

**THE VOICE OF THE AMERICAN FEMALE POET:  
TRADITION AND INNOVATION**

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of my thesis involves the art of imitation: a practice that has spanned over two millennia. Imitation was originally used as a pedagogical practice for early Roman writers and continued as a central part of education until the twentieth-century. While male writers have historically dominated the poetic tradition, I found that the art of imitation opened the door to a world of female poets and their individual styles. In this thesis, I create and develop through imitation a line of influence that is more relevant to my own background. Consequently, I imitate the styles of six American female poets who attended women's colleges, universities, or seminaries spanning from 1800 to 2016. These poets are Emily Dickinson, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Rebecca Morgan Frank. Through the analysis of these writers' poetry, I identify key components of their poetic styles and write in each of their styles in turn. This thesis also includes poems written in various forms, including sestinas, villanelles and a variety of meters and rhyme schemes. There are also recurring motifs throughout the collection, including those of mental illness, movement, femininity, nature, and memory. The final section of the collection consists of original poems that demonstrate where I am in my own poetic journey as I seek to join into this lineage of female poets.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### I. Imitation: A Pedagogical Tradition

#### A. Historical Practices

Imitation has been a crucial part of poetic practice since ancient times. Many poets have used the art of imitation to learn how to write in particular styles. From Roman poets to modern ones, imitation has been considered one of the best ways for a poet to learn the craft, both historically and artistically. In “Imitation,” Gideon Burton charts the history of imitation in classical pedagogy and points out that imitation was a central rhetorical practice in ancient Rome, teaching beginning students to copy “the purity of speech of a given author” (Burton, n.p.). Then, as students became more advanced, they were asked to parse out speeches based upon common and reusable rhetorical conventions, including schemes and tropes. At the most advanced level, Burton writes, “students were instructed to use copybooks to record passages from their reading that exemplified noteworthy content or form, which they would then quote or imitate within their own speeches or compositions” (Burton, n.p.). Although the contemporary notion of originality was absent, Burton argues that there was a distinction made between quoting and imitation, with imitation seen as the means by which a student could distinguish themselves.

In his *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Thomas Sloane details the history of models in imitative pedagogy. These models include pre-existing poems or speeches that have a particular style or form and can be replicated. Models began as early as the Greek Sophists in the fifth century BCE and included text such as “Defense of Palamedes” and

“Encomium of Helen.” From 390-338 BCE, Sloane observes, Isocrates ran a school in Athens where students were taught by being made to imitate his rhetoric. Sloane argues that imitation became even more common in the late fourth century BCE in the Mediterranean region. Until this point, imitation was primarily limited to the written word, but now included oration and, even more importantly, by the time of Horace, imitation alone was no longer considered sufficient; instead, Sloane says, it required “an attempt to go beyond what has been done” (Sloane 382). Consequently, imitation became seen as the pedagogical foundation for writers to develop their own voices.

Horace, according to Sloane, urged that the “imitation of literary models or imitation of nature and life” should form the basis of an education and Horace’s views became “the dominant concept in critical writings” during the Roman Empire (Sloane 382). In fact, Sloane goes on to argue that Horace’s views on imitation continued to be the standard for “neoclassical critics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, authoritatively stated for French by Boileau..., for English by Dryden..., and for German by Johann Christop Gottschied” (Sloane 383). Indeed, imitation remained the basis of rhetoric and composition classes until the end of the nineteenth century. This model of imitation that I follow in my thesis combines reading, criticism (both interpretive and historical), and writing. Imitation not only provided me with pre-existing models for self-expression, but also enabled me to gain deeper critical and historical insight into different poetic projects and styles. Imitating rhetoric and style also helped me grasp various different forms in which verse can be written and opened me to new influences that will impact my future writing.

## B. Modern Practices

I first discovered my love for writing by using imitation as a learning mechanism when I was in middle school. I would take a particular style of poem, whether sonnet or sestina or villanelle, and try to follow the pattern and the cadence of the sample poem precisely, while adding my own voice and content to the piece. I learned how to write villanelles by imitating the style of Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night;" I learned sonnets by reading Shakespeare and I followed his meter and rhyme scheme exactly. To learn sestinas, I would practice over and over the pattern by asking friends for a random selection of six words that I would then repeat as the ends of lines. This became a challenge both for my friends and for myself, trying to see if I could still keep my voice using words that did not belong to me in a style that had existed long before me.

This practice has continued throughout my time in college. In my "Introduction to the Study of Literature" course at Mount Holyoke College, I read Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*. My writing covers every page of that book of poems. I would read Trethewey's poems and write my own in the margins. This was my way of engaging with the texts. I was particularly engaged by Trethewey's use of the technique she calls "cross-hatching;" this is where she lays one text over another to reveal two separate pieces of writing. Cross-hatching, in this instance, is both physical and metaphorical. Physically, cross-hatching refers to the literal writing on top of pre-existing work; metaphorically, it is the reusing of pre-existing text through the layering of new verse on top. I have come to think of the work of imitation as a form of cross-hatching where a new piece of work

lays on top of pre-existing work and both are seen in new ways and are in relation to one another.

As a poet, my writing and background are very different from Trethewey, but as a student of poetry, she became part of my line of influence, allowing me to engage with her texts in ways that felt both essential to her writing, and yet also individual to me. I have come to see the art of imitation as the art of separating the essential essence of a poet's writing from the inessential, then layering this essence with new text inside a set of boundaries that are fixed by poet, but also fluid enough to enable something different from the imitated poet.

## **II. On Poet Selection**

After taking a number of courses in poetry, it became clear to me that British poetry has been dominated by male poets. This fact has often preoccupied female poets as they respond and react to a poetic tradition and canon that has excluded them and I decided to use this thesis to construct my own female line of influence. I selected American-born female poets who were students at a women's college, seminary, or institution. The poets are: Emily Dickinson, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Rebecca Morgan Frank. Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College); H.D. and Moore went to Bryn Mawr; Bishop and Frank matriculated at Vassar College; and Plath attended Smith College.

Although the poets differ in many ways, particularly stylistically, all of them explore the question of being a poet and a female in a male-dominated society and poetic



tradition. Stylistically, they vary immensely. Dickinson writes in a controlled poetic structure, whereas H.D. came to prefer longer, flowing poems that span multiple pages. Moore creates her own rhythms and rhyme schemes while Bishop uses pre-existing poetic forms, such as the villanelle and the sestina. Plath writes in a variety of stanza forms and often ends her poems with a single, declarative sentence and Frank creates two-line stanzas composed with longer lines of varying lengths. Their approach to questions of gender also shifts from grief and a sense of oppression to righteous anger to moral judgment; they also reckon with their own shortcomings and flaws. I came to see that their differences and similarities create a continuing dialogue in my thesis about poetic style and content, especially in relation to being a female poet.

### **III. On My Collection**

#### **A. Emily Dickinson**

My collection begins with poems written in the style of Emily Dickinson. By imitating Dickinson's work, I focused on some of her lesser-known poems about grief, sunsets, and depression. By doing this, I was choosing to focus on more technical aspects of imitation, in particular the Dickinsonian lexicon and the stitching together of lines with dashes. Using these two techniques as limits, I also decided to create a storyline that depicts Dickinson's biography. Following Dickinson's own practice, I did not title the poems in order to suggest that my poems make up a fascicle. I have, however, numbered them, as her editors did, for convenience.

Dickinson's lexicon can be seen throughout the set, as I used only words and definitions of words that existed in her time period: for example, words such as

“gossamer” in poem 1, “dejection” as a euphemism for depression in poem 2, and “crone” in poem 6. Each word was specifically chosen to be faithful to Dickinson’s time period. This consistency presents a number of fascinating challenges. I had to research the particular wardrobe available to women for poems 5 and 6, referring to the “veil and sash” and the “corset” respectively. By limiting myself to her lexicon, I found myself struggling in particular to find alternatives to words for “depression” and “anxiety.” In selecting words in poem 2 such as “dejection,” “apathy,” “lethargy,” and “numbness,” I came to a greater realization about the historical differences and similarities in people’s conception and experience of emotional states. In addition, I often had to search for suitable synonyms in order to fit a particular meter since I also set myself the task of ensuring that each poem has a different rhyme scheme and a different use of iambic meter.

I also followed Dickinson’s use of the em-dash to stitch lines together, both within lines and at the ends of lines. With the em-dash, I became aware of how Dickinson links her content, especially in relation to her exploration of the ideas of separation and continuity, and of absence and presence. In my first attempts, my lines often made no sense because I was too reliant on dashes to replace missing words. I realized that Dickinson does not use the dash in this way but rather uses it more like a stitch, to hold full phrases together, while not trying to make them self-contained. In poem 7, for example, I use dashes to help create not only separation, but also continuation. I repeatedly rewrote the end of this poem in order to juxtapose the body being lowered into the ground with words that are being scattered above the ground.

In this final line, I made the verb “sprawled” passive and its tense unclear. There is no real explanation as to how or when the abstract “words” came to be “sprawled” there. I left the phrase open for interpretation, deliberately ignoring a more concrete version of “words,” such as “writings” or “poems.” The dashes in that line suggest competing interpretations: it could mean “Her words [were] sprawled on the Lawn.” or “Her words [are] sprawled on the Lawn.” or even “Her words [would be] sprawled on the Lawn.” Each one tells a slightly different version of Dickinson’s biography. First, the line suggests a funeral where people share words about the deceased. Second, it refers to her family discovering her poems after her death. Finally, it refers to the recent exhibition of Dickinson poems in the shape of small houses that were placed on the lawn of the homestead museum. Without the use of the dash, these ambiguities would disappear. From this exercise, I came to understand more clearly the ways in which Dickinson uses the em-dash to create multiple meanings.

