each other, why your daughter will forget my name in a few weeks or days and I will be left saying hers over and over into a paper napkin. Everything falls apart at some point. Nothing can solve this, not the bird caught in the air conditioner this morning and unexpectedly singing, not the way the bees swarmed the window, mistaking a clump of leaves for a hive.
Pretty living room

The nearness is too much for him, the distance they have traveled from the hive. They have been married thirty years and he feels passive towards her. He wants to write a memo of how he really feels, the pretty living room, all the conveniences that make up this house. The tiny clot that moves in him like rain is one of sorrow, a series of small, irretrievable losses he has been conditioned to absorb. Even the flower’s approach is not kind anymore, the advent of spring that used to leave him breathless. At the wedding, she carried heliotropes, the color of half-mourning, a bouquet not even the loneliest woman wanted to catch. They found they could push their desire together like mattresses. Memory leans on him like a prescription, something you memorize and erase. Most days, his stomach feels like a shaking of bees, the sort of mess you either deal with or ignore. It is not that he never loved her, just there are molecules inside him that demand picking at like a scab. Maybe this is what covers the wound, the early need to embrace someone who doesn’t empty him. If memory was a flower, if it carried more than this dark longing, he could look back at their lives together and see brief instances of joy. Instead, he decorates their afternoons together with trays of tea and water. He buys her a charm bracelet which houses a tiny chair suitable for a child. Is impropriety ever kind, this claim against a restful knowing. He turns his head as she tries it on, fails to prepare her for the pain. If only the truth wouldn’t sing to him in sleep, if only the myth of sterility was less furious. He puts his arms around her in a final act of calm, the sort of reassurance he offers faulty and cloying. They stand like that, hand swollen with age, bathed in the light from the window so you would not know their grief.
What we turn towards

She feels like a magician with a hive of bees, like anything is possible. Maybe she’ll administer sedatives to her enemies, or maybe she’ll turn towards winter and pray for them. She’ll steer them, gracious, into a murmuring field. She will pray hardest for the man she used to love and his daughter. He who plugged himself into her soul like a toaster, the kind of act you can’t hand over later. Deep down, their bed was a nest of something ugly, the mattress punched in by how he slept. She wanted a vending machine, a man you could hollow out and gather kindnesses from. Instead, her arm blistered when he touched her, quiet instances of grief. You could point to her and say this is where he loved her, the difficult ground they traveled to become permanent. He wanted from her a mother for his daughter, all the strategies it takes to build domesticity. They played rock, scissor, paper over and over, the three of them, and someone always won. The adjustments to feeling were not made—she did not grow more adoring of him, only stayed at the same level of emotion. And then, the awkward tilt as he grew more fond of her, the way he stood by as she boiled water for tea. Oh the mundane beauty of worship.

When she prays for him, she imagines the tranquility of his teeth, how they looked like a coast you might drive along. She thinks of his ex-wife, the mother of his child, and her prayer goes the way of rotting pine. Nothing is perfect, not the way she asks for forgiveness, talking to God on a day some people are getting married, others are going to their graves. She is not afraid to name what she is feeling—jealousy with its hired hands rooting around in her. Her thoughts migrate back to the mouth of the man she is praying for, the soft meadow that lives inside of it. There is no place to return to, no amount of tenderness that will allow her to grow graceful in memory. His body is still the site of damage and control, reasons she left him in the first place. Even God cannot encourage towards a false desire. For a few minutes each day, she can convince herself she is grateful. And then, the terrible truth of her heart, the swollen shell it has become. She listens to it beat its demands, a set of noises she would rather ignore than give into.

She wants to abandon the whole mess of religion, turn the hive back into a gentle one where she can reach her arm in and not risk anything. Instead, it feels like a million tiny roses are gnawing at her, misplaced splendor she wants to fold into a pattern and disguise. One day, she will elect herself president of pain, but for now, in the hush of recollection, she will settle for being attached to its outcome.
The necessity of hives

1.
My sister, that floating flower, fell down the stairs. She was stumbling over beauty, the words her head contained like a funeral. Someone I dated moved into what used to be a crematorium. The universe is unlikely to dismantle me today. I have filled myself with pills, a fat piñata swaying in my chair. I am planning on making a home with you later tonight. Together, we will comb your daughter’s hair for evidence of lice and any sadness that has climbed into her in the years since you and her mother loved one another in the big bed with its emptying of bees, the sound of drilling out the window because nothing lives in a place void of love, because they are building a hotel next door for the purpose of devotion, the necessity of hives existing somewhere other than inside this apartment.

2.
There were plenty of years when she couldn’t swallow anything larger than a dime. She was reading *Stumble, Gorgeous* when she fell. Her hand swelled into a small bud, the kind of thing controlled in its pain.

3.
My boyfriend has an injured inner ear and that’s not saying much. I didn’t tell you about the building they tore down to put the hotel up. It was filled with pornographers and their disciples, the kind of people you want to say you’ve seen but not touched. Living in this town, it’s impossible to get away from knowing someone associated with loss.

4.
In childhood, we would house bees in jars. Most people do this with fireflies, but we wanted to shake them until they were incapable of stinging. Death comes early from shaking – the average lifespan of a bumble bee is four weeks. Nothing that is touched to death dies peaceably, I told my sister when she would lift the weakened ones from the jar and pet them and pet them until they took their last breath.
5.
The drilling continues into the night. By morning, half the outside of a hotel is up. It looks like cardboard, or a house made out of cards. I imagine everything temporary that will go on there, how I will get to watch every last fondness. Of course there will be the opposite of affection, the existence of melancholy, the early death of bees and women. I will bear witness to it all.
Last Night

Last night you reminded me
there is just a thin wall separating us from the stars.
Scientists have discovered sadness in the leaves of a clover.
I count my lucky hands in the bathroom sink because it is morning
and you have made your way home.
I imagine you after a night of crying, someone you love in the next room.
You will take her in your arms, open her mouth like a window.
Scientists have discovered the distance between pleasure and pain.
The first man to volunteer sent me a sonnet in the shape of a woman's arm.
"Everything reminds me of cancer," I said when I realized he was not
the sort of man I could love. My sister on the telephone, a part of her
finger in a small dish beside her. It will be a few days before she can touch
her husband, vague weather following her like a gown. I sleep in her bed
while she is gone, her husband singing some song on the sofa.
I will not write to tell you what a lovely time I had, that the ceiling has moved
a few inches since your visit. Instead, I will fasten this to a tree
so you might know in passing
what we could have made of our emptiness.
Something like love

One word for another, love for love or something different like snow. You were giving me a foot rub last night even though you are moving on Saturday, back to the suburbs with your sister and her small family, her daughter who speaks with her hands. The flowers you gave me are just about to die. This is the site of little bumps on skin caused by crying, of hair being pulled out because I have that condition where I do that when you are anywhere near. You are probably wondering what this has to do with snow, or lack of emotion, the pale weather caused by lack of love. Bird stands for bird just as beak stands for beak – picture that if you are going to picture anything. And if you are not, if you are going to rebel against this poem, at least have the decency to think about it once you have gone.
Memory or loss

