Everything We Name is Precious

Chelsea Campbell

Follow this and additional works at: https://red.library.usd.edu/diss-thesis

Part of the Creative Writing Commons
The members of the Committee appointed to examine the Thesis of Chelsea Campbell find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chairperson

[Signatures]

Lee Ann Roripaugh

Benjamin Hagen

Cindy Struckman-Johnson
EVERYTHING WE NAME IS PRECIOUS is a collage of poetry exploring the challenges of reshaping a disembodied being into a new whole after trauma. The collection critiques a phallocentric America entrenched in toxic masculinity and violent gun culture, calling for individual and cultural healing. Drawing inspiration from Hélène Cixous, Maggie Nelson and the Book of Genesis, the manuscript’s speakers seek agency and restoration by exploring what it means to write through the body and reimagine the feminine.

Thesis Advisor

Lee Ann Roripaugh
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committee Signature Page</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1: ARTIST’S STATEMENT</strong></td>
<td>1-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2: POEMS</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Filleting</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>genesis chapter one / mother</em></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>i am the churning cosmos reconvened</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filleting</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trashfish Elegy</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood; Or, Ritual Ways of Doing Things Keep Us Safe</td>
<td>23-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Overload</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration I</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse, check my blood for a pulse.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duality of the Butterfly Betta</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuser’s Blackout Apology I</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuser’s Blackout Apology II</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuser’s Blackout Apology III</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tightrope</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Unsent Letters from Rabbit to Dog</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonviolent Disturbance Reported</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday Presents</td>
<td>37-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Mary</td>
<td>40-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note on Target Shooting</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for Home Invasion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Conversations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Date</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sound of Death as Flashback</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To My Son, Still Unnamed, Who Inhabits Me</td>
<td>48-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3: INHABITED</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: Inhabited</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>genesis chapter three verse twenty / cusp</em></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abecedarian for My Hallucinations</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ode to Tinnitus as Seascape</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canine Desire</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappearing (and How to Stop)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>making and naming</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adam and adam</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Becoming Chimera 59
Morning Sickness Nightmare 60
Becoming Chimera (with Mirror) 61
First Feed 62
A is for Apple, B is for Bear 63-64
The Stay-at-Home Mother Confesses 65
Migration II 66
Survival 67
New Church 68
Apostate 69-72

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 73
CHAPTER 1: ARTIST’S STATEMENT

During a blistering midwestern summer in August 2018, I was pinning several dozen tiny collages on a clothesline with wooden clothespins for an exhibit on the quiet, airconditioned second floor of my university’s library. Together, the collages created an interactive exhibition titled Ladies Who Go There! by artists and activists Janet Braun-Reinitz and Sarah Maple. I remember feeling like a strange type of housewife hanging laundry on a line, except this laundry was not clean and comfortable. Barely bigger than a postcard, each piece depicted an arrangement on topics of violence, trauma, activism, and various political issues. I could arrange the collages in any order. In their instructions, Braun-Reinitz and Maple invited any exhibit attendee to unpin a collage and write whatever message they wanted on the back, creating a whole new interactive layer to the collages. As I hung the pieces, I read the anonymous stories and phrases on the back and was struck by how someone’s “Just Smile! :)” written on one card appeared next to another card sharing a story of sexual trauma. This arrangement happened randomly and was unintentional on my part, but I did not change it. The artists’ collages and anonymous writers meant something separate from each other, meant something else when considered together, and meant something entirely new as part of the exhibit’s whole. When I think about this exhibition now, I ponder how the artistic medium of collage works to encapsulate traumatic experiences of not only a collective group, but also for an individual’s trauma.

Thinking of trauma writing as collage-work helped immensely with my own wish to write about my experiences with violence. I entered my first relationship at fourteen years old with a seventeen-year-old boy and was subjected to sexual and psychological abuse. I was only able to fully escape the relationship’s pull after he turned eighteen, and my parents were able to
secure a protection order to keep him from contacting me. Years passed, and I often wished to write about my experience, but I confronted a mountain of mental blockage when I approached the writing task itself. As an avid fiction reader, I thought telling my own story meant that it needed to have a beginning, middle, and an end—the only trouble is that this is not how remembering trauma functions. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, psychiatric doctor Bessel van der Kolk says, “Trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions” (70). To me, this is the brain in the beginning stages of collaging trauma. The whole is too much for the mind to bear at once, and so the memory is cut apart into “isolated sensory imprints”—images and texts are cut from their homes (rendering their original context inaccessible), upsetting the understood rules of narrative. Fortunately, poetry succeeds where narrative fails in that these texts can be reassembled into a new collaged whole.