## **B. H.D.**

In the second section, I write in the style of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). In contrast to Dickinson, H.D. often wrote longer poems, instead of just small individual lyrics. In imitating H.D., I chose to identify a common theme within her longer poems that I wanted to expand upon in my own work. This theme was the way she uses mythology to understand human culture and struggle, especially in relation to women. I was particularly interested in those poems where H.D. writes in the voices of often-overlooked goddesses. H.D. famously demonstrates her ability to tell well-known myths from a different angle in “Eurydice,” where she retells from the perspective of Eurydice

the famous myth about Orpheus's failed attempt to rescue her from Hades. I write a similar set of poems based upon giving voice to the female characters of mythology, seeking to examine relationships between men and women, between women and women, and between women and the self. I deliberately use some of the lesser-known goddesses and tell traditional myths from a different perspective.

The first four goddesses I chose to write about are Hestia, Persephone, Psyche, and Medusa from the canon of common Greek mythology. I chose primarily goddesses that represent various types of relationships, whether between a mother and a daughter or a handmaiden and her lady or the destructive relationships that can exist between men and women. "Hestia" represents the homemaker, virginity, and feminine purity.

"Persephone" is a coming-of-age story about finding both light and darkness inside one's self. "Psyche" examines the relationship between a daughter and a mother-in-law.

"Medusa" is the story of salvation for a scorned woman. Medusa is also part of what I see as a modern female American poetic tradition of Medusa poems that moves from Louise Bogan to Sylvia Plath to Patricia Smith.

The fifth and final goddess is Mania. While Mania is part of the canon of Greek mythology, she is not at all well known. Indeed, no backstory exists for her. For that reason, I created her from my own reading and used H.D.'s own experiences with Freud and mental illness to form a larger discussion about representations of mania, insanity, and mental illness. "Mania" is the only poem where I take a biographical approach to imitating H.D.'s work. I include lines like "Bid me to live," which is the title of one of H.D.'s novels. I also took more liberty in the construction of this imitation. While my poem is still elongated and separated into parts, H.D. does not indent lines for emphasis

in her poetry. However, in the second to last stanza of my poem, I do indent three lines in order to demonstrate the splintering division of a manic mind. However, to keep in touch with the idea of using mythology in the larger work, I do invoke Medea in the first part, second stanza. Medea's madness involved violence against others, seeking revenge following unrequited love. H.D. saw several parallels with Medea when she sought to understand her own complex situation following her divorce. Another possible invocation of the madwoman trope could have been Ophelia, but because I was imitating H.D., I use a mythological reference, rather than a Shakespearean one. Moreover, Medea's mania is expressed through anger, whereas Ophelia's mania is expressed through her eventual suicide. I want to represent H.D. with rightful indignation rather than with depression.

### **C. Marianne Moore**

In the next section, I imitate Marianne Moore, who, while a contemporary of H.D.'s, differs in style and form. Whereas H.D. uses long, flowing sections of verse, Moore is more focused on meter and rhyme. Whereas H.D. grapples with the mythological content, Moore uses the every day as her material. Moore's poetry is most easily identifiable by her use of syllabic meters and of quotations and footnotes. These are the primary components that I sought to replicate. In Moore's poems, such as "The Fish," she uses her own invented metrical scheme. Her meter is constructed on the repeated syllabic line count of 1/3/9/6/8 and the rhyme scheme is AABBC. In order to keep her very particular meter and rhyme scheme, she sometimes breaks apart words, such as "ac-/cident—lack". In an attempt to replicate this, I wrote "The Fox" in the same meter and rhyme scheme. Then, in "Paint," I began to experiment with different rhyme

schemes and meter lengths, finding it an interesting challenge to make rhymes and rhythms work in Moore's style.

The other central aspect of Moore's work I focus on is her use of quotations and footnotes. Moore's citations and quotations range from magazines to science textbooks to Biblical references to newspaper clippings. I modernize this by using what would be considered the contemporary equivalent of these sources. I chose sources such as *Cosmopolitan*, scientific websites on the anatomy of butterflies, movie quotes from "The Wolf on Wall Street," Facebook posts from one of my friend's profiles, and the *King James Bible*. This was an opportunity for me to take bits of prose and transform them into poetic lines that fit within the given meter, especially in "Paint." It began to feel like poetic patchwork at times. I sewed quotes to disjointed pieces of verse to form a unified piece. I aimed to allow for anachronisms in this section, experimenting with whether or not quotations of today could be as effective as they were for Moore.

None of these poems attempt to be biographical; however, several of the poems use lines from her poems. The title of one of my poems, "The Savage's Romance," is a line from Moore's poem "New York." Similarly, "Perfunctory Heart" quotes partial lines from her poem "Pedantic Literalist" as an exercise in both quotation and innovation, blending her voice with my own.

Moore had an affinity for animal poems, writing "The Fish," as well as "To a Giraffe" and others. I chose to keep "Paint" in the animal realm and personify the Painted Lady butterfly using a quote from a *Cosmopolitan* article about floral tattoos. I blend modern quotations with the fixed pattern of meter and rhyme in the hope that the reader will notice the way in which my original verse wraps around the cited prose. It was

incredibly difficult at first to find quotes that were both informative and topical and also fitted the meter and rhyme. The fourth stanza's first three lines are all one quote referring to male Painted Lady butterflies, but I divided them in such a way that I could keep the meter and also have a slant rhyme with "males" and "patrol." Although I use words such as "aster cosmos" and "blazing star" to refer to two types of plants whose nectar Painted Lady butterflies regularly eat, it is not until the final stanza of the poem that I make clear the "her" of the poem is a butterfly in order to provide a sense of revelation.

#### **D. Elizabeth Bishop**

The next section is on Elizabeth Bishop and I was interested in the way she establishes a poetic I in her poems. Bishop often explores memory and obscurity and interweaves the political with the personal in an oblique manner. She is also the first poet in this collection to use the sestina and villanelle. I became particularly fascinated by the ambiguity of her endings and what I could learn from them. Previously, I have struggled with oblique endings, wanting rather to wrap up the poem than to leave it open for interpretation. However, my work in imitation has allowed me to further develop my knowledge of endings and how to write them.

I begin with a poem about memorials. "Omaha" is a physical memorial to the fallen soldiers on the beaches of Normandy, France. This poem sets the stage for a larger discussion of memory in the rest of the imitations. The next two poems are a villanelle and a sestina, respectively. Both discuss what home means and what it means to leave home. The villanelle sets up the personal process of leaving a home and juxtaposes it with the refugee crisis and the Brexit referendum. The sestina remains personal, while

questioning normative gender roles, such as female ambition and male contentment. It questions again how one chooses to remember and memorialize.

The fourth free verse poem is another memorialization of a personal, yet political event—the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. One of Bishop’s skills is to imagine others through using personas that explore memory. I decided to expand on this by putting the devastation of a national tragedy into the hands and eyes of a seven-year-old girl who is just at the precipice of learning about politics and the world around her.

The final poem takes the reader back to Europe to another type of memorial: a photograph. Although I was just in Whitstable last fall, this poem discusses what memory looks like when it exists across generations. What will memory look like in future tense, when this photograph is passed down to my children and their children and their children’s children? The idea that memory is contained inside a photograph and could be passed down without a given context intrigues me as a philosophical question.

The main idea of the poem stems from a Magritte painting with the quote, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” and his essay called the “Treachery of Images.” For Magritte, the painting of a pipe is not a pipe itself. More broadly, an image of a thing is not the thing itself. Therefore, the poetic description of a painting of Whitstable is not the same as Whitstable itself. Whitstable only truly exists for the speaker and branches beyond the confines of the photo. However, in the passing down of the photograph, Whitstable as a place beyond the photograph ceases to exist. Given only the context of the photograph, the other actions and senses invoked by the real Whitstable are completely lost. The



vibrant beachfront cabanas are dulled, the five-mile walk to and from Whitstable is not shown, and even the people the speaker was with no longer make an appearance.

However, the poem compensates for the treachery of the image with its descriptions of what lies beyond the frame. There are still missing elements, such as specific names, captured laughter, and the way the sun and the wind feel to the speaker of the poem. The photograph and the poem both work as forms of memory, engaging differently with the speaker. This poem discusses influence and legacy. On a micro-scale, legacy is the passing down of a photograph to a family member. On the macro-scale, it is the passing down of literature from poet to poet and from poet to reader.

Bishop's work in subjectivity through consistent point of view, her use of tenses, her content and form, as well as her oblique style gave me the liberty to tackle large, philosophical questions, such as what existed in the past before me ("Omaha"), what existed in the present without me there ("Referendum"), what existed in my personal past ("The Classroom"), and what will exist in the future without me there ("Whitstable") as well as how do we, as humans, remember each of these moments and do we perceive the same memory differently ("Clouded Visions")? Imitating her powerful use of varying tenses gave me a way of linking memory to the past, present, and future.

### **E. Sylvia Plath**

The next section focuses on poems in the style of Sylvia Plath. In reading her, I came to see what an allusive and literary poet she is; the works of her predecessors frequently inspire her imagination. I continue the use of the motifs of sunsets and butterflies in this section. The content of the final poem is biographical, based on Plath's

suicide. I also continue the political discourse on migration in the second butterfly poem. Repeating motifs and content across my thesis is one of the ways I seek to make my imitations distinctive and individual. Plath's style changes so drastically throughout her short career as a poet that it was difficult to write poems in a single style. I instead wrote some imitations of particular poems. For example, the poem "Weeds" is a direct poem-imitation of her poem, "Mushrooms." I also use lines from Plath's own poems as inspiration for my poems; for example, the line "An atrocity of sunsets" in "Autumn" comes from Plath's poem, "Elm."