There’s a fire going and I’m pretending to be invisible, even in this heat, the conversation thief getting away with everything because my mind is located a few days back, to when you were touching me, taking apart my morality like one might dismantle anything delicate. Memory is a place to put your longing, another word for desire. I have a history of hives so I’m going to come away from the fire, thinking about the near dark where we sanctified our mutual deprivation, there in the pretty living room where you’d lived with your ex-girlfriend. It hurts to put my hand on the places you warmed so I focus instead on the tiny clots of blood that have risen under my skin. I’m not sure what’s marking me, a loss of comfort or the sort of allergy that attacks you from the inside. My skin has turned into a sort of pain hive, and I’m trying to listen to what’s being said but the trauma my body has undertaken is putting itself in first place. If there’s a war to be won tonight, I’m not the one to do it. I’m just getting used to being alone, to allowing the rising pleasure of my hand to console the quiet parts of me. It was like this with my sister’s fall, the gorgeous ritual of losing touch with reality. It’s hard to read in the dark, but after you left I opened a book and set about trying to lose myself in someone else’s mouth. Tonight, by the fire, with a dear friend consoling me, or, moreover, talking on and on about his own miniature battles, I feel like the lost element in a periodic table, the one that’s not discovered until it’s too late. Here, in this quiet car crash of thought, in this room swarming with light, I must learn maintenance, the inaudible way we feel even in this reckless weather.
Proof

There is no proof of water, only the humidity following that night
Her fears, little birds in her mouth
It is small, remembered gestures that make this bearable
I am going home tonight to where my parents live
If I died then, I wanted to be looking at something beautiful
My mother burned a moon-shaped hole in her bed
It keeps floating back up at me, a little green God’s eye
When I was a child, Japanese beetles invaded our suburban lawn
A lot of people have lined up to tell me not to do this
I am saying my youth consisted of sex and death
Do not ask me to remember more than that
I want more than anything to know how to love you
I do not want you to think of me anymore
Flowers poking through the snow like toothpicks
The Anti-Romance Novel

We are reading aloud from Raymond Carver again, a short story where very little happens. This is being done while we are having sexual relations, meaning one of us reads while the other does something else. We have talked about this for a long time, and we are finally doing it. You should know this now – we are no longer together. I would say he left me, because it sounds better, but that is not exactly right. The truth is I left him for loneliness, the possibility of longing. You might say I am becoming repetitive. I think it is important to repeat things in order that I might not repeat them. There is no formula to love, only the wrecked stars out the window when you are missing someone, the small dog like a compass in the middle of the floor. I am going to forget what it was like to have someone in my bed at night, to push up against during acts of love.
A consideration of need

I want to write something beautiful about desire, how my father placed a love heater between my mother’s legs to make me. There is something luminous about being unborn, feeding off someone’s cells you will later learn to despise. The cause of emotion is a dream technique, a way to imagine blackbirds swelling to twice their size. Maybe that is more a dark honeymoon, the way we live together and then marry without love. In wartime, there is nothing else to discuss. The dark is here again, and I set out to do something different. I am traveling too far from the source, the quiet couple who imagined me that night in June, a month named after my mother or is it the other way around. My heart throbs for acceptance most days, strangers thick as lilacs in my bed. The surface of my body allows for pleasure. Once, I had a lover who painted me all night. In the morning, he refused to touch me. I can see your lungs, he said. I had become translucent, void of mystery. I lay on my heap of pillows, rejection exploding my insides as if a needle was pointed there. God knows my disappointment, heaped at the foot of the bed like a tiny chest of drawers. If you want to know what’s in me, the gravel and the snow. When it came time to open the door and let him out, I found myself wrapping my arms around his legs like a child. Oh, the albatross of need. When heartbreak threatens, I submit. Red stripes on my chest indicate a poverty nesting in women like me.
A kind departure

We walked through the museum’s heart and I wondered what the walls were made of, never realizing we were a family incapable of anything but loss. I only barely escaped my youth, the record player twisting the same song over and over, the cliff of my mother’s mouth housing a set of teeth that would escape into a sea of regret. I don’t want to tell this story anymore, a softening of birds trapped in the wall to ease our loneliness. There was no kind place to collect yourself in that house, my father’s easy medicine making me into a tiny piñata. I was connected to very little, a string attached to my longing reminding me the span of the yard like a wide hand pressed against my temple, or a gun. I wasn’t going far anytime soon, the names of my heroes plastered to the inside of my head. The heart was in Philadelphia and we walked through holding hands. We must have looked like any family, small grievances tucked away inside us. Or were they wide as oceans, the smash of a moment held up to the ear for examination. If I am bitter about anything, let it be the nature of escape, how the birds were rescued too late and then the reassembled wall never failed to remind me of the casual accident lining us like lungs. I opened myself like a time capsule too early, the vestiges of my compassion having been wearied into the substance inside a bruise. I could drive all the way north and still, there would be no conclusion. Not even the horizon loops around enough to allow for the obscurity of containment, the final decision to ignore the past like seeing a cleft palate for the first time. Or would that require stares, the inevitable deceit. I want so badly to return to the museum, to hear the artificial beating of a heart flooded with symmetry, designed to know all who pass through it.
What we lost then

There was an hour of solitude in your Paris loft, my whole childhood resting in a piece of tinfoil stuck in my finger, a tiny silver splinter you pored over, father and doctor. You would never learn to spell my name or to count back to the day of my birth, but then, in the dim light of illegality, I was your daughter, drowning in the possible poison aluminum offers. And I was grateful to be near death, or far away from the future. It was evening and we could have been anywhere. I loved you because I was meant to rather than out of a sense of obligation that would later grow in me like a tumor etched with nostalgia so that if they went back and studied it, there would be confusion. I don’t remember what I was wearing, but my child’s hips must have appealed to you in some way, because you invited me to dance once it was over, once you had freed me from extinction, and you carried me in your arms to the record player where you ended the loving silence and the room filled for the first time with a voice I could not name, luminous and thick, cradling the air like an infant. Oh divine language of song, let me remember you this way. I was fortunate for once, tinged only with the recollection of sadness. We are meant to live this way, bereft of the supplication of autumn. This was the last time I was innocent, on my way to becoming someone’s pinwheel or temporary dream. That night, dancing in the dimly lit loft, I succumbed to the wrecked universe I was borne into. The ritual of being slender and fought over would come later, the realization that even in the dark it is possible to see.
Cut-outs of the ones I’ve loved