One connecting thread in this assembly of a new whole is desire of embodiment. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous says, “So few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies” (886). Her words feel like a paradox as I question how a woman can write through her body if she has not won it back. Cixous says, “If there is a ‘propriety of woman,’ it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate…[she has] body without end, without appendage, without principal ‘parts.’ If she is whole, it’s a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble” (889). What Cixous discusses here also feels like a collage-work that has transitioned beyond memory-cutting and sense-making assembly: This is the stage in collage-making that exhibits a body as a newly assembled whole aiming to unfix from phallocentric definition, lest the individual
experience the death of the self, becoming othered into object status. Cixous explains that “a woman is never far from ‘mother’ [as]...outside her role functions: the ‘mother’ as nonname and as a source of goods” (881). If women are always near their pre-language, “nonname” status, her own creative language acts cannot be understood if her language does not revolve around phallic language.

In my poetry, I wanted to imagine Eve biting into the fruit from Eden’s forbidden tree as a creative act in defiance of the phallus. Although I have been curious about Eve for as long as I learned scriptures while growing up, my interest in her reignited after seeing a collage in Ladies Who Go There! that proclaimed: “Eve was framed!” I wanted to write about this somehow.

While looking through Genesis, I noticed that Eve is the very last being on Earth to receive a name, and she doesn’t receive a name until she and Adam are cast out of Eden (Genesis 3:20-21). This disturbed me—I couldn’t stop thinking about how it must feel to have even the lowliest worm named before you, what kind of identity crisis that created in addition to the disembodied feelings that must occur. Nodding to Cixous’ concept of nonname, I write in the poem “genesis chapter three verse twenty / cusp”:

adam named the entire world alight with our breath god called me
his wife non-name and created the dawn i made myself into
eve, because i am the cusp of darker earth. (35)

In the original Genesis, Adam is the one who names his wife. In my reimagining and collage-work, Eve is the one who names herself in accordance with the evening that comes before nightfall. “Darker earth” is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Freud’s ignorant idea towards women’s sexuality, calling it a “dark continent.” Later in the poem, Eve says:

i made a mother from my deepest hunger—
she would become a full body an inhabited body

the mother of all the living not yet named. (35)

Eve mothers herself through naming, and thus creating herself, flipping the idea that “mother” and “nonname” are synonymous, achieving embodiment through feminine writing not associated with the phallus. Thus, everything we name is precious. In the poem “adam and adam,” the reader might understand “we” to mean Adam and Eve naming the beasts together, as she claims in the poem “making and naming” (40). However, the title for my manuscript transcends beyond this context, especially since in “adam and adam,” Eve calls hunger precious and will eventually make a mother from it. Therefore, when I say “everything we name is precious,” I refer to the symbolic mother who names the self and embodies the self. I aim to collage the Eve persona with my persona in an effort to mother across the mythos, so to speak. The speaker in the “Apostate” poem “II. Remembrance” gains embodiment by drinking her own breastmilk (54), performing Eve’s communion-like bid to “drink in the name of myself” in the following poem titled “eve’s final thoughts after escaping eden” (55). This references Cixous’ own way of flipping the mother figure as “nonname and source of goods,” where she writes: “There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881). Cixous explains how one can mother/name/embody oneself. I understand that taking communion in the name of the self would likely be considered blasphemy, but that is my point—to upset the phallic preference of theological patriarchy, to “Blasfemme” (55). However, as many who grow up in devout Christian households know, Eve would actually become a mother—not just a symbolic one—and actual pregnancy and mothering runs the risk of tipping towards disembodiment once more. Satisfied with leaving the Eve persona in her self-embodied prayer, I wanted the
manuscript to explore the disembodiment of pregnancy and mothering through the speaker that is my own persona.