Towards the end of her life Plath wrote a series of poems that use bees as her central motif. In these poems she writes about her interaction with bees and about bees' interaction with each other. In imitating these poems I decided to change from the topic of bees and chose butterflies instead. While Plath's personal background involved bees and beekeeping, mine involved raising two Monarch butterflies and following their migration patterns. Two of my five Plath imitations are on the topic of butterflies. The first, "The Butterfly Tent," blends a Bishop-like focus on memory and obliqueness with a Plath-like emphasis on natural forces and various relationships. Here my use of the phrase "the kaleidoscope of chaos" plays on the word "kaleidoscope" both as an image and as the scientific term for a gathering of butterflies. This is characteristic of Plath's language in her bee poems where she likes to use words that have a poetic and a scientific meaning. I chose imagery to fit the butterfly theme, with similes such as "It was warm like a cocoon" in the second stanza. The whole poem centers on how, in this moment of chaos, the speaker experiences a butterfly moving from a bush to her hand. This tiny moment is the calm in a storm of movement. At the end of the poem when the speaker

steps out of the tent, I set up an ambiguity as to where she, the butterflies or the tent go the following day. I learned from the way Plath often ends poems with a single declarative sentence that takes up a single line how to end “The Butterfly Tent” in a similarly abrupt and inconclusive manner.

The second of the two butterfly poems (“Migration”) shows the speaker as a bystander with the action not happening directly to her, but rather in front of her. Where the butterfly in the first poem interacts directly with the speaker, the butterflies in this poem are more similar to the bees in Plath’s poem, “The Bee Meeting.” Like Plath there, I personify my creatures. The wanderers are identified by their professions or physical appearances. For instance, I mention a “lady, painted,” a “man with blue copper streaks,” “the blacksmith,” a “common sooty fellow,” “an admiral,” a “buckeye sailor,” and a farmer with a “ruddy face,” as well as the Monarch who is described only as being “dressed in orange and black.” I took common names for butterflies (painted lady, Karner blue, metal mark, common sooty fellow, red admiral, buckeye, and ruddy dagger wing) and transformed them into their human equivalents.

One of the major challenges I faced while writing this poem was making sure that the content of the poem was empirically true. This poem still has some scientific inaccuracies, including whether all these particular butterflies would congregate. While the vast majority of the butterflies chosen are from Pennsylvania and do congregate, two butterflies (ruddy dagger wing and metal mark) originate in the Southwest and do not migrate. Although Plath’s own attentiveness to scientific accuracy can be seen throughout her bee poems, I decided to keep the scientific inaccuracies in my poem as an opportunity to highlight it as a work-in-progress in Plath’s style. By so doing, it reveals the

importance of empirical accuracy for Plath even in some of her most metaphoric of poems.

I also continued my theme of migration that began in the Bishop section. Only four of the butterflies that the reader meets migrate. I refer in this poem to the Syrian refugee crisis. Of all Syrians, only a handful get to leave, and of that handful, only a minuscule percentage will survive to make the return trip. The poem ends ominously for that reason referring to the future death count and to the inability to leave. The final line alludes to the Eliot's famous opening to *The Waste Land*, "April is the cruelest month" which I rewrote as "Winter is the cruelest dictator." Specifically, I wanted to juxtapose the Monarch and nature as two types of dictators. Also, I wanted to shine a light on homelessness in migrant and refugee populations, especially as winter arrives. This poem serves as both a warning and a plea for assistance, depending on the reader's interpretation of the refugee crisis and their own moral predisposition to the conflict.

The final poem of the set is a biographical representation of Plath's suicide. The reader enters the scene when Plath makes the conscious decision to commit suicide. While the narrator is an onlooker, she is somehow subject to Plath's inner thoughts. Since Plath committed suicide by poisoning herself with carbon monoxide from her oven, some of the side effects of the poisoning are mentioned throughout the poem, including dizziness, nausea, haziness, slowing heartbeat, headache, and itchy eyes. The mention of wet towels under the door set up the scene. Plath was found dead with wet towels under the kitchen doors because she wanted to protect her children from the gas. Ted Hughes, her husband, chose to end her posthumous book, *Ariel*, with a poem about her suicidal thoughts and tendencies, which is why I decided to follow suit in this section.

## **F. Rebecca Morgan Frank**

The final section is written in the style of a contemporary poet, Rebecca Morgan Frank. Frank uses both the mundane and the mythological in her poetry. Her style resembles most a combination of Moore and Plath. Frank often uses a two-line stanza, but also writes regularly in free verse. Her line length and meter are rarely consistent throughout her poems and I found myself struggling to identify structural repetition in her work. Instead, I focused on her use of questions and moral storytelling. Whether about trains or goddesses, Frank often poses hypothetical questions or scenarios to suspend the reader between two different choices or outcomes. She does this, I think, in order to force the reader to ask moral and ethical questions. In the process of writing in Frank's style, I found myself integrating more of my own style into her structural framework. Because she is a relatively young, contemporary writer, her style is not defined as concretely as the other poets in the collection. For this reason, I feel more freedom in adapting her style to include my own quirks and preoccupations within her two-line format and using her style of rhetorical questions.

I begin the section with "Train Hymns," a poem written in Frank's typical two-line stanzas. This poem is based on a Frank poem also about trains. However, in my poem, I discuss the relationship with the conductor and his family. She focuses primarily on the train as a mechanism. One of the places where my voice can be heard in the poem is the word play on "him/hymn." Frank tends not do such punning in her poetry, but I wanted to experiment with the oral component of modern verse. On the page, there is a clear distinction between "him/hymn," but when spoken aloud, the words are

homophones. The poem ends with a mention of those who commit suicide on train tracks every year. The “him” of the poem initially refers to the conductor, but later switches to the many potential men “who never made it.”

“Reflections on Narcissus” imitates the way Frank makes use of white space on the page. This poem is written after Frank’s “Spokes of Venus,” the titular poem of her latest book, published in 2016. The return to mythology is reminiscent of H.D.’s goddess persona poems. However, in Frank’s style, I pose several rhetorical questions about love and women. The lines “what is a woman but/ water? And what is/ love but a mirror image of self?” represent the role of women in mythology and their subservience to men. This echoes Jacques Lacan’s idea of the mirror stage in child development, where he argues that children see a kind of wholeness in the mirror image of themselves, and they begin to strive for this image throughout their lives. By using rhetorical questions, the reader is allowed to make their own moral conclusions about women and love. I use Narcissus because he fell in love with his own reflection and often, in mythology, women are considered mere reflections of their male counterparts. This is why I used water to represent both Narcissus’s lover and his mother. By feminizing water, I seek to give agency to women in the poem in ways that are not mentioned in the original myth. Frank’s poem, “Spokes of Venus,” also reclaims the power of Venus from the men who sought to control her.

“Bald Peacock” examines the taming a wild creature and what it means to be broken. This moral storytelling represents the harshness of masculinity against nature. The poem’s undertone becomes clear in lines like “humiliate him for his baldness, / his gawky nudity.” The poem emphasizes the abrasiveness of humanity, particularly men,

toward the softer subtleties of nature's most beautiful creatures. I chose a peacock specifically because its beautiful plume worked well as a symbol of the delicate and beautiful within the natural world. The final lines of the poem ask the reader to consider the motive of the peacock tamer and why he chose to break the spirit of the peacock.

The fourth poem, "Tombs," deals with how death and life are both remembered over long spans of time. The poem moves from noticing a museum exhibit to questioning mortality. The ending of the poem is cyclical with the beginning, bringing the reader back into a museum exhibit. This poem also revolves around rhetorical questions that create a kind of inner-dialogue for the speaker examining the topics of death and remembrance. One particular line in the poem references Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," with the lines, "If dying is a fine art, one day, the bones that/ once wrote this poem will be art, too." Plath's original lines are: "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well." I evoked Plath in Frank's poetry to demonstrate the continuity of influence across generations.

The final poem of the section, "Influence," calls upon the line of influence in this collection. The poem speaks to the emptiness of a vessel and idea of being filled with the works of others. I address each of the poets in this collection, summoning them as spirits to fill a vessel. The overarching metaphor of the poem is of a ship on a voyage. This represents the speaker's poetic journey. I use rhetorical questions to demonstrate the influence of each ghost on the speaker. This poem summarizes what I have learned from writing in the styles of six American female poets who attended women's colleges.

#### IV. Conclusion

The final section of the collection consists of original poems written in my style over the past few years since attending Mount Holyoke College in 2013. These poems also reflect their own growth, influences, and traditions. Some of these poems were written as memorials for loved ones; others were written to compete at the National Poetry Slam in 2015. Finally, they seek to shine light on what I perceive to be injustices, whether about mental illness, body image issues, politics, or chronic pain. These are the themes that speak most to me as a poet and I synthesize memory and femininity with politics and literature.

The section begins with a poem for my grandfather, who passed away in 2011. He was a high school English teacher and every year on the anniversary of his death, I write a new poem for him. The poem for January 2015 was “Meteor.” The use of metaphor in the poem is explained in the line “You taught me metaphor” and is directly followed by the inspiration for the titular line “My heart was a meteor bursting”. This poem deals with grief, loss, and how to remember someone who is no longer there. I honor the memory of my grandfather through writing poetry. As my first critic, he read many of my early poems and I remember his excitement when he realized I, too, had an affinity for poetry.