My grandmother would lock herself in the garage to smoke. No one knew what she’d bring back from that solitude. Once, she lashed out at me for knocking against a lamp. I wasn’t sure how to flesh out her anger, to separate that from the woman who would tell me I came from a history of passive aggression, that I should take out my emotions by dancing in the living room while I waited for my grandfather to prepare brunch. I ducked the issue of anger for many years, denying I had any, until I decided I needed a place to put my longing. Anger and longing are not that far apart, and I’d cemented my loneliness with substances like alcohol and the pretty pills that fill up your hand. I took a trip with my grandmother one summer and she smoked the whole way there, filling the car with rings I’d take my hands off the wheel to catch. I’m not saying we weren’t lonely together, just that our feelings snaked around the inside of the car like visible air. I wasn’t ready to admit anything back then, not the way I bashed into people’s hearts and left a trail of bruised parts. One man I loved for the whole year back in 1994 told me I knew nothing of the gorgeous ritual of being alone. He advised me to go to a twelve step group for codependents, only I was already hastening towards an early disaster, pushing him back into the land of rising pleasures where I’d found him. I guess in the end I didn’t learn anything from my grandmother; sometimes in the evening I like to look at images of soft porn where someone’s choking someone else. Maybe that’s not soft to everyone, maybe it’s just how we define love that gets us mixed up in it. I felt more kindness towards my family than anyone else. Maybe this meant I was incapable of affection, the sort of touching you get good at only from practice. You’re probably thinking I’m a porn addict, but there are other things I prefer. I’m making paper dolls shaped like the men I’ve lived with, some carrying domestic traces like vacuum cleaners or soup ladles. I’m thinking of housing them at the window so they can know what it’s like to be divided. I’ll let you know when I’m through.
My endless compliance

I tell my mother I don’t want to talk about natural disasters, how a million sardines washed up on the coast of California and no one’s sure why. Maybe they were swept up by grief, a negative theology concerning how the ocean swells to contain them. A set of bridesmaids twirls in the store downstairs from where I work. In some ways it’s a miracle, finding someone to love you. Some people carry empty luggage around the parking lot, waiting to locate beautiful objects. There’s a splendid little war going on, the covenant of kneeling exes and those who are learning to speak with their hands. I never wanted to mix the men I’ve slept with, but the internet is banging them together like hips. There’s a shattered altar for each one, a place I used to go to study the past. I’ve learned to focus on the shiny matter of the present, the meadowlark with its bright underparts, the blood poppy with its crumpled petals before blooming. Tell me if I’ve built a frame too delicate to house splendor, if these images belong somewhere else. I’m infamous for inflating desire, building a bed of demonstrative behavior. The sky hasn’t gone all the way dark, but it isn’t letting us see ourselves, either. If you want another drink, give me an indication. Even the inventor of feeling went blank sometimes. All this is to talk about my enemies, the inverted friends I used to have. May God lift me into a kinder place, one in which the end comes quickly for those who suffer, the season’s newest conquest bursting out of the ground. I’m standing on a battlefield and yet it’s cheerful here. They say my neighborhood is filled with waste, I’m waiting for a sign to leave, like a swarm of bees appearing above my door. I’ll make a wild pitch for exiting then, what with the evening’s reckoning itself, the truth emerging like a row of thumb tacks.
The evolution of touching

I know nothing of peonies when the woman gives her talk on them at my sister's poetry school. It is June and my sister has just fallen, her head ballooning and beautiful. I have never seen her as at peace as pain provides, focusing her worries like a pool of blood focuses you one summer a long time ago I broke a jar of pickles into the below ground pool at my father's house. he went to hit me, swung his arm like a bat to my tiny piñata body, the one he had touched and touched until it became something that liked touching. That doesn't sound right. Maybe beauty depends on definitions, maybe if I don't know what a peony is I don't know anything. I am dumb awful at the reading, sitting in the back row, a panel of stone or a woman who has grown into knowing, grown into a set of scenes we call memory tell me there is a time I can go back to that is pale and lovely as my arm writing this, a time that means nothing, that carries no layered meanings like a cake or the briny back of a fish. tonight, the truth mimics me, a fun house mirror I have stepped into that leaves my sister looking like a bruised boxer, the inside of my head.
How to count to ten

God is in this little flower, here in my hand.
The years have been kind and unkind.
I'm writing this from a remote island.
If nothing I'm saying makes sense, know this:
seldom do I make sense. My mother likes my poetry
to be obvious. I need to outgrow the desire to be loved,
at least by those who will never make their way
up the mountain. When my sister and I went to the cult
for the weekend to practice yoga, I think we fell
in love with the small room where we stayed,
the two beds in their smooth rows. Winter has made
its preference clear – to undo my mood like the cat
and its yarn. If you dream, the nauseous rush
of you, dream of a man you might know in your
sleep. I am not asking to know your red flush
only that you declare yourself lonesome and sweet.
Any men left on the street will be mine to overcome.
The cups of the four leaf clover, the counting
part of me. To know what we are is to rest when we go
to our beds. The small lobes come into focus
when you turn the camera on, the way to capture nature
before it begins its slow job of waning.

First appeared in Lyre Lyre
One winter evening

I am no longer interested in walking through the woods. Someone I love is in isolation in San Diego and someone else is fondling small boys. I go online to buy a dress, the tunnel of nothing that will become me. Everything is new until it is not. I would say I am a prisoner to loneliness, but there are spots of beauty and I am tired of studying myself in the mirror, so I go to the local bar where no one will ever know me. The words in my mouth spill into the pieces of a broken cup that line the bar like soldiers who have had it out with war. I’ve never been to Kansas, but my friend says there are a lot of metaphors there so I plan a trip, from where I am at the bar, but no one’s paying attention and the winter lawn outside which is comprised of cement and oversized trashcans calls to me the way snow does. They haven’t predicted any snow but I’m hoping, because weather clears the city like a throat. When I get home, I try to touch my longing. The kettle sounds my roommate’s thirst, a distraction I can’t get past. I think of the men who have loved me, the ones who didn’t send hate notes when we broke up. Maybe I should call one of them to come over, visit me in the night the way a lover would. We can pretend to be anything when we are facing our sorrow down the long pipe.

First appeared in Lyre Lyre
Old fashioned flight

I’m on an old fashioned flight that plays movies from the eighties. My sister’s learning to love herself in a locked facility and I’m sandwiched by two middle aged ladies with their hands folded as close to their sex organs as they can get without being deliberate. I don’t like to imagine the sex organs of strangers, but I do it a lot. They’re remodeling the bathroom so the other one has a long line and while I’m in it I think about the space it takes to love someone, the way we rearrange ourselves in order to accommodate what will probably end in loss. Everyone has a comfort zone, mine is just a little smaller than most. It’s like a miniature golf course as opposed to a regular sized golf course, or one of those tiny bottle of liquor you can slide in your purse. Last night at the hotel I could hear weeping from the next room. I wanted to do offer my assistance and I wanted to stay comfortably away from tragedy at the same time. Maybe that’s how it is with relationships, or maybe I’m just good at stuffing situations into spaces they don’t fit into. It’s hard to believe I’m lonely when I’m surrounded by people. The woman next to me is waving down the flight attendant and I’m pretty sure I’m not going to last a whole six hours like this. At least her hands are safely away from her sex organs now – I’d name them, but it’s dangerous to say anything true in a poem. The issue of trust is what sent my sister to the facility in the first place, and I’m not saying I’m much better at it. My mother was really good at archery before she had us and then once she did she’d aim her threats towards the invisible targets places strategically on our heads. My first day at the hotel I swam in the pool but I didn’t stay long enough to do it again. I wonder if I’ll miss the weeping when I get home – you get used to anything if it touches you enough. The difference between being touched and being moved is delicate, like my sister going from a single room to a double. I have a box of disposable gloves on the table in my room. There are traces of childhood everywhere.
**Affection for water**