After finally feeling like I was beginning to process my trauma through writing and beginning the healing process, I became pregnant, and one of the first thoughts I had upon this discovery was that my body wasn’t completely mine anymore. I wanted to capture this feeling in “Becoming Chimera”:

Locus slides
Backwards, displaced
By lizardy embryo’s
Faint beacon. (43)

The “locus” means two things: 1) the shifting locus references how a pregnant body’s center of gravity literally shifts during pregnancy, requiring the body to adapt and move through the world in a whole new way; and 2) the shifting locus references the renewed feeling of disembodiment (feeling “displaced”) after the speaker discovers she is pregnant. She emotionally distances herself from the collection of her body’s own cells—instead of feeling pregnant with a baby, she feels invaded and inhabited by a “lizardy embryo.” This reflects my own personal experience. Even though I chose to have my child, the rapid changes in my body disturbed me, and I suffered from panic attacks and combated what I think was body dysmorphia (I haven’t been able to find studies on body dysmorphia and pregnant people, as pregnant people are a severely under-studied group). All I know is that the bigger I became, the more I felt like the body in the mirror wasn’t mine. The chimera—a female monster of collaged animal parts—became a perfect representation of how monstrous and othered I felt as a collage of two humans in a body separated from its selfhood. In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson captures several moments of the societal trap of pregnancy in which the mother cannot escape object status. When she presents a scholarly lecture regarding her book about cruelty (thus displaying her subjecthood), a male
audience member experiences cognitive dissonance, asking, “‘How did you handle working on all this dark material…in your condition?’” (Nelson 91). This question demonstrates how the audience member was unable to reconcile Nelson’s selfhood with her motherhood as being able to exist in the same body. In “Becoming Chimera (with Mirror),” the speaker points to the blurred lines between her body and her baby’s body while in active labor, saying “this child feels nowhere / And everywhere” (45). The presence of the mirror is important. When I was in labor, I had difficulty feeling where and how to push because I had an epidural. The nurses wheeled in a giant mirror because they claimed that seeing my body could help me figure out how to push. Already having a complicated relationship with mirrors, I couldn’t help but feel that my body looked “unfamiliar, monstrous / Opened” (45). It made me feel sick, so I asked them to take the mirror away. In an effort to encourage me, a nurse guided my hand down to where my baby’s head was crowning, and I remember feeling this intense emotion paired with the thought: *There he is.* The line “I know exactly where we are” points to that moment where the speaker can finally touch this new body and delineate between herself and this new person (45). However, this feeling doesn’t last. Labor isn’t over yet. Legs “collapse / Onto sweat-soaked sheets, / And he submerges back inside” (45), returning to chimera-ish, collaged body that baby and mother share.

The following poem, “First Feed,” features multiple examples of collage-work, beginning with the speaker birthing the placenta and attempting to breastfeed her baby for the first time; one might think that, finally separated, the mother regains selfhood, but this is not the case for my persona. First, the placenta is a shared organ, the means by which the mother transfers nutrients and oxygen to the baby. Whose organ is this? Whose milk is this? My body made it, but my body didn’t make it for *me.* My use of “your/my” collages two bodies together in order to
demonstrate lack of definition between what belongs to each body. Nelson describes the act of feeding as a “physical and emotional challenge,” where feeding “reminds the nursing mother of her animal status” (99). However, the speaker encounters difficulty with breastfeeding, saying to her child:

nothing fits your mouth. Feeding you

Should have been encoded inside us,

A deep and promised connection taken—

Maybe nothing is instinct. (46)