“Fragile Women” and “For My Body” both deal with the coded language of femininity and what it means to be a woman in a body that is not necessarily described as beautiful. I wrote both poems for the National Poetry Slam in August 2015 and both speak to my preoccupations as a poet who has struggled with body image and self-confidence for a long time. “Fragile Women” is a lullaby for other women who are seeking solace. “For My Body” is a mantra for myself to begin to see my body as a



worthy source of inspiration for poetry, rather than as a physical detriment. Both poems speak to experiences I have personally faced and encountered. Together, they portray emotional vulnerability with quiet confidence and acceptance.

The final two poems, “oblivion” and “Reliance,” were written for a former poetry mentor at Northampton Poetry who continues to struggle with chronic pain. These poems seek to understand the relationship between a malfunctioning body and a suffering person. At its core, these two poems strive to understand the role of the body and mind, but each is a picture of two people who are connected and disconnected at the same time. “Oblivion” uses white space to represent silence and emptiness. The disjointedness of the poem represents the disjointedness of the body and the recipient as well as the recipient and the speaker. I chose an obscure ending, not explaining why the speaker fades or how the relationship ends. “Reliance” offers a softer, loving tone with a promise to be there and not leave, even when the recipient is in pain. This, too, uses the body as a catalyst to discuss relationships between bodies. As seen in the penultimate stanza, “As body relies on body/ I rely on you,” the body is used as a physical representation of reliance. Other moments in the poem discuss body parts, such as hand, spine, mouth, and throat. However, it is the house metaphor in the poem that brings all of the body parts together with words like “skeleton” and “joints.” These two words were specifically chosen because they are both architectural terms as well as connecting parts of the body.

Through the process of imitation, I increased my critical understanding of the content and form of individual poets. Although my thesis consists of imitations, I have noticed my own preoccupations infiltrate the poems. My interest in politics and memory bled into such poems as “Referendum,” “Migration,” and “The Classroom,” and my

personal relationship to mental health plays a role in the shaping of the Dickinson poems, as well as in “Mania,” “4:30 AM,” and “Bald Peacock.” Poems like “Whitstable” and “Omaha,” invoke personal memories of my time in Europe, while others seem more general, like “Weeds” and “The Fox.” My voice and memories are infused in the imitations. While these poems are written in the style of other poets, they still resemble key parts of my own poetic journey.

Some of the motifs throughout the collection are: nature, mental illness, femininity, memory, and motion. Nature is demonstrated in the Dickinson poems on sunsets, the Moore poems on the fox and the butterfly, the Plath poems about sunsets and butterflies, and the Frank poem on the peacock. Mental illness is explicitly linked to the lives of Dickinson, H.D., and Plath. All three struggled with madness, mania, depression, anxiety, grief, suicide, or loss. Femininity is brought up first in the Dickinson poems through a discussion of wardrobe and what it means to be a woman in Poem 6. This theme is also apparent in the poems written in H.D.’s style, retelling myths from the unheard or overlooked perspectives of mythological women. Memory is a key component of the Bishop poems, but also exists in the Plath-inspired poem, “The Butterfly Tent,” and the Frank-inspired poem, “Train Hymns.” The final theme is motion, which is seen in the movement of butterflies, of migrants, and of time. Each of these themes blossom in more than one section. These common themes describe how the line of influence molds the female poetic experience as a whole. Some of the same themes that these poets wrote about over a period of almost two hundred years, I am still preoccupied with in my own work.

Through imitation, I have gained a greater understanding of historical, political, and personal aspects of these poets. Imitation has allowed me to walk in another's shoes and experience the world through another's lens. This collection is a practice in deeply analyzing several collections of poems in order to form a scholarly understanding of them and the way they are written. I have spent time over the course of this project reading poet biographies and autobiographies. Through the use of imitations and imitable models, I learned to evaluate the style and content of these six poets and my own poetry has matured over the course of this project. In summation, this project has changed how I view poetry, from a personal art to a collective, linear endeavor that spans the course of two centuries.

**CHAPTER ONE: EMILY DICKINSON**

1.

An avoidance of confession  
To keep the pain away—  
Until it grew teeth—snarling at her  
Death—a Beast—made of clay—

Her remains mourned—wooden box—Mortality's carpenter  
Thrashing at her gossamer Life—  
Her ruins—void—lay bare

2.

Dejection consumes wholly—  
Apathy—Lethargy—  
It swallows ceiling, four white Walls  
Boxes, an Effigy—  
Untried Liberty—locked in chains—  
She remains—Alone—  
An Aching—beneath the Surface—  
A Numbness in her Bones—

3.

Crimson sky— Armada of Red—  
Dipped handprints of the Day—  
Clouds mutate— bleeding Infantry—  
Firing into the West—

A newborn pink fades away—  
Into a Blackbird's wings—  
Her sky will war once again—  
Tomorrow—not tonight—

4.

Loss cut so deep she could not feel—  
Consumed by Grief—a Blade of steel—  
Emptiness filled her shattered Soul  
Her fire burnt out—a lump of coal—

She did not notice it at first,  
Her Mind's abduction—well rehearsed—  
It stitched itself into her Life—  
Her every bodice and her Ink—

She had felt nothing for a year  
Until her heart began to tear—  
Pain spread so fast—  
She should have died—

She did not think that she could last  
Her heart—a sunset in a Cup—  
Cosmos confined—she cried—

5.

She bottles emotion  
Like miniature ships  
Rushing forward—volcanic remains—  
Smoldering on the lips

Her life—taut—corseted—  
Heart—unwillingly caged—  
Boning—Pompeii's skeleton—  
World sees only slope—stone—

This natural disaster—  
Her tongue—an Inferno—  
Her mind—blistering unnoticed—  
Vesuvian Woman



6.

The Dusk dressed all in Black—  
Her Dress—a Dim outline  
Her Hosiery— an ill-formed Bruise  
Her Heels—of Shale design

Despite her shrouded guise  
The Hearth bathed her shadow—  
Her silhouette turned Amber gold  
Her eyes—settled Hollow—

Too close to Death—to cry  
Too close to Void—to repent  
The Crone of the Interstellar  
She was Rapture—Heaven sent

Crackling fire—turned to smoke—  
She endured—Veil and Sash—  
Her figure faded to Dark gray  
Dust to dust—Ash to ash—

7.

Her mind filled all with incense—smoke—  
A holy prayer—chanted—  
Sinners and saints filled wooden pews  
Turpitude—recanted—

All were dressed—black as Midnight—  
The girls in tear-stained Lace  
The boys—Rigid—in suit and tie  
Mortal mind—left no trace—

Sanctimonious ceremony  
Of calamitous loss  
Remembering smoke and mirrors  
A ruse— Smolders—a gloss

This is the Graveyard of her Mind—  
Haunted—a Wicked past—  
And all ideas come to Die  
Where her Soul has been cast

When lowered into the cold Earth  
Muddied ground—trampled on—  
Her Body—rots—within her Grave—  
Her Words—sprawled—on the Lawn—

**CHAPTER TWO: H.D.**

Hestia

I

Born first, yielded last  
I am first meal,  
the warmth of fire,  
pillars holding house.

I came before the rest,  
allowed to enter last.  
It is no surprise no one  
envies my future or past.

No statues, monuments,  
no temples, no fame.  
I let my two sisters  
take credit for the warmth  
of my flame.

This hearth needs tending,  
that home needs my care,  
those children are laughing,  
these gods keep fighting,  
and I remain.

A fire that never stops  
burning for eternity,  
a virgin spark untainted  
by man's rough touch,  
and I remain.

II

O, sun-streaked god,  
you beautiful creature,  
who asked only for me

to learn to love,  
I ask you this:

Do you not understand  
that love can be quiet?  
Do you not understand  
that love can be sacrifice?  
Do you not understand  
what love means to fire?

O, sun-streaked god,  
you magnificent creature,  
burning with a thousand  
beams of light,  
I am not Icarus; I do not fly  
too close to you  
for fear of catching fire.

Where my familial nature  
keeps steady at the hearth,  
you are too ethereal.  
We are made from  
different elements,  
you and I.

O, sun-streaked god,  
you bright star,  
I cannot leave my dignity  
for all your heavens.  
I cannot leave my home  
for fair weather.

Do not you know  
from your sister  
the chastity of sacrifice?  
Do not you know  
from her what women  
give away in order  
to truly live?

## III

O, I cannot love you either,  
great trident-bearing god.  
A fire and an ocean do not  
mix well together.

Every moment would be  
filled with moderate catastrophe,  
a house that had been flooded,  
a fire extinguished.

I cannot love you either,  
for fear you might  
extinguish me if ever  
your temper swelled  
like waves, crashing onto me.

I cannot love you or  
the sun-streaked god,  
for one of you would  
extinguish me,  
the other would  
make my fire grow too great.

In moderation only  
can I find happiness,  
in myself only,  
can I find peace,  
in sacrifice only,  
can I find my womanhood.

## IV

Keeper of the home,  
friend to all those who enter,  
I sit patiently, waiting,  
to listen, to tend, to care  
about a passer-by in need.

I gave myself to nurture,  
my voice to travelers  
far and wide.  
While my siblings venture far,  
I hear stories by the fireside.

One day I opened up my heart  
as I opened up my home,  
and he entered as a man,  
like any other man.

I offered him warmth  
and shelter and food  
and beverage.  
I told him he was welcome  
to spend the night inside.

As hours passed into night,  
I heard an unfamiliar noise,  
a creaking of his step,  
until he was creeping in my bed,  
and I shuddered so.