Once, sea grasses covered my legs
They were a child’s legs, easily hidden
beneath skirts. Summer climbs out of the sky
and into dusk tonight, wherever dusk lies
when it is not straight above us. Maybe this
is what it feels like to be surrounded,
like the boy I dated who went to a quiet
war or the one whose sister got held up
at gunpoint because another customer
went crazy in the firearms department
at Walmart and the police had to be called.
Every male in their family had schizophrenia,
so she was used to the raucous caused
by a stranger holding something that could
kill someone. Youth is dangerous when
your parents don’t show you how to love.
It used to be they thought autism was the result
of a cold mother. Maybe I’m saying everything
you don’t want is the result of a similar occurrence
or lack of it. My own mother loved me too much,
knew every line on my legs. The sea, a place
I felt comfortable, being carried without much
effort. If this is a love poem, I’m glad I don’t
know what it’s about.
All I ever wanted

There was a custodial responsibility for health, all we cannot control in our cube shaped homes with their family member who own hearts in the shape of mouths. All I ever wanted was to be well, to pocket my intentions like everyone else. I am housing a locker room of teenage girls. Memory lingers even when it is inappropriate to feel, the lamp I matched to my father's left ventricle beginning its descent. It has been years since I altered the furniture of this room, since anybody reminded me of my first crush. The sky has its way with stars night after night, and I pretend not to know. They teach us there is no way to lose a war, but I think the pretty end is in sight. A stuntwoman gathers on my bed whenever I have guests. I have put the word dissociation in too many poems. They teach us it is preferable to lie still. The alternative would be to fit into a tiny compartment like a pair of glasses or a glove. My mother had a hatchback and we would fill it with stringed instruments taller than our arm. To keep any of this, I must continue to function. Falling behind or getting lost in the snow has its benefits, but not here. When you are wearing white, it is easy to get lost in a blizzard. Some great painter died with a brush in his hand. I don't know if that is true. In a simpler time, it wouldn't matter. We would come back from Ikea flattered that it even existed. There would be no necessity for books, or small tables that come apart. It is evening, and I am considering my resignation. Strangers line the streets thick as flies and I am tired of being eager. I watch them from here, where they appear like thumb tacks, those terrible spears. My mother is allergic to anesthesia, but the milder drugs seem to do wonders. There will never be a shortage of someone to love me.
It is not my place to discuss the details

At the sixth grade science fair I fell in love with a prisoner. Everyone back then was in some sort of miserable silence. That was before I knew what it was like to sleep with someone. I read in a poem you pay prostitutes not to sleep with you but to leave afterwards. Those people have obviously never been to a cuddle party. My friend Margaret frequents them. When she leaves, the mess of her hair, all that lying down. The vise of arms in the room, what I imagine going on. I’ve been to a sex party at a hotel bar, the impromptu kind that just take hold of you and before you know it you’re the center of attention. It’s better when it’s an expensive hotel, the kind where you can move upstairs to the pool area. Not that I’m speaking from experience. There’s an air of denial surrounding sex, even in a poem. Let’s just hope it’s good or it’s not even worth the thin veil of authenticity. I’m tired of taking initiative and having it not get me anywhere. I wonder what will come of this – my mother, who reads all my poetry, will probably write a letter to someone. Everyone asks forgiveness in their own way. Maybe I should be writing a letter to God. I have a God box on the top of my tall dresser. There’s not a lot in it. It looks like a stomach, the box. I made it, so it’s handmade. My sixth grade science project was, too. My stepfather helped me, so most of the credit goes to him. I guess this is a confession more than a poem. Maybe I should donate it to the Catholic church when I’m through. They’re in the business of apologizing for beauty, anything that aches too much. I’ve been holding the same shell since childhood, mottled and true to life. If it wasn’t so small, I’d hug it, it’s been that good to me. The kind you hold to your ear and the ocean roars at you like a thumb. When night comes, this will all be a distant snapshot, something to laugh at. Memories clump together like episodes of an old TV show or handfuls of wet berries. The dark is icy and we’re here by accident. We have the luxury of pushing off.
Small rituals of desire

She is tired of narcotics, the ritual visits she is trying to escape. She dreams of living in Kansas, somewhere flat where she can ease herself into a routine. The last room she lived in caught fire. She is afraid to go anywhere red and mean, which precludes her from entering the subway, that cavern of need. She dreams of tongue kissing, even at eighty, even in an open field where there is no possibility of touch. Her mouth is filled with lonely places, the type of ache only a companion might reach. She often sees swallows before sleep, tiny perching birds characterized by their adaptation to aerial feeding. The struggle against wreckage is never ending, the sort of peace that emerges from embrace. Lovers litter her past. No longer capable of destruction, she begins each night with a gentle weeping. The rafters are filled with bees. Anything that blooms longs to be loved. Parts of her still glisten with desire. Friends turn away in horror or indifference. If she could make you see how far she has traveled, you might begin to know why she is oblivious to black holes, the incessant activity of bumblebees. Nothing she feels inside is related to the damaged box of stars moving across the sky. It is amazing to carry grief like dark lungs. The past is not as cruel as what is to come. Oh, the forest, brief bed of poverty. Even in sleep, we hunger for distraction. This is the cure for adoration, this practiced departure we ease ourselves into like a skirt.
A brief history of the past

I told Bobby I’d never be alone on purpose.
The agency of pushing and prodding has run its course.
I divulge that now, after a night of bad dreams.
No one cares that I’m saying this, but I’ve become accustomed
to the quiet. Winter has me touching my loneliness,
the part where there is nothing. Once, I went running
through the woods. Don’t think I haven’t done this.
In the distance, the dark seems manageable.
Tonight, I will dream the blue flower that made me.
My mother banged herself against my father in an act
of kindness or will. Like a small murder, I was born.
There are towns where killing someone is practically legal.
The melancholy denial of anything constituting love.
A lot of serial killers have sex with their victims.
Mutuality, that dark bird. This poem is filled
with repetition, even where you don’t see it.
I adore alternative therapies like truth and reconciliation.
Despite some flaws, it is generally thought to have been
successful. The portal to happiness is suffering.
After we broke up, you would drive by my apartment
calling out to me. I was in my room, listening against
the winter lawn. I only have sad, quirky things to say.
Don’t look to me to resemble myself. Memory burns
sweet holes in the sheet like my mother’s long
cigarettes. Bring me the past, the white petal of it,
bring me foxglove and thrum. Steer me into the familiar
condition, your body gracious in how it invites me
into loss. Promise we will emerge, fresh as berries,
unaltered by how we house and push ourselves.
The legality concerning public touching