By saying nothing is instinct, I wanted to challenge the notion of “animal status” as the speaker sinks further into objectification. Since the animals and the rest of the living were named before Eve, “animal status” becomes a privileged term over “non-name.” Something considered so animal, instinctual, and natural has become unachievable as the speaker pumps milk to syringe-feed her baby instead. She empties her milk into a cup, declaring herself “non-name, / No more your mother than your tongue is the syringe slurping / My/your dull stars” (46). Even though the speaker can’t delineate some aspects of her and her baby’s body, a mother’s body becomes objectified as the ultimate source of goods no matter the method of feeding, her breasts becoming occupied spaces as milk flows out from inside of her. A baby’s unconscious instinct after birth allows the baby to sleep, expel waste, but most importantly, feed—an animalistic subject, but a subject nonetheless. Similar to Nelson’s notion of feeding as a reminder of animal status, Jacques Lacan describes the Real as synonymous to the body of the mother in relationship to the infant. This method of being exists in a state of pre-language. Then, as a baby grows, it is (hopefully and ideally) nurtured into a holistic understanding of the world, and its own place in it, with an understanding of the mother’s domestic space as a place of safety. At this point,
through the mother’s nurturing, the child enters language and thus also the symbolic order. The child’s entrance into the symbolic is all well and good in theory, but there resides a problem in that the Lacanian Symbolic is notoriously phallic, which condemns the mother to remain in pre-language, object status. Pre-language is like being “a blank wall…a cloud effaced,” which is directly taken from Sylvia Plath’s “Morning Song.” This collage-work I perform with Plath demonstrates another important part of collaging: how one chooses to space different pieces, fill in gaps, or leave things cut apart and unexplained.

These spaces, or gaps, are important. After all, the first step in creating a collage is cutting a text/memory/feeling from its metaphorical page, leaving a gap behind in the original material. In many pieces, the utility of gaps lends a clue to the speaker’s feelings and tensions at work. For example, “First Feed” tightly weaves Plath into the poem with the intention of making Plath’s words and my own less obvious, suggesting a kindred spirit between the two speakers. This familiarity differs from other collaged pieces where the speakers are clearly separate and almost resist being woven together. In “genesis chapter one / mother,” there are many spaces between Genesis and the speaker, signaling breakage both in the speaker’s voice and the sanctity of the Holy Bible. The phrase “in the beginning” presides over the entire poem, asserting dominance over the speaker’s words and ends with “upon the face of the deep,” leaving the speaker’s voice sandwiched between biblical text. While the speaker’s voice is dominated by the biblical, the speaker still demonstrates power in their ability to poke holes the biblical text. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a gap as; “Any opening or breach in an otherwise continuous object; a chasm or hiatus.” The English language equips us to think of continuity as a straight line—a rather phallic, masculine image—while “opening,” “breach,” and “chasm” suggests yonic, feminine imagery. The tension between phallic and yonic imagery appears in the
manuscript’s second poem, “i am the churning cosmos reconvened,” where the speaker identifies as a “slow, milky stream, carving / through the caverns of god’s metaphysical guts” (4). However, I want to note that this feminine energy isn’t the cavern itself. It complicates the notion of yonic breach by becoming the stream inside the cavern (much like how Eve is both the metaphorical chalice and the body that fills it in the “Apostate” poems). I aim to create a feminine presence that isn’t simply an empty space—an unknowable, Freudian dark continent—but a fluid, tangible body—a mothering body—that rejects and disrupts rigid continuities. The first two poems of my manuscript mimic a stream by leaping from the left-hand margin, refusing to be confined. However, this flowing style changes after violence occurs at the end of the second poem:

his finger curves into a fishhook,

and the hook becomes a rib.

netted in this body without body,

i wait, dreaming for old currents

beyond reach. (4)

When I began thinking of Eve’s trauma, I chose not to follow the original creation story where Eve is simply created from Adam’s rib. Instead, I reimagined Eve as a divine feminine, flowing entity that had always existed, just like God. The God character traumatizes and disembodies the feminine presence, wishing to control her under masculine, phallic dominance (paradoxically, I cannot help but feel like Adam is experiencing a queer sort of pregnancy himself—a body collage that he certainly did not ask for—but I don’t want to fall down this rabbit hole just yet).
After God’s violent act, the culture of violence and trauma established, the speaker shifts to my persona. All lines from poems “Filleting” through “Sensory Overload” remain left-aligned until “Migration I.” “Migration I” begins with a callback to poem “i am the churning cosmos reconvened” when the speaker says “My body is a star” (12). This is the first instance where the two personas connect across the mythos, becoming connected and collaged by the culture of trauma. Lines become untethered from the left-hand margin again, but they do not return to the left-hand margin to form a stream. Rather, the word “collapse” is offset from the lines, signaling one of the key moments of breakage and disembodiment for the speaker. The poem “Migration II” jumps forward in time to when the speaker is preparing breakfast for her weened baby. The sensory images are grounded in the tangible (as opposed to the language at the end of “Migration I” which becomes abstract and untethered). However, even in these grounded moments, gaps appear and offset the words “quicken,” “flying,” and “fell” (50). This styling points to breakage—even in calm moments, like preparing oatmeal for her son, the speaker still thinks about their trauma. When the baby innocently grabs his mother’s chest, the lines begin to untether, demonstrating the threat of the speaker becoming disembodied once more. However, after the child accepts his mother’s boundaries, calm returns. When the child becomes scared of a butterfly, the speaker holds and protects him, and a metaphoric collage occurs:

A round pink check melts into my shoulder,
And we become solid, centered like the sun.
Hundreds of butterflies gravitate around us
Like little living planets. (50)

Metaphorically, the mother and son’s bodies are so close that they melt together, but this is a different type of collage-work compared to the monstrousness of the “Chimera” poems. The child has accepted that he no longer shares a body with his mother, and his mother feels some sense of self returning after feeling disembodied. The butterflies are important as well; Cixous
writes that “Flying is woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly” (887). In “Migration I,” the speaker feels like a caterpillar with wings inside her, and these wings become damaged after the assault, signaling her inability to be a fluid, moving, embodied person. “Migration II” shows the return of the butterflies, making the speaker feel “centered like the sun” (50), a powerful celestial body. If a butterfly functions as one of the symbols of embodiment, then embodiment (even a fragile and short-term sort) is all around her and within reach.

Embodiment hides in many different creatures (real and mythological) throughout the manuscript, becoming a Cixousan limitless, changing ensemble. If the challenge for women is to write through their bodies even though so few have won theirs back, then I reckon a woman can write through different bodies as a costuming exercise until she discovers what fits. Readers see this happening in “Filleting,” the poem that follows Eve’s trauma. The speaker is a young girl witnessing a bass fish being filleted by her father. Upon discovering the eggs, the fish becomes a mother struggling to breathe (5). The alligator gar in “Trashfish Elegy” are discarded like trash, and the female betta fish in “Duality of the Butterfly Betta” is battered into submission. The speaker is on the outside looking in on these bodies, feeling sorry for them while also helplessly contributing to their demise. Yet, the fish’s image evolves, transitioning from object to subject after Eve eats the forbidden fruit and chooses embodiment. “Anglerfish” features a vengeful female angler who swallows a fisherman and laughs. The poem “Survival” features the speaker imagining herself as a catfish who becomes “a river medusa” (51). Both the angler’s laugh and the river medusa reference Cixous’ essay, where she writes:

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.—It is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable…they riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the
abyss…you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (884-885).

Cixous argues against the two damaging phallic definitions of feminine sexuality as either unknowable or monstrous. In my writing, I juxtapose and collage female monsters with motherly figures in order to show how the body can house limitless identities in coexistence (as opposed to becoming othered to nonname and source of goods). The poem “Parable,” the final “Apostate” poem and end of the manuscript, explores this juxtaposition via a speaker considering different possibilities of what her body is doing in a theoretical moment of zero violence. Possibilities include literal mothering (“wiping slobber”), feeding (“chopping a carrot”), and having an orgasm. I was inspired by Nelson’s exploration of Catherine Opie, an SM kink practitioner who, after becoming a mother, posed for a photograph holding her newborn infant up to her mutilated, scarred chest (74). The depiction of the subject’s two worlds of domestic and kink coexisting in Opie’s body commands the viewer not to separate the subject’s selfhood from her motherhood, but instead to reconcile them. This poses a problem – in an interview with Opie, the interviewer says, “‘I think you going from the SM scene to being a mom, and all your new photos are these blissful domestic scenes – that’s shocking in a way, because people want to keep those kind of separate’” (74). Opie acknowledges that these photos are transgressive. Part of this transgression may be due to the unconventional nature of the SM scene. However, the photos show Opie moving from objectified Other into a subjecthood outside of the phallic order. Similar to Opie, the speaker in “Parable” demands to be seen as both a sexual and mothering being without separating these identities. And by the end of my manuscript, the speaker doesn’t need to wear creature costumes to feel whole.
The “Parable” poem also uses the second-person pronoun “you”; my persona is still the subject of this poem, but I wanted this piece to reach out to the reader to mimic how Eve reaches across the mythos to the speaker. Cixous claims, “Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman” (884). Now, I don’t mean that my writing speaks just to women. After all, the manuscript’s second poem talks about the yonic cavern in God’s metaphysical guts, which claims how the feminine can exist in all genders. My writing reaches out to cisgender men too, men who want to squash and control the feminine inside themselves; the feminine inside every being that cries to embody and display the full spectrum of the self; the quiet, suppressed urge to mother and nurture the self; “Every empty, dark hole [holds] space for eve to dazzle it / With her vastness, giving birth to endless stars” (“Parable” 56). I gesture towards every empty space in people, no matter their gender. Write, create, and “look at everything you’ve made” as a writing Subject, a wholly realized Self in the mirror (“Parable” 56). However, the paradox of the Apostate Poems is that even when personal embodiment is achieved, it’s impossible to exist in a world without violence that can threaten to tip you backwards once more (thus the importance of fluidity, becoming ever-changing and finding your way to a new sense of self).