He was violent,  
full of desire,  
and shaking me to and fro.

He wanted to rip away  
my dignity and my womanhood,  
my warmth and fire and spark.

I could not let him insult me thus,  
so I pushed him out the door.  
He fought me all the way,  
but I could not let him stay  
and cause me harm and disgrace.

But he taught me forgiveness,  
of learning to open my door  
and my heart once more,

of emptying words  
into the hearth  
and feeling my voice  
slowly, slowly burn.

I am the living flame,  
the first, the last, and always,  
the contented spark of life  
when all else turns to ash,  
and I remain.

Persephone

I

I was maiden daughter once,  
full of life and love,  
picking flowers in the fields  
of my mother's endless garden.

The day was lovely,  
the fields so lush and green,  
and the irises were blooming  
a beautiful royal blue.

I imagined they were plucked  
for me from a fine young man,  
a gift of courtship for my hand  
in marriage, how romantic!

It was then I heard the beating  
of a hundred majestic horses  
and I thought I was imagining  
a prince or king or lord.

My eyes were closed, day dreaming,  
when I was swept off my feet,  
and a male voice said he'd come  
to take me far away.

II

My day-dream prince had always been  
light and full of spirit,  
but the man who had me on his horse  
was dark and brooding,  
gruff and pale,  
with black hair and blacker eyes.

He said he would take me  
to another world,



and I stayed silent,  
half afraid, half excited  
but wholly nervous.

When I discovered  
this other world was across  
the point of no return,  
my excitement turned to tears,  
and I could not stop my fears  
from coursing through me.

I yelled for help  
when I dared,  
I screamed for my mother,  
but no one heard me disappear  
from those magnificent fields.  
Would I ever see those fields again?

### III

My captor kept me  
in his lair,  
with no hope of escape.

Above this hell,  
my mother mourned,  
and earth turned  
gray and cold.

This frosty winter  
for my absence  
brought new friends  
but none were grateful  
to have met  
the new Queen of the Dead.

### IV

As days passed, then months,  
I learned to love the darkness,

and bits of me were stripped away  
as bits of her were formed.

Maiden I was no more,  
but rather a thing of dark.  
My childhood stripped away  
in the spring of its content.

There were no daydreams,  
only nightmares,  
so I stayed awake at night  
and imagined the pinkness  
in my skin would  
fade and fade and fade.

My dresses became gowns,  
the yellows turned to onyx,  
and my veil made me regal  
as I grew in strength.

V

One day I was found,  
but it was far too late.  
I had grown accustomed  
to my dark prince  
and my dark fate.

Maiden no more,  
I was woman,  
I was queen,  
and my prince had found me  
after all,  
and swept me off my feet.

I did not miss my past  
as I once thought I would.  
The darkness inside me grew,  
and I learned to love  
who I'd become

and forget the girl I was before,  
maiden I was no more.

Psyche

I

O, how she did loathe me,  
the mother of my love.  
For, she, in all of this,  
had kept him from me,  
masked as a monster in darkness.

How she did hate me  
for being more beautiful,  
for hoping I would never see  
my love's face by candlelight.

I Psyche would go  
to the end of the world  
for my love.

I Psyche would sacrifice  
everything I hold most dear  
for my love.

O, how she did despise me  
for winning the heart  
of her son and oh,  
how she made me pay  
for my pretty face.

II

I kneel prostrate here,  
begging for a chance  
to redeem myself unto  
my love.

I clasp my hands  
and pray to you,  
mother of my love,  
for a chance to see

my love again.

I Psyche would travel  
anywhere in the universe  
to see his face.

I Psyche would voyage  
to the darkest ocean  
to kiss his lips again.

Let me show you  
I am more than a pretty face,  
I am woman and warrior.  
I would be your slave  
so that he would be my love.

### III

In this box is redemption,  
freedom from your control,  
at last, I will be able to  
love again.

This box is beauty,  
and tempting,  
an elixir from below,  
but I must not open it  
for fear of losing my chance.

I Psyche have gone  
to the ends of the earth  
and below for my love.

I Psyche have been  
slave and warrior  
for you without question.

I cannot help my anger,  
my curiosity, to see this  
elixir of beauty

that I dare not keep.

I open the box slightly  
and inside is only sleep,  
a deep draught of unending slumber,  
and I fell victim to my dreams.

#### IV

I Psyche was awoken  
after a deep slumber  
by my love's kiss on my neck.

I Psyche was made immortal,  
leaving all my worldly possessions,  
to be with him.

O, how she hates me,  
this love she cannot control,  
even the mistress of love  
can sometimes be the fool.

O, how she envies me  
to have a romance free from fate  
and an eternity of passion.

O, how she despises  
my eternal love  
and my undying, unyielding soul.

## Medusa

In her stone garden,  
sat a figure weeping.  
Statues surrounded her  
and she was alone.

It was not always this way.  
She knew love once;  
at high tide, he was with her,  
by low tide, he was gone.

She was left longing  
for sea foam on sand,  
for ocean spray on gravel,  
for love instead of stone.

She had broken her vows  
of maidenhood in exchange  
for vows of marriage.

Her broken vow discovered,  
the molten part of her cursed  
to harden every other molten,  
fragile man she ever met.

She did still yearn for love,  
an unmoving dream,  
but as the years passed,  
only stone remained.

What once was beautiful,  
now crept in horror,  
an ugly monster,  
a cursed beast.

She mourned her love  
for the first few years,  
then succumbed to anger.  
Her heart was granite,

eyes of shale.

She began to forget  
what love felt like—  
a shoreline filled with treasures,  
sea foam dancing on the waves.

Every man she encountered  
fell victim to her stony gaze,  
as she enticed,  
out of envy, out of jealousy,  
those who yet could love .

If she could not know of love,  
then neither could they.  
They were creatures of lust  
who captured her spirit once  
and damned her to a life  
of misery and pain.

Some days she dreamt  
of a young man who  
would not be so afraid,  
who would give her what  
she longed for most—  
a fatal wound.  
She'd never want for more.



## Mania

### I

I am infection,  
a curse wrought  
on those unable  
to control their impulses.

I am madness,  
the frenzied heart  
of Medea, a feminine  
disposition toward  
emotional chaos.

I am nonsensical  
and nauseating,  
the twisted mirror  
image of a spiral.

### II

O, every tragic heroine  
knows me in her  
last moments before  
dagger goes in,  
before poison is drunk.

I am unbound by time,  
unbound by place,  
see all, know all,  
bid me to live  
in this lunacy.

They put my name  
in diseases, in conditions,  
in locked rooms with  
padded walls.

This frenzied heart

and wide eyes  
beckon me to come,  
to mend the heartbreak  
with a single thought:  
tragic death.

### III

Over the years,  
I have taken thousands  
as my companions,  
persuaded them to make  
fatal decisions and find  
happiness, find closure,  
in death.

The sounds of shrieking  
fades after a while,  
the dullness of apathy returns,  
and I am alone again.

Chaos cannot live  
where its victims  
are already broken.

Chaos cannot live  
in the peace and silence  
of content and joy.

### IV

Bid me to live  
in this bedlam  
of haunted voices  
crying out for  
those lost,  
those shattered  
souls in the night.

Let the disarray

consume all it can,  
infect every heart,  
split natures  
    split minds  
    and bodies  
    and hearts.

The brain crumbles,  
the heart shreds itself,  
newborns weep for  
wretched mothers  
as discord reigns.

**CHAPTER THREE: MARIANNE MOORE**

The Fox <sup>1</sup>

stares

and he glares  
 across the field at his naive prey,  
 licks his lips as he may  
 and he waits for his chance to pounce

on

the young fawn  
 who chews peacefully in the meadow,  
 but little does she know  
 of the direction of her fate.

Mean

and unseen  
 in the grassy green, he draws nearer  
 til his view is clearer  
 and she is helpless to escape

him

on the rim  
 of her anxiously nervous eyesight.  
 His beady eyes of night  
 at a moment ready to pounce;

her

smile demure  
 with innocence radiating from  
 her whole body like some  
 saint of the almost forgotten.

She

abruptly  
 turns to face the roguish, cunning fox

---

<sup>1</sup> After Marianne Moore's "The Fish."

with orange flesh and white socks  
and knows him immediately:

teeth—

gums beneath,  
he, she discerns, is no threat to her  
except his shrewd nature.  
He only chases her because

men

in a pen  
grow wild and hungry for fresh, pure meat,  
want to play while they eat,  
forget to say "please" and "thank you."

Wo-

men swallow  
virile blades with each greedy conquest,  
carry on without rest  
and pray for a day of safety.

The

fox and she  
stare into each other's dark black eyes.  
Then a flash, then loud cries.  
The heavens open and rain falls.

A

tree splats, splays  
dividing field between fox and fawn.  
Both scatter from the lawn.  
The cruelty of debris, perhaps

fiend,

perhaps friend.  
The fox sees missed opportunity  
The fawn, security.  
Nature as both blessing and curse.

Perfunctory Heart<sup>2</sup>

This “perfunctory heart”<sup>3</sup>  
     ticks away in its little metal  
 cage with its little metal hands  
     until all begins to fall apart  
 and dissolves into nothingness.

Mechanical creature  
     automated by the pulsing of  
 blood pumping, pumping in and out  
     in and out; a raw, tender feature  
 that has been so long forgotten.

“Carved cordiality,”  
     pedantic discussions of things left  
 vacuous, inane, and useless  
     for it seizes with every sigh  
 of fainting drawing-room ladies.