I bang on my heart, a rough citizen this morning.  
So many stars are scattered over Wyoming, a place  
I will probably never see. My apartment feels  
like a one gallon fish tank. There is little progress  
in this deep solitude. Last night, the sky dropped  
out of sight in my dream. This is a happy continuation  
of the poem about porn shops, the kind where you walk in  
and they sit you down and touch you. I have the desire  
to tell them I am not as casual as that, but already  
they are undoing my dress. This is not a dream  
but a fantasy, one I have never had the decency  
to get caught in. I’m not clear of the legality concerning  
public touching, but I’m pretty sure you can get hauled  
into court for letting yourself go. My grandmother wore  
makeup until she died. Her left breast was missing,  
and my grandfather pointed it out often. Still, eye shadow  
made her feel complete in some way. That, and the lemon  
tree out back with its glorious fruit. Towards autumn,  
it was slow to produce and the neighbor’s pool would fill  
with leaves. I liked it clogged like that, the way they floated  
to the top like a dog. Not that I haven’t lost something  
I loved. It’s just, how can you love somebody and yet want  
to manage the amount of happiness that person is allowed?  
I see death as a sort of freedom, like sitting in a chair  
and letting a stranger caress you. I’d like to be still  
if this happens, and at least a little young. I’m turning  
forty-two on Thursday, so it’s getting late, the solitude  
lengthening like a shadow. I want to tell you about  
the time my voice collected in my throat, a sack of candy  
I couldn’t contend. I was silent for the better part of a week,  
my mother calling to listen to me breathe. Speaking again  
was like eating honeysuckle on my way home from school.  
This, as a child, slender and straight as a plant. Afternoons  
revolved around what the universe had left for us. This poem  
has taken a turn, and there’s no going back. I am delirious  
for the past but I won’t often admit it. My grandmother  
rubbing Nivea into her face at night, the way she would sleep  
with her one breast on a twin bed because my grandfather  
could not bear to feel the absence of beauty.
Daytrip to Pennsylvania

The bird’s nest in her hair comes from a lack of brushing. I am behind her all the way to Pennsylvania where I see a friend from the city. I bring my small dog. The Mennonites who are also guests ignore us, although one small boy makes inappropriate motions with his tongue. There is a horse tied to a tree and I end up crying even though I never cry and the chickens have a lot of room but I am afraid for them. The sky is a striped vest of clouds. Gregory, our host, wears rubber boots because the ground is wet and will swallow your feet. My sister, the one with the messy hair, takes photographs with her boyfriend of bees drowning in a bowl of honey. It was my idea and I want to somehow make this visible even though I am close to not caring who is responsible for beauty. On the way home, her boyfriend hits a white van. We are talking about Burning Man, how you can trade art for small sex acts. “Isn’t that prostitution?” I ask but my sister is busy looking at the van and the question gets lost somewhere between Kenmare Street and home. Because it is winter, the dog and I are wearing our coats when my sister’s boyfriend drops us off. My own boyfriend, who I am in the process of breaking up with, is there waiting to touch me. There is a storm beginning out the window, a set of women who look like twins walking in their red hats. “Let’s watch a movie,” I say because this is our way of signaling that we don’t want anything romantic, that our bodies are to remain separate. We sit on the couch and I knit, thinking about how the sky might still be striped without me there to bear witness, how I know nothing of what is going on except in this narrow room in this apartment with someone I am learning to unlove.
Lower East Side Party

At the Halloween party on Sunday couples slaughtered one another.
One poet was a farmer, her girlfriend a sliced open chicken.
All of this is too much for me to bear. I am for the type of love
where red stands for beauty rather than death. Some people will say
three abstractions in a row are too much, but I believe in the perfection
of large things. The distance swallows an elephant the same way
it does a cat. When I was walking away from you last night,
your voice a hush against the dark, I thought of a photograph
of a man and a woman learning to leave each other like that,
learning in the space of a few months or years what it means to let go
and then come together again, over breakfast or dinner or even
a walk in the park. Your heels clicked like a collage on the pavement—
I could hear you adding to our affection by moving in the opposite
direction. One woman was a bowl of fruit, each piece round
with a groove running from the stalk to the tip. I lifted that directly
from the dictionary, or wherever it is words become themselves,
fastened like an arm or a leg to other parts to form meaning.
Every night I give myself to you, and every morning I learn
to live with what I am missing.
I am not here for your amusement

I have been touching myself since 1979. That is an approximation, as is memory, and song. The remnants of accidents are conscious like pieces of glass, not expressions of anxiety and loss. I blame myself for fish’s bloated body, how it swims around the tank looking for a way out. I call the pet store for an early remedy aimed at a tiny, ruined thing. They tell me to traffic in flowers, that there is no reparation for negligence. They do not know I am always assigning feelings, be it to a boyfriend or a blood red tulip sitting quietly on the table.

The year I began masturbating, I learned to think of something other than myself. This is where abnormalities emerged, the sort of projection my therapist calls a failure to suppress unwanted impulse. You might think I am organized like a religion in my knowing when this mental process started, but to me it is no different from playing the cello. I know the year that originated, how Gabriella was my stand partner, how my small wrists ached around an instrument that was too wide for them. I put up walls to establish myself as someone who could not absorb any more discomfort. You’re probably wondering why I’m not talking about pleasure, that source of enjoyment that led me directly to pain. I am not here for your amusement, nor am I the live action girl you see in those booths.

When I was small, I would still the rocking horse rather than ride it. I was always touching something to tranquility, bestowing insects with kindnesses like prayer and brief attempts at cloning. I was happy then, bent over an ant, pulling it apart in the name of science and multiplication. My generosity ends there, for guilt follows me like a fork and a metal detector, that infrequent wedding ring and then, when you find it, it comes replete with a history of desire. I don’t want anything with a past, not a fish in its purpled tank, not a billowed ring of smoke emanating from someone’s mouth. I want every object to start now, every person who’s going to be beaten and loved, in that order, to emerge out of thin air.
What we offer each other

You and I were trying to make our loneliness a little less awkward, pushing mutuality back and forth like you can only do as adults. When you are still, you seem far away like a flower, something impossible to touch without destroying. I love the possibility of horizon, the smoke and unbearable pain of knowing someone. Not all lines I like ring true. I am saying there is deep solitude in the unison of hips, the stunned universe of sadness that gets cleaned each morning by the dew. They’ll watch us in our ecstasy, those who made us and those who would have liked to have clustered together our pleasant sounds into one long record of desire. There is archaic endearment and then there is the reason for feeling lamplight and wonder, the specificity of calling a landscape into being. We are painters at this, the way your hands are a mistake covering my heart, the way we were never meant to know one another so intimately. Love conditions us to let us ache, and yet there is the trajectory of sense clotting me like anything that is too much. What we offer each other is falling through the ice, breaking apart like a dish and not being capable of doing this with anyone else. A hush comes over the body’s openings when it has made its way through. Feelings associated with friendship protect us from blooming too wide. It is November and I can’t feel my feet against the crush of snow. Tell me there is more to this than crossing the park to reach you. I am turning back, an organization of singing. Let me drone out emotion for the sake of realizing I like the awkwardness of longing. It will happen anyway, we will grow tired of our clumsy movements towards bliss. We will want to be warmer, in a climate that can offer us the necessary embrace. I must have read a hundred pages on need. Our friends are here. It is time to loosen what we do in the back room with its factory heat. It will happen anyway, on days like today, but we should not invite attachment like dusk invites the dark, like anything that relies on an unraveling.
Commitment to adequacy