Although violence appears in every section of my manuscript, the phallic image of the gun dominates the central section of my work. I wrote “Unsent Letters from Rabbit to Dog” while I was pregnant, during rapist Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court nomination under the reign of a rapist president, during which—for the first time—my mother shared with me that she was a victim of rape. So, one of my first thoughts after finding out I would have a male child was this: How can I raise him to be good and kind, to recognize his privilege and use it to help others? How can I ensure that this 3D ultrasound image of a 20-week-old fetus’s face won’t eventually become the face of someone’s abuser? It was a terrible thought to have when seeing
my child’s face for the first time, but an understandable one in that current climate. I couldn’t help but think that my past abusers were once tiny, innocent babies like the one I would soon hold in my arms. “Unsent Letters” needed to investigate this culture of violence that begins at birth and infancy, which is why this section begins with “Nonviolent Disturbance Reported.” In this poem, a bullet hits our home’s glass door while my mother is feeding and washing my infant brother. The image of the mirror appears:

   The sound of death: Cold, electric
   Festering of a mirror neuron. Pulsating
   In our mother’s pounding heart.
   His infantile ear. (20)

The mirror manifests in the broken window as a mirror neuron. Science journalist Lea Winerman writes about “The Mind’s Mirror,” describing how the mirror neuron explains “how we learn through mimicry and why we empathize with others” (48). The out-of-frame gun fires a bullet into our home, cracking the mirror-like window, introducing my brother to a culture of violence that persists in the next poem, “Birthday Presents,” where I claim:

   The guns are always there,
   In the first scenes of a boy’s first act
   As a hospital crucifix
   In all of our hands. (22)

I wished to indirectly reference Chekhov’s gun in these lines—the idea that if a gun appears in the first act in a drama, it must be fired in the third. The violence of white American theological patriarchy threatens us the day we are born, promising to fire on all of us somehow, in some way. And for many people, their answer is not to look in a mirror in order to embody the self. Rather, they are looking in a cracked mirror damaged by the violence of the phallic order. Empty spaces and holes—in both imagery and form—persist throughout “Unsent Letters,” mimicking the untethered form that first appears in “Migration I.” The speaker calls across the mythos to
find a kindred spirit in Eve when reckoning with these empty spaces, including the space in her husband, proclaiming:

Like all other men in my life, or the men that have passed through, he holds a hollow space within.

I am still working on stopping myself from feeling responsible. To cease filling gaps made by male pain. I am so tired of emptying myself into men’s empty spaces as they dig their caverns into me. (“To My Son, Still Unnamed, Who Inhabits Me” 33)

This passage exhibits the deep emptiness that phallocentric violence wreaks, regardless of gender, and demonstrates why feminine writing and embodiment is necessary not just for individual healing, but for a cultural healing as well. EVERYTHING WE NAME IS PRECIOUS is a collage of poetry, of writing-as-body, that attempts to reshape the disembodied being into a new whole. We can’t keep privileging the phallus as the dominant Subject, casting the yonic aside to object status, and emptying ourselves into others as the ever-failing antidote to what we Lack.
Works Cited