“What stood erect,” preset,  
     “has withered” to rusty responses  
 to questions of philosophy,  
     of duties, of what God created,  
 if He “was pleased with what he saw.”<sup>4</sup>

This heart of destruction  
     will beat and beat like a drum into  
 the long night and the longer day  
     without gregarious “obstruction”  
 without emotion, just vain thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> After Marianne Moore’s “Pedantic Literalist.”

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from “Pedantic Literalist” unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> From Genesis 1:4, King James Bible.

## White Rabbit

“I’m on my way to Wonderland,”<sup>5</sup>  
the man with whiskers exclaimed.  
A frantic look crossed his face  
as if he had forgotten something  
and he would be blamed  
for it if he did not find it.

The girl next to him looked concerned,  
“I think I’ll ride along with  
the wind today instead of  
fighting it,” she whispered to herself.  
Something in the pith  
of her being shattered, exposed.

She spoke to him at last: “You know,  
this charade of waking up  
every day has really gone  
on long enough.” Her face translucent,  
cheeks like paper cups,  
filled with vulnerability.

The man with whiskers fidgeted. “An odd  
juxtaposition, aren’t we?”  
He seemed a giant to her,  
crushing her notion of truth. She asked,  
“Is this fantasy?”  
Then, the ground gave way beneath her.

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes from Facebook posts.

Paint

her

flesh a blur  
 of “flowers that last forever”<sup>6</sup>  
 must be artistic, clever  
 “and always look most beautiful.”

Turn,

draw a burn  
 here, paint a daffodil right there  
 and plant a garden on bare  
 skin for the whole world to enjoy.

Paint

her a Saint-  
 like mirage of purified hues,  
 mold her into a bless'd muse.  
 Pray to her when all hope is lost.

“Males

perch, patrol  
 during the afternoon”<sup>7</sup> for her.  
 She has paused near the aster  
 cosmos. A blazing star,<sup>8</sup> consumed.

She

has to be  
 spotted with “black, brown, blue, or gray.”<sup>9</sup>  
 She ascends, and floats away—  
 a Painted Lady butterfly.

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<sup>6</sup> Quote from Cosmopolitan’s article, “22 Adorable Floral Tattoos You’re Going to Be Obsessed With.”

<sup>7</sup> Quote from “Attributes of *Vanessa cardui*” Butterflies and Moths.org.

<sup>8</sup> Aster cosmos and blazing star are both plants whose nectar Painted Lady butterflies regularly eat.

<sup>9</sup> Quote from “Attributes of *Vanessa cardui*” on the coloration of Painted Lady butterflies.



The Savage's Romance<sup>10</sup>

is a city filled  
 with the false nobility of poverty  
 juxtaposing “a former member of the middle  
 class raised by two accountants.”<sup>11</sup>  
 Everyone is playing the same  
 horrific game of “moving the money from  
 the client’s pocket to your pocket,”  
 a legal pickpocketing of the naïve  
 in the concrete and metal jungle  
 of urban space where commerce reigns supreme.  
 Skyscrapers a mile high into cloud space and tent cities  
 clutter the streets forgotten in the distant below.  
 Each building a cavern hollowed out,  
 peopled by wolves and unknowing prey;  
 the howls resonating down the post-apocalyptic street  
 with burning pages floating like snow  
 onto the echoes of screams and traffic.  
 “The only thing standing between you and  
 your goal is the story you keep telling yourself as to why  
 you can’t achieve it” the lone wolf howls as he prowls  
 the sidewalk for his next victim.  
 Fur coats and sewer rats coexisting, starving for  
 attention and survival, for meat and berries and gems,  
 public commodities or private pleasures.  
 Risk after risk, it keeps the imaginary line of wealth vivid.  
 “This right here is the land of opportunity. This is America.”

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<sup>10</sup> After Marianne Moore’s “New York.” Title is a line from Moore’s “New York.”

<sup>11</sup> All quotes are from “The Wolf on Wall Street.” 2013.

**CHAPTER FOUR: ELIZABETH BISHOP**

Omaha

There the three stand solemn  
on the sandy beaches of France.  
These carved shiny shapes look like  
they are rusting in the unrelenting sun.  
They stand as if waiting for a G.I.  
lost at sea or a ship returning home  
after the storm settles,  
mirroring blue on blue on blue.  
The metal bows like a belly  
of a landing craft or  
a bayonet gleaming in sunlight.  
The blades beckon to the ocean,  
a third water, a third sky, a third sand,  
they summon the elements in with the tide.  
The three stand rusting in France,  
with baited breath, for the rest,  
searching the horizon.

I saw them standing there eight years ago  
like incisors breaching the front lines of sand  
gnawing at the sky.  
I was only a child then and did not notice the way  
the wind whistled past them like chimes  
or how the thin hollow of them  
resounded when touched.  
I wondered why I was taken there  
to the sandy beach in France memorializing those  
that would never see these metal teeth,  
the beckoning blades, the sharpened edges.  
The three stand solemn, penetrating the skyline  
like men aged beyond their years,  
with tarnished, yet unyielding courage.

## Referendum

It is not so difficult to leave  
a place when you do not know  
who you can or cannot believe.

When you are unable to perceive  
belonging and must lie low,  
it is not so difficult to leave.

And when forced to grieve  
those you lost not long ago,  
it is hard to believe

anything is worth saving or conceive  
of any way loss is okay, so let go.  
It is not so difficult to leave

home and begin to weave  
a new story and leave only an echo  
of who you once were. Believe

in a better tomorrow and retrieve  
all that is left after this harrowing show.  
It is not so difficult to leave.

--To lose home and love without reprieve,  
watching the world swallow your past  
it is not so difficult to leave  
when there is no one left to believe.

## Clouded Visions

A storm was brewing outside the groaning house  
where man and child and wife  
sat huddled by the fetid fireplace  
crudely chiseled into the brick walls  
as the thunder rocked them drowsily,  
as if in an unnatural daze.

The shaking child was in a daze  
until the storm assuaged and the house  
settled. The child rubbed her eyes drowsily  
and the man looked longingly at his wife  
as he put the child to bed. The walls  
boomed at the spitting in the fireplace.

Home meant as long as the fireplace  
could bear the wood and smoking daze  
of heat against the bitter cold walls,  
the world around this house  
could fall apart but man and child and wife  
would be together, laughing drowsily

as they aged and grew. Drowsily,  
they slept by their antiquated fireplace  
snuggled under a Christmas blanket as the wife  
fell into blankness; the husband in a daze.  
The home expanded beyond the house  
and its groaning, echoing walls

as laughter bounced from ceiling to walls  
until the sun appeared from its stupor, drowsily  
spreading its rays throughout the slight house  
and the dull heat from the fireplace  
was no longer needed and the stormy daze  
lifted on man and child and wife.

The three hugged tight as the wife  
reset the slanted pictures on the walls  
and the child glanced outside in a daze

of daydreams for a future, drowsily  
wishing for a fancier fireplace  
in a fancier house.

The husband dazed, too, about his cherished house,  
carved affection from sooty fireplace memories, as wife  
drowsily imagined a life beyond these crumbling walls.

## The Classroom

In Odessa, Texas,  
I sat in the same chair I had  
sat in for the past month  
five days a week with the same  
teacher who told us about the cosmos  
and the Amazon and how to color  
within the lines.  
I sat there reading  
during what should have been naptime,  
and lost myself in the stories  
of those that never existed.  
This universe of characters  
who faced struggles I could not yet fathom  
were as real to me as my classmates  
sound asleep around me.

I lost myself in the page on page  
of heroines defeating evil  
with swords and wit and spunk  
and I likened myself to them.  
They fought valiantly  
in a quest for nobility. While my fight  
was over the amount of homework  
I had that night, I could hear them  
whisper to me, "*You are one of us, too.*"  
They came alive to me. "*You are a Jocelyn,  
You must fight nobly among us.*"  
I lost myself inside myself for the rest  
of that restless naptime.

For the rest of the afternoon,  
on a day that felt like any other,  
I thought about the characters and  
how the cosmos I was being taught about  
was so massive it could contain  
whole worlds that I hadn't yet read.  
Every single star I peered into when  
dusk blanketed the horizon and dusted

it with planets could contain heroes  
fighting bravely for their honor.

When class ended at 3:15 that day,  
my teacher's parting words  
were that our President had decided to go to war.  
Outside, in the heat of  
a September day in Odessa, Texas,  
the sun was beating down on the bubbling tar  
parking lot.

## Whitstable

About the size of a small picture,  
 taken by some old time photographer  
 in Whitstable, and about the same browns  
 and off-yellows of the sepia landscape,  
 this little captured moment of a rainbow  
 dulled by age and yellowed further  
 in the creased corners of too many  
 wallet pockets and accidental stains,  
 it never knew the brightness of the painted  
 beachfront cabanas or the artist who  
 labored over them.

In the fuzzy bits of photograph,  
 one can make out the green-gray of waves  
 lapping at the rocky shoreline  
 where sand ought to have been,  
 but had long since vanished beneath the swells.  
 There was a bit of wood, rotting, sticking out bravely  
 as if a barrier between the off-colored houses  
 and the impending waves.

In the faded brightness of pinks, purples, pastel blues,  
 one could witness the sloshing sunset tide bathing  
 the shoreline in an amalgamation of stripes and designs.  
 One could become one with the harbour's bell and Old Neptune,  
 the pub, on the precipice of the universe beneath pinkish clouds.  
 One could hear the sound of seagulls (not pictured)  
 cawing and squawking at each other  
 in the distance, like little specks  
 of bird or perhaps I can only imagine it  
 and it's really a bit of fiber from the film  
 worn to the surface.