I was rescued from sex by indefinable devotion, the tender management of adoration. Language forks between obscenity and worship, what I mean by the complete absence of desire. My soft palate was wounded in a happy incident, the last of its kind this winter. My unlikely mood with its possibility of extinction, the gardenia in my hair already beginning its downward spiral. I’m nodding at the prospect of escape, moving away from snow towards wherever it is cardinals go when it’s cold. If there’s a sign of life, I’m waving it in my room, the dog contained inside the nauseous rush of my fear, the fact that a lot of people love to touch what doesn’t belong to them. Once I tied the dog outside the Laundromat and when I came for him a child had him suspended in a moment. I’m afraid of management systems, the whole awful truth of unfolding. I’ll contrive an instant before I let it dissolve into the ordinary clover. Medicine brings this into focus, my father bent over dishes containing parts of each of us we’d rather not know. The sun promises to sour anything it loves while we lie next to each other after an afternoon of mindless devotion, everything coming full circle like gestures we practiced in front of the mirror before unveiling them to a sea of adoring fans. No one loves heartbreak like I do, the unbearable way we free ourselves of want. God knows who loves me. For now, that’s going to have to be enough.
Landscape

I couldn’t will you to love me, there in the park on my one sheet I’d stripped the bed to fit. I talked you into taking me home and spent a few hours pretending you belonged to me, the heart tricking itself once more. In solitude, I am beholden to memory, a worn vision of skinned plums, stars leaning on the sky like anything loosened into promiscuity. The one time I was pure lasted half my life. And then, the gentle unwinding. I wanted a direction to send my longing. Back came an empty bulb, dangerous to look at. Nothing blossoms in an easy landscape, the kind you turn towards and avoid. The diagnosis is harsh for behavior everyone knows. I have no manners left to dictate desire, the lovely ritual with which we disguise ourselves in order that we might focus our love. I am a remote island, a planet echoing loss. Send me your gifted, your honeyed men. I have sliced the hive open in anticipation. Its papery contents are clear, tiny favors that latch on and ready us to dream. We will go on living, the green returning to remind us everything is stretched across a map, that a softening will occur and we will know the difference between emblems of beauty and disgrace. I have grown fond of being felt up in public rooms, of being distanced from those who come to gather those we have chosen to favor. Remember what it was like to be followed to the bed like a flower, that dumb concoction of splendor we yearn for and forget. Sweet clover, carrion of need. I am emptying my cup, learning the difference between hollow and dark. I will draw the blinds in a symbol of arrival, the warm queen preparing for deceit.
Pleasure world

From where I sat I could see only his loneliness.
He was said to explore the city’s floating world –
the night-time world of pleasure which formed
the backdrop of his paintings. Some of us are flawed
by trivial concerns, but he didn’t care about anything
except the inclination towards desire he found
in those houses. Sometimes I used to drink with him,
to do what is called chatting, where people say
unconnected things to each other. He used to tell me
the best things are put together of a night
and vanish with the morning. Once, he painted
one of the women. His wife found it to be a lovely
likeness, even though she had never seen her.
Some marriages are based on ideals and others
on imagination. I named my fish after him,
this talented man with a proclivity towards splendor,
the fragments of an evening we spend in hushed
quarters silencing our greedy parts. We are drawn
to consumption, claiming one another like we would
a pet or someone we might ask to take their place
in our bed. The fish swims in circles in its bowl,
unaware of the consequence of overeating.
I feed it blood worms, poppy red and staining.
What this has meant

I am navigating feeling in this marriage bed, this new knowing
made possible by a kind contract which pushes us together
in order to procreate or get along. My body refuses to see you
humming along its circumference as if to say *everything I own is tinged
with sadness*. My body, that refuge for emotion. At night, the dark
thins me out like a destination for travel. I am the road you drive on,
the dangerous clot of weather you touch like a stage with its tiny,
fondled actors. I will join the bees in knowing the swell and rumor
of rain, how to knock among the blossoms without bruise.
Anything that belongs to the region of a soft slowing provides the outline
for knowing you, the brief assumption that a night of initiation offers.
Sometimes, my heart beats in my hair. The places I love you
move across my body, a declaration of desire or need. An insect
has made its home in my left thigh, a late summer hive resembling
a glissade. This is a departure from beauty, or maybe beauty is contained
in punishment. The diagnosis of heat makes it difficult to endure loneliness.
When I grieve, drug me. Let me know what it means to embrace.
Love hotel

The way a hotel acts makes me feel differently about what we do there. This one has a leak just over the bed. The issue of mutual using arises, how you think I will never be a bride. Nothing blooms in this space created to house intimacy or to hush it like a parent. I am my own arbiter of feeling, making sure the dome of laughter travels between our mouths like a drug. I never act like this alone, small breakthroughs regarding my body loosening the bed. Please love me while there is still time, while I am capable of both seduction and sadness. I am standing on the bed now, waving a pillowcase to indicate loss. The ways I suffer are not obvious like the grasshopper in the bathroom with its bent back where you eased a trashcan over it earlier in an attempt to save it. A lot of what we do fails to hit. You say insects don’t feel pain, but I can see it grieving quietly in the corner. Everything in me aches. This type of brief love, hollowed and fluttering. I can walk away from here, but it will not be long before I recognize myself again. God watches over us, nude and filled like balloons with anguish. I can say a few things about convenience, but you could probably say more. The sky is indifferent when we pull the curtain back, revealing a night more metal than sound. Sometimes I wish I understood my longing, could touch my broken places with something more than need. The distance between the window and the bed contains another round for us, the loose bond of not wanting to part tying us here like a blizzard.
Proof of choking

You are stopping my voice, your hand on my throat where I have been touched before. These kindnesses show how little you know me, muffling my response to strangeness. We are lying on the bed after, the site of love’s opposite, my promiscuity banging up against your desire. We continue to do this, week after week, other lovers shadowing us like flowers or puppets. I am turning this into something vulgar. Or maybe it always was. If you project my voice into you, feel its thrum against your ribcage, that word that means less the more you say it. Thrum, thrum, thrum. Petal and piston, all the parts of a flower. Say anything besides sex, besides the clear knowing of bodies that layer together like slices of cake. In the midst of knowing you, I am filled with instances of lying down that meant more to me than this. I am not good at being unrestrained, not good at being touched in the various places that threaten to prosper despite my failure at knowing you beyond this brief blooming.
The kind that are reluctant to hurt you

Maybe this is all that is expected of us,
fighting for space in the pornography of the dark.

I am singing to you, the soft grass of my mouth.
This is me being polite, a quiet flower close to blooming.

All the things that cluster around mourning,
our bodies reaching towards each other in acts of love or kindness.

I haven’t told you how delicate my throat is,
a pair of yellow birds small as butterflies mating in the yard.

She has been having small seizures in her sleep,
something you have caressed by mistake.

We push into each other like every other couple trying to love
or however long it is the stars last.

Everything I have not told you stands on my tongue like a tiny soldier,
bits of dulled beauty you want to hover near and then avoid.

Maybe if i don't know what a peony is i don't know anything.
Everything has a way of becoming familiar.

My mother taught me never to trust the heat.
There is no great lesson here.