CHAPTER 2: POEMS
Part I: Filleting
genesis chapter one / mother

in the beginning,

before memory, before pain, i was a dormant

god created the heaven and the earth

egg in a fetal girl who slept in my grandmother’s womb—

earth without form, the mother of my mother of my mother is a god,

void, cloaked in a father’s name,

and darkness was donned like a marriage veil a funeral veil

upon the face of the deep.
i am the churning cosmos reconvened

into a slow, milky stream, carving

through the caverns of god’s metaphysical guts

until he dips his young-ancient hands into me,
rolls me between his finger and thumb,
and brings me to his lower lip for the first taste.

his finger curves into a fishhook,
and the hook becomes a rib.

netted in this body without body,
i wait, dreaming for old currents

beyond reach.
Filleting

I remember a white bass with the hooked
Finger under its pulsing gill, an expert
Knife-slice to its tail. A surprise:
Jelly-cream eggs exposed, shining
Even in the garage’s din. *A female.*
The globules are plucked
And squeezed between my father’s
Sand-packed fingernails.
Her mouth gasps in
Familiar air.
Trashfish Elegy

At the shore of the Missouri, a rib bone sticks my toe. Corpses of alligator gar decay on the riverside beach.

I ask my father why as he removes the cartilage splinter. He says garbage, says invasive species and We should kill them.

Obedient, I add to the body count in my quest for better fish; trashfish death dances twist patterns in the sands.

My grey-bellied offerings bake in the sun: become penitence to hungry birds who pick them clean,

or so I thought. In truth, the trashfish write promises to come back as reptilian beasts

with jaws and teeth so strong, so sharp, they could tear off my obedient hands.

Until then, they will bite my tarnished hooks, these crooked things I cast into the depths.
Blood; Or, Ritual Ways of Doing Things Keep Us Safe

I. I Learn to Scan the Ground for Thistles

I am playing barefoot in the backyard, full of popsicles and summer carelessness, when a thistle sticks my heel. Later in the bathroom, my mother plucks miniscule needles from my skin with tweezers, and I ask her why thistles exist. She says that God cursed the ground with weeds after Eve’s betrayal in the Garden of Eden.

The earth is young, and I am young, and so my mother’s words are truth. Wiser, I slide on my sandals and return to the sunshine, but I feel needles that she missed dig deeper into my skin.
II. Puberty

When I first try to use a tampon, my mother shares a story from her childhood about her neighbor who died from Toxic Shock Syndrome. At the time, I didn’t understand how someone could un-sense a foreign object in their body.

I can’t stop crying because the training bra stitches irritate my raw chest. My mother says I will get used to this new feeling, but all I hear is that I will get used to pain. Somehow, Eve is also to blame for this.
III. The Father Leaves Generous Tips on Large Bills

My father takes out a loan to invest in some church lady’s son who has private endeavors to build square houses in Africa. We’re apparently going to see the bank’s ten-thousand tithes come back tenfold, because faith, because Jesus doesn’t accept credit cards. We didn’t realize the savior entrepreneur would vanish with our money like a vision.

Months melt away, and my father asks for a few hundred dollars from my minimum wage job for utilities. He can’t look me in the eyes, his own rimmed red from the Wild Turkey bottle marked with mom’s sharpie lines.

The old pastor drinks too—he takes a leave of absence to get sober after his third DUI. Packed into pews after consuming Christ’s body and drinking his blood, the congregation cracks open hearts of repayment, deposit their contents into bowls of velvet-lined brass. It’s the right thing to do, considering that Jesus just paid for our sins. Exchange wallet denominations for prayer currency: In God We Trust.
IV. This Journey is Always Treacherous

I start dating when I am fourteen. My first boyfriend is seventeen, dark-haired, cool-eyed. His last name—Smith—gives him a degree of anonymity, just like his violence. He ignores me when I say I am nervous and unsure, senses my tension and pushes his fingers into my trembling body anyway, finds where tampons are supposed to go before I can. I take mental notes on where he travels, try navigating the same routes when the blood comes again, studying tampon box pamphlets like maps.

Diagrams make little sense compared to the reflection in the mirror between my knees. According to my mother, the pamphlets, and the websites, all I do is assume some kind of position and relax before pushing it in.

Instructions are familiar. My hands are already shaking when I pull apart the plastic wrapping.
Sensory Overload

I am a child's vased dandelion