I recognize this place, can almost make out  
 the path I once took to get there  
 beyond the hayfields and past the slumbering cows  
 flicking their drowsy tails at the flies  
 buzzing like a halo around them.  
 I can almost smell the rotting of fish in the harbor



and remember the carved yellow fisherman  
standing, watching, on the docks  
outside a butchery for fish.

This snapshot of memory,  
the bit of tattered film creased  
along the edges beckons me back,  
confronts me with questions I try to ignore,  
*Do you remember the way my sand felt beneath toes  
or the breath of a deep-bellied laugh,  
the way your grandfather used to laugh?  
I remember the way you carried  
the memory of him with you on your back  
the way you do with all things lost to time,  
the way you carry me, too.*

When this photograph travels  
from my wallet to my granddaughter's  
and from hers to her niece's,  
I wonder if she, too, will visit  
this faded rainbow, this  
almost beautiful thing warped  
by years of being beloved.  
Perhaps she will ask her  
about the shoreline and what lies beyond  
the bent, creased edges.

She will never know me, but we will both  
know this place, this Kentish town  
in the south of England  
where houses are constructed just so  
and photographs of rainbowed cabanas  
are dimmed to the same browns and  
off-yellows as an old notebook,  
once cherished, too, collecting dust on the shelf.

A poem confined  
into this portrait of a memory,  
cramped into the green-grays  
of waves breaching the stony beach.

This memory of life lived and not yet  
lived again crammed into a tiny  
photograph of the forgotten.  
About the size of fading minds  
along with those not seen: the sleeping cows,  
the seagulls cawing, the crashing of water on rocks,  
the voices of those who are no longer here,  
their laughter splitting the howl of wind, and all this  
the same color as spilt tea on parchment  
and the memories of rainbow promises  
sighing to us in the distance.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SYLVIA PLATH

Autumn

When earth becomes a shaken snow globe,  
A painted Rorschach of ink  
Butterfly or ghoul or blob,

The canvas becomes spilt wine,  
Merlot and White Zinfandel?  
Reds mixing with pinks,

A crime scene,  
An atrocity of sunsets  
Or a funeral of broken glass.

How much sticks to the earth  
And how much is just shadow,  
The way light turns into darkness?

My hands sticky with sap  
From a maple tree in autumn,  
With leaves browning and orangine

The way they do when days  
Turn into nights,  
The way light turns into dark.

My hands are the rough edge  
Of tree bark, a splintering of nature  
Which grows inside the swelling

Of my palm, all red and livid,  
Colors of a sun giving up  
On its worshippers.

Beneath this tree  
With kaleidoscope glass  
The grass becomes a forest

Becomes a watercolored mess of green paint  
An anguish in burnt orange  
Sighs itself into shadows.

O how every leaf crisps red-brown  
Around its green countenance  
As the sun and the day sigh, then collapse.

Weeds

Somehow silently,  
Distinct and greenly,  
Unnoticed by all

Our fingers, our hands  
Push through the surface  
No longer buried.

No one notices  
Us digging below  
Clawing up; scratching

Unable to be  
Beaten back under.  
We are resilient.

An undead creature  
A fraction unearthed  
Still suffocating

Still gasping for air.  
Dirt beneath our nails  
As we reach, skyward.

Antennae of freaks  
Probing for someone  
For another's hand

How many buried?  
How many reaching?  
How quickly we grow

Creatures of below  
Spawning, desperately  
Fingers like switchblades.

We are menaces  
Acquiring the earth  
With ruinous hands.

## The Butterfly Tent

A small enclosure appeared on the third day  
Of the county fair that comes once a year.  
I pushed myself through the kaleidoscope of chaos,  
Desperate to get inside, to see them.

It was warm like a cocoon but not so still.  
Everywhere there was a flash of color,  
A glimpse of light ghosting across my line of vision,  
Butterflies there and then not and then there again.

I escaped the crowd just long enough  
To find a quiet corner to stand in  
And appreciate the art of flight.  
I did not notice a small blue one on a flower near me.

She danced from the flower to my hand,  
A maiden with curtsyng wings  
Fluttering about to the metronome of dull chatter.  
How civil and delicate this moment!

A single breath in a desert dust storm  
And she was back to the flower.  
I left her there and went exploring.  
Outside, it was a blistering September day.

The tent will be gone tomorrow.

## Migration

In autumn, I see them gather on the ledge, the wanderers.  
Each wearing a delicately designed coat, wrapping themselves  
Tight and warm for the impending winter.  
They all wear black stockings and black gloves  
And try hard to blend, to fit in, despite their transience.

I outstretch my naked arm, but they do not seem to notice.  
Do they see me or am I too far away?  
I see a lady, painted, in disguise conversing shyly  
With a man with blue copper streaks.  
How strange these creatures are in their choice of garb!

Now the blacksmith has joined the conversation  
With metal marks smeared on his coat,  
Flirting with the painted lady relentlessly.  
I wonder if he knows her interest lies elsewhere,  
If the man with blue copper streaks knows, too?

I watch as each arrives separately,  
Conversing only for a moment,  
Near one particular purple shrub with flowers.  
They look as if they are drawn to this place,  
As if they find refuge in its softness.

One who looks like a chimney sweep perches nearby,  
A common sooty fellow, he seems pleasant enough.  
I try to comprehend their movements,  
But I cannot make it out from this distance.  
All I hear is danger, hushed tones, departure.

I fear for them, cannot imagine what lies ahead,  
There is a sense of hesitancy in their step.  
It is as if they feel the cold coming already.  
Does the weather already threaten illness?  
It is difficult to tell if they are coming or going now.

I hold my distance for some time, hesitant to interrupt  
For fear of scaring them away.

As I watch, there enters an admiral dressed in red,  
A buckeye sailor, and a farmer with a ruddy face.  
They seem an odd assortment of drifters.

Yet still, they hold their ground.  
Together they look like salsa dancers,  
Skirts and capes and coats rustling in the breeze.  
Their constant movement is not unlike dancing,  
The way they circle and part, circle and part.

This rabble has grown to twenty strong,  
Then fifty, then a hundred, but still they dance  
In solemn rhythm, careful not to get too close to each other.  
This blur stills, a second of silence.  
The only movement is another joining.

She is dressed in orange and black,  
A cape of gold and onyx.  
This outfit unlike the rest, regal.  
She knows her journey will bring her back  
Here one day when the rest are gone.

She adjusts her cape, her dress, her crown.  
There is fixedness in her gaze.  
She departs with the painted lady,  
The sailor and the admiral in flank behind.  
The rest will die where they stand.  
Winter is the cruelest dictator.



4:30 A.M.

When the rest of the world goes black, then white,  
 The flowers feel too light, too human.  
 She confronts the dulls of beige and baby blues  
 And the bloodstained flowers in a gray vase in the corner.  
 She is accosted by their confident façade:  
 The color of cheeks as blood rushes out of them,  
 The color of wrists and of pills.

It smells too sanitary here, like a mausoleum.  
 The odor of floor wax and dish soap reeks.  
 The flowers irritate her nostrils, make the room unclean.  
 Perhaps the floor wax, the soap, the dull are all deception.  
 The room is empty, full of heavy air.  
 Her sneeze resonates in the silence, rings. No one comes.  
 She scolds herself. Ridiculous nostril, too keen a sense!

She is not sure what is keeping her here, but something is.  
 The early morning sky is too looming, like a mushroom cloud,  
 An atomic explosion sheltered by wet towels under the door.  
 Silence must be better than what is beyond.  
 The walls that confine her keep them safe.  
 Her body is gas to them, they all use too much caution,  
 Stay away as long as they can, she is too flammable.

She is unlit potential, irrational compulsion,  
 Told to take too many deep breaths in.  
 She wants only to sleep, but can't,  
 Only to watch the dull white of her flesh grow hazy  
 Like a field of budding flowers in spring.  
 She was the holiest of final moments  
 Bruising the canvas with reds and pinks.

She did not ask for these flowers plucked before their time,  
 Their lives cut short for her viewing, a reminder of her illness.  
 To slice the stems, remove the roots, leave them in water  
 As dying half-things, a head unattached from its body,  
 A guillotine of red, red, and yet more red.  
 Their petals like a halo around their dead necks,

And their red eyes piercing beneath folds of white.

She is alone in the dullness, but feels their stare,  
Hallucinates them suffocating on her shallow breathing,  
Anticipates their revenge on those that have wronged them.  
Their roots betrayed them the way hers did.  
Her head begins to throb to her slowing heartbeat  
Blood rushes downstream to the bends and canals of her fingers,  
An army trying to retreat when it's already too late.

These flowers feel too bright, too light.  
They open their mouths near her,  
Suck in all her breath, whole contents of overworked lungs,  
Make her eyes itch, her stomach churns like a seasick sailor.  
If she shuts her eyes long enough, maybe the silence will fade,  
Maybe everything will go from dull to white to black,  
And all that once was will disappear.

**CHAPTER SIX: REBECCA MORGAN FRANK**

## Train Hymns

There are no trains in Texas,  
but here, in Oakland, there are many.

It's 2 am and I feel the rumble before  
I hear the clearing of its throat,

the blaring drunken voice of too loud  
a neighbor I never expected

when I arrived here two nights ago  
at this temporary home for the forgotten

and this clanking metal is my constant  
companion every fifteen minutes.

The conductor does not know me  
but the one who I met yesterday

when traveling from here to downtown  
and back works his way

into my thoughts, his family photo, he showed  
to me a wife and two kids and

I cannot get him out of my head all night  
long: the him that isn't even him

but may be another of many, a hymn  
on repeat, a broken record of hymns

out of tune and screeching the names of those  
who never made it, who called the tracks

their final resting place, their home.