They breathe into each other’s mouths until they pass out,
moving closer towards God or farther away.
June

We sent our child back that June day when Lily sat with me in the recovery room until her fingers bled from biting them. You'd think she was the one losing something, but I was as indifferent as a slice of cake on my green chair with its puffy arms I thought of turning into a dress. I thought of anything so I wouldn't have to imagine you in your meditation chamber, the room you had rented to make sense of what was happening. You said we could tell your parents we were having a baby and they would buy us a stroller and a bassinet, as if that was all we would need. I held the phone away from me so your kind voice would not reach the innocent ears I was fairly certain I was going to hire a doctor to remove. And when I did, on that day Lily sat in the recovery room biting her hands, the bucket placed strategically between my legs, my thoughts bounced from your lovely, young face to my own sad youth, years spent swallowing small items to stand in for grief. A penny from a doll's shop is probably still floating around in me.
**History**

You felt like a pop tart, a piece of rye toast, saying “I don’t love you anymore” in the near-dark.

I’m thinking about John growing monarchs in his living room, how the mice ate paper bags while we fought.

The little birds in my mouth whistle and thrum.

There are always a series of losses, a dozen sets of hands undoing the buttons on my dress.

It is night and I am thinking about teeth and broken bits of flower, the parts of us that leave holes in the universe.

My hand blossoms until a bruise forms there.

Last weekend we drove upstate to a small cabin, flowers poking through the snow like toothpicks. I was prepared to love anyone.

I lay like a flag, draped across your bed, the song of my hips beneath you.

I thought of God while you moved up and down on me and glue, and Zachary Price who ate paste.

When you were through, two small hernias hidden beneath your jacket, the bed stained as if a war had been fought.

“What a mistake we bear together,” I said, my voice the hush of funeral homes, and sunrise and drowning.
The sky, that artery for beauty, opened up.
I could see it out the window, a landscape where you
were a dot I had no responsibility
towards loving.
The fantasy of love

We were considering making religious dolls of each other. He said it was because we were lonely, and kinky. The embarrassment of ideas, and speaking them aloud. I had on a new dress, the ruffled kind. I felt new, younger than I was. I forgot all about my body for a little while, thinking about what it would be like to have him for a boyfriend. I wanted him to rescue me from the life I was making with my small dog and the papers I would write for school. I imagined him kissing me, leaning me back like a schoolgirl. *Love evolves slowly in the suburbs* my high school boyfriend used to say or maybe I’m just making that up. I feel absence more strongly than most people. The reasons for moving keep me here. Like this instance on the sofa with someone I find lovely, someone I could as easily love as ruin. We’re all capable of hurting but only a few of us are flexible enough to admit it. When we rise from the sofa, the sky operating on itself to enable the dark, there is the usual ring of stars. It is late for love, the room staring us down with its labored walls, the mirror on the way to the bed telling me I am too old for this delicate blooming. I contain all abandonment already, but when he leaves the part of me that most resembles happiness empties like a winter pool. The dark continent of feeling crushed and small. In memory, I am propped in his arms, a clover in focus or a field of them.
 Everything we felt was related to convenience

I am a case for bewilderment and you, you are awake in a way no one who has been molested can be, as if someone is about to bake you a cupcake and you have absolutely no idea why. The dark was plush until it became scary. That’s me talking. This is all me talking. Feelings are associated with hurt which is associated with fondling. I overheard a conversation where someone was telling someone else about a situation of mutual incest. I interrupted to say I don’t think incest is ever mutual but they were already onto another topic. Today in the pool I slumbered as I swam, my limbs associating with everyone else’s limbs. Modes of communication are thin these days, the internet clustering at night. I sleep with my computer beneath my pillow. Desire follows me in the shape of men I have met in various rooms. The one in the beginning of this poem, the man with the cupcake about to be baked for him, he is not someone I could love. With him, I am blooming into indifference, a state of repair I would rather occupy in therapy. I don’t need a man to make me happy. What I want is someone to see me safely into sadness, that brittle dark that rises up in my throat, challenging the gorgeous syllables.

I used to care too much about appearances and now I’m living in a fever blister like the woman in the lane across from me had on her mouth. I wanted to tell you the small story of the pain hive that’s surrounding me, but there’s not much to tell. The truth is I invite the hush of melted snow we all find ourselves wading through because it slices through me and gets to the grief. Even now I’m contradicting myself, choosing men who agitate the cells my father named in a laboratory in France. Love is neither young nor old, it’s just what you do to avoid feeling. Even the sea slug knows this, its body an entire continent.

This morning I saw a mouse eating an almond in my living room. How lovely to be so unconcerned with anything but food. People with eating disorders are like this. I’ve been one of them. Maybe it’s time to find a way to end, to create a kind of thing you can break apart and see its contents. I’m famous for not liking goodbyes, so I’m just going to say I’ve been to confession and this isn’t it but it’s close. I think God is somewhere nearby, imploring the sea hare which I only just now learned existed. To do what, I’m not sure, but I have a feeling it’s something important.
Farewell poem

I am singing to you, the soft grass of my mouth.
An orchard grows everywhere I do not long for.
I know when this is over, the longing will last a few
months and then there will be someone new
filling your place in the bed, the indentation where your
head rests now, peaceful like a new moon.
It is as if you are dreaming of a celebration, the kind you
imagine without touching, children staring at a painting
of a piñata, only the promise of candy. One day, when we
are over, I will dream of you crossing the river where we
washed our feet, walking to some other land
where this is possible, the heat that comes
from our bodies when we touch, the way our eyes
turn into dark toys when they link arms.

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It’s the weight of my love for you

I need the dawn. I’m only faithful to daylight, not the night
when we make our attempt to reconcile it all. We’ve had our initiation,
the toy soldiers you told me what to do with, an opportunity for seizing
the enemy’s location. I want to destroy your fantasy of me but we’ve lived
together so long I don’t even I think I’ve come to be what you expect.
When I’m flossing, I stand as close to you as I can so my flaws will bloom
for you, quiet flowers without expectation. The hedges are rough examples
of how we’ve come to ignore each other’s desires, tiny tourniquets placed
over our mouths to ensure we don’t say them aloud. There’s nothing
inside you I want past this brief knowing. You might argue with the length
of time, but in the long run, it’ll be worth the effort to forget.
I used to go to the theater with someone I loved, and now we’re not even
speaking. All of your poetry is hard edged, like your father’s mouth
when it aims its missile in your direction. This is actually a biography,
a little piece to say I know what you’re made of. We’ll pay later for this,
like lead fiesta wear and the type of car accident that leaves you vacant
and aching. There’s a ring of beetles devouring the tree out front—you can see it
from the one window. Nothing, not even tugging with your fingernail,
will get them off. The view is damaged but it’s still there. I long for birds,
their winter song breaking through the distance between us. Tonight, stars
will fester in the sky like a rash. We’ll spread our voices through the air,
infatuated again with how we think of each other, the hazard of love
erupting only to end tragically. I’m already disappointed
and we haven’t even grown tired. For now, I’ll call this home,
the pretty calendar eating its way through our relationship like a lawnmower
without its owner. If our love is a series of accidents, I’ll trace each one
on your wrist, the place I put my loneliness and the ties I use to quiet you.
I love you when you bruise, anything to show you are capable of feeling.
I can hear the beetles eating through the leaves. It sounds almost like singing.
Remind me that I am clean and I will turn the record player over.
Each day, we grow a little farther apart.
This is a romantic poem

The stars have cleared their small faces to tell you this.  
The bathroom, lined with crickets, concurs. Nature in general  
blooms for you to know love is not a word you can contain  
in your mouth without meaning to undo someone’s dress.  
This morning, I watched a movie about celibacy.  
Last night, I attended a meeting where a group of women lined up  
to tell me not to date. The underlying reason is I am more  
like a man when it comes to love and people come away  
everything to lie on top of one another after  
a date, despite the evening having gone awry. I know too well  
how the stars watch us, from the lone window.  
My lover lined up his body with a woman’s last night.  
After, in the kitchen, she made them a shake to cool them  
down. It is too late for apologies and explanations.  
I remove my body from his like you do with a lit cigarette.  
It is morning again and I have given into desire, touching  
my body the way you touch anything that is familiar,  
the handle of a brush you use on your hair, the stem of a flower  
you pull from the ground. I am rising from my chair to tell you  
this, that decoration and love are inseparable, that no miracle  
exists to separate us from need. Even birds know the myth  
of celibacy.
On being an object

I’m trying to get to you through someone you loved. Everything’s transparent, even the way you touch me in the dark to signify a small series of losses. It’s easy to part when you’re not in the habit of letting yourself love. Or is it letting yourself be an object of love. I have a figurine on my bookshelf at work that signifies something important. I’m pretty sure I’ve suffered trauma, but that’s beyond the point. If I’m being controlled by anything now, it’s love. That word keeps coming up. I’ve failed to make clear the limitations of going to bed early. Tell me what that means. I’m locked in battle with the refrigerator. All my eggs are getting old. There’s a point at which innuendo becomes deliberate. The poet reading next week was supposed to visit me. We were going to write a series of sonnets based on monogamy. Irony can be combative. Again, the thief comes to me in the night. Another point that needs deciphering. I forgot to tell you it’s late into August. The heat stifles like anything that does that. Deep down, this is a cry for help.
I am as close to Fetishland as I have ever been

The end comes quickly and, when it does, it leaves me bent over and weeping in the grass. Some might mistake me for a bird or something else wondrously beautiful, but I am filled with a longing so deep it is hideous in its ruts, in its scars like on arms only they are somewhere inside me, filling my lake. There is a tiny hole in the sky burned by a cigarette or sun. I want to erase all those poems you wrote about me, or where you included me in a line, to tell anyone who will listen the particular way in which you hurt me, setting aside your belief in love and your daughter, everything kind. We never went to a sex shop together, never traveled outside of the state. There are so many qualities left undone. I am stupid with grief and I am yawning at the same time, for I am done dreaming and when there are no more dreams there is nothing left to disdain. Sadness does not keep me as busy as its opposite. I plan on placing one man after another in the space you have left, the indentation in the bed where parts of you rested and rose, complete. I am through fulfilling your covenant, through giving myself over to your desires. The stars eat away at the sky, night after night, their small promise obliging. Perhaps this is the last communication you and I shall ever have.
Cake

I want to pierce your happiness like a cake, to test it until it’s either done or tired of me. It’s not that I don’t love you, just it’s lonely here in the snow. Remember when we visited the graveyard, how kind we were then. It’s natural to be lonely when you’re alone. I’ve been saved from shame, that sinking ship, all the amends I have to make swelling my mouth like after you’ve been hit. The last time I went to the sea was with you. We were at your mother’s house, our hair matted from sex. There’s no one looking down to tell me things will turn around, no God to rely on like a lucky puck. All the contentment we felt was someone’s joke, the way you’re told to recline and then you fall. The huge slowing has begun, the sleeping on opposite sides of the bed. I want to repair what’s gone wrong, but I’m wearing bulky clothes and I’ve been having trouble breathing. Maybe I’ll feel better after awhile, maybe I’ll see a rose blistering through the snow. There’s a set of sticks waiting to be turned into fire, everything in its place. Tonight, we’ll clean the wreckage with our tongues, excavate our discomfort with a spoon.
Overnight

She waited for his cold sore to blossom overnight
They were already comfortable, two dark blooms
getting ready for bed. “You are my remedy for sorrow,” she said
and wrote her name across his chest. They were thinking
of making something, a child or a bowl of coleslaw
Their bodies moved against the night, an old record
familiar as the fringe of emotion
By the end of the task, upstairs in the gentle room,
she touched his face where it was beginning to raise
into a flower. “You could infect me,” she said, and he looked
into her eyes as if searching for what would make him
strong. He threw a few words her way, something
that sounded like “this is not your fault,” and the room
darkened a little, the stars she had pasted on the ceiling glowing
in the distance, reflecting their small tragedy back at them
The day after they break up

She walks through the apartment looking for him. There are fingerprints on the mirror, a small heart in the shape of her name. No one should leave anyone in winter. They were talking about getting married. She had tried on a few dresses at the store downstairs from work. There is a clear process of leaving, the dog barking while you help him to move his books and the space heater to his car, the snow making everything beautiful. Without him, there are quiet spaces in the apartment she does not want to hold onto. She dreams they are any couple in love, lying on the red sofa watching a movie. In the morning, she goes online and sees that he has placed an ad for a new girlfriend. She quickly places her own ad, looking for his opposite. There is no end to this bitter loneliness, this seeking more than what you have found.
A beautiful reactor

I’ve been flinging myself at God too long not to know the instant meaning of each bird’s call, facts for survival that are crushed inside an apple. There is a place on the lake you can go when you’re trying to control your flaws, to laugh at the gloaming rather than get sucked in by it. I would say it is surrounded by loons, but the relative flatness of any theory means there is no guarantee of loveliness. There’s an emotional contagion housed like a wound in the water. When we’re talking about false idols, the abrupt wounding that takes place with the failure of small miracles, all we can do is turn towards the emptiness and say hello, misfortune.

The body forgets pain but lingers on beauty, the residences we press to accompany a bruise. We’re swelling into greater visibility with each instance of hurt, carrying our devices for calm on our backs. Mine fits in the palm of my hand, a tiny officer in its worshipped uniform. The days masquerade as brief hours, the last gestures towards kindness most of us will ever know. When my sister was a new widow, the politics of being gentle became too much. The beautiful noise of her sorrow crossed from our apartment to the one next door. The inhabitants arrived bearing candy, packages glossy and fragrant. No one knows how to react, my mother said. And then the fruit flies from the ceremonial flowers took over. We slammed our fists into the wall in an attempt to kill them. The artery of my sister’s home, which was a converted toy factory, gave out. There is no lucky recollection of that occasion. Next time, I will wear kneepads to a death, scour the floor with my regret. I will take my place amidst the mourners, allow the past to coincide with the clipped version of the present that deserves escape. There will be the calling on my tiny officer, that account of erasure that grants departure. A drifting will take place, one where bluebirds gather on air conditioners. You can hear them gossiping, their voices carried on the wind like a culture.