## Bald Peacock

When you see him, you will want  
to remove his tail of a thousand eyes  
each roughly the same size and all  
staring at you from his plume. You will  
note that they are his prized  
possession, full of vanity and pride,  
his stride is synonymous with certitude.  
When taming a vain, confident thing,  
you must first break him, steal  
what he values most, then  
humiliate him for his baldness,  
his gawky nudity. When you saw him,  
a beautiful proud thing, I wonder  
if it was his wildness or his beauty  
that made you want to destroy him.

## Reflections on Narcissus

Narcissus is not the only man to find himself  
    in the reflection in a woman's eyes, for  
        what is a woman but  
water? And what is  
    love but a mirror image of self?  
    It is so easy to grow infatuated with an image  
        that its embodiment ceases to exist and  
            pining over love is pining over the imaginary.  
If he speaks into her, I wonder if she is only echo,  
    repeating back the affirmations, dutifully.  
I wonder if he sees himself in the sweat  
    from his brow or the tears from his eyes.  
Does he only recognize his own image  
    in the grief of his mother? She is an ocean so vast,  
        all of us would drown in her wake

## Tombs

They call this a fine art, too.  
How bodies are buried in tombs inscribed

with ancient runes in a language that seems  
familiar but I no longer know.

Surrounding the sarcophagus is pottery  
made around roughly the same time or

in roughly the same location, but  
seldom both. This museum exhibit,

a room bustling with people, is tomb  
and runes and pottery. Still,

is death to be considered a fine art,  
a preservation of life, a ritual misfit?

When I die and my body begins to decay,  
will one day scientists and archeologists

come along with their shovels and dig me up,  
put me on display like a Mona Lisa of carcasses?

Will they keep me in a glass case, roped off?  
If dying is a fine art, one day, the bones that

once wrote this poem will be art, too,  
even when my voice fades and my eyes become

sockets. My tomb will be inscribed with funny symbols  
in a language that seems familiar to a girl in a museum

who passes by to examine the pottery, instead.

## Influence

I crafted myself from their bones and memory and ink,  
transformed into blank canvas,

made my mind and hands into vessels to be filled  
with their spirits.

The first came with her stanzas, a volcanic eruption  
corseted in the finest lace.

She taught me to enjoy the in-betweens of dashes, then  
left quietly, silent as dots on snow.

The next appeared with her volumes, a saga  
told and yet untold.

She left me asking whether God is real or if He, too,  
is nothing more than myth.

The third followed with many voices, but only one mouth:  
a patchwork ventriloquist.

Does she want me to follow her voices, to quote  
her work in mine?

The fourth found me in the softest places of my heart,  
returned to me memories I had forgotten.

What makes remembrance so powerful, even when  
the details feel like fog?

The fifth spoke to the me that is no longer me,  
the me that left me years ago

with scars on my wrist and misfiring synapses  
in my exhausted brain.

The last knew at the end of this journey, I would  
have too many questions and

not enough answers. How does one learn to live  
in the unknown these days?

How does this journey continue off-page? How  
does this oral tradition blossom?

These words are sailing onward, seeking the  
most distant of ocean tides.

They journey on, perhaps to inside, perhaps  
to beyond.



**CHAPTER SEVEN: JOCELYN MOSMAN**

Meteor

Grandpa,  
I have a hole in my chest  
where you landed—  
a man who could speak more rhymes  
than anyone I'd met.

You told me I was  
a star in your galaxy,  
and you had me spinning  
through space.

You made me a daydreamer  
because I was less afraid in the daylight  
than when having night terrors  
where you were only a whisper.

I remember the day it rained,  
because the atmosphere went  
on strike against your absence  
in my life.

You were a ghostwriter  
on my mother's birthday,  
painting a heart in the sky  
to remind her

that it could be easily torn apart  
by the breeze  
and she needed to be more careful  
carrying it on her sleeve.

I think she buried a piece of it  
under your tombstone  
when your body turned to ashes,  
but my mother is a gravedigger

during the holidays,  
she brings back the old memories,  
talks you down out of  
black and white photographs.

To me, you were just  
the man who loved poetry and Dickens,  
but still had space in your heart  
for me.

You always encouraged me  
to break through walls  
with new words.  
You taught me metaphor.

My heart was a meteor bursting  
in slow motion  
and my mother  
enveloped it in her womb.

The matriarch of my earth  
took in the broken shells,  
swallowed shrapnel every morning,  
collected the ashes as keepsakes.

But I only witnessed the aftermath,  
telling me that poetry  
would be the only way to  
wedge out the lost time.

I feel like I missed something Earth shattering  
because you left my family  
as a Pennsylvania reflection  
to the storm you'd created.

I can't write enough poetry  
to make your memory  
more three-dimensional,  
but I'm not sure I want to

because my heart is a burial ground  
where I keep those I've loved and lost  
and there's a tombstone  
in front with your name on it.

I'm sorry I didn't  
get the chance  
to say goodbye.

Goodbye.

## Fragile Women

Our slit wrists are  
severe weather alerts,  
and we are sounding out  
unnatural disasters.

We bleed until our palms  
are clasped together  
dripping our prayers  
onto cracked canvases.

We keep  
our hearts like angel wings,  
growing a feather with every  
heartbreak,

and I know women  
who are flying right now.  
They bleed out too many  
days without sunrises

keep tally marks  
on their flesh,  
wait for their chance  
to breathe again

without having to bite their tongues,  
and swallow  
bloody saliva  
that tastes like their unspoken self-defenses.

I know women whose DNA  
turned against them,  
created a pallet of brown  
and grey and emptiness,

never satisfied with their  
shade of pretty.  
I know women whose

hearts are breaking

without the metaphor.

They are pleading  
without any god  
for a new one before

theirs erupted in the ER...  
2016 has a way of breaking women's hearts,  
and teenage girls are bleeding out  
broken futures.

I know women who are performing  
exorcisms on their spirits,  
hoping that their unholy ghost  
paints their wings white with every slice of the knife.

Fragile women,  
bodies made beautiful and self-destructive.  
We aren't meant to bleed  
like martyrs.

Don't cast down your faces,  
look into the places  
of your body  
you've never seen.

Every hair is a part of your halo,  
every scar is a rose petal  
for you to garden  
with self-love.

Fragile women,  
we are born to be strong,  
ashes being relit  
into the fire we started from.

Let our bruises become candles  
guiding our angels with broken wings  
and misplaced spirits home.



only the sound of your voice  
means melancholy  
but you forget to answer

and I cease to be  
I fade

## Reliance

You are every stretch of tendon,  
wrist flexed, then relaxed,  
the curvature of hand,  
steady and bent.

You are brain stem activity,  
words and pain both flowing  
down your spinal cord  
until it is too hard to write.

You are mouth and throat,  
soft spoken and fragile,  
swallowing blood,  
choking back heart.

You rely on the body:  
hand to write,  
spine to stand,  
mouth to speak.

As you collapse inward  
like a burning house,  
all I can do is hold sound  
the walls,

resist the destruction,  
or flee.

I will not leave.  
I will not watch you burn.

I will guide your hand,  
until words flow past  
unspeakable pain  
onto open page.

I will stand tall beside you,  
become sturdy,



lumbar vertebrae,  
help you climb and stretch.

I will climb into your voice box,  
be your echo, resonating;  
repeat your words until I  
know them by heart,

but when the house smolders,  
the skeleton screams,  
the joints crack.  
I smell smoke.

As body relies on body,  
I rely on you.

I will not leave.  
I will not watch you burn.

## For My Body

For my big bones, short torso, and small feet.  
For my stretch marks and my scars,  
my icy skin and burning blood.  
For every curly strand of hair  
and every freckle.

For my dry skin.  
For my pimples that arise one week  
every month,  
like a Brigadoon of pimples.  
For baby fat I never  
grew into or outgrew.

For womanhood that churns  
like butter.  
For these breasts I inherited  
from my grandmother.  
For my pelvis made wide  
to birth new life.  
For my womb that may  
never hold a child,  
my genes that may never  
be called Mom.

For my iron deficient blood,  
for my migraines,  
oh god, for my migraines!  
For taking migraine medication every night.

For the hair follicles  
digging deep into my brain,  
like words not yet discovered.  
For the discovery of electricity,  
in the waves of kinetic energy  
sent to my fingers.

My stubby fingertips.  
(For those, too).

For these hands that hold  
my niece's baby fingers one day  
and a pocket knife the next.

For this body I love in,  
emotions tangling like spaghetti  
and curly hair  
and a heart  
always off-beat.  
For my veins like lightning-struck branches,  
for my spine like a redwood tree,  
for when I am most bare.

For the scars on my elbows  
from falling off the jungle gym.  
For the discoloration on my kneecaps  
from tripping up stairs.  
For my trembling ankles...

For the zigzags on my belly  
from three operations.  
For the abscess in my uterus  
the doctor forgot when stitching me up.  
For my appendix that burst  
at the Harry Potter midnight premier.

For my hourglass figure  
running out of time,  
for never having enough,  
always having too much.  
For never quite fitting no matter  
how much I squeeze and pull  
and don't breathe.

For wanting  
to be less curvy.  
For wishing for smaller hips.  
For wishing plus size and thighs  
didn't rhyme so well.  
For wanting a body tailored

to me.

For trying to be someone else.

For still never fitting.

For knowing I am not perfect.

For that being okay.

For forgiveness.

For this body I live in.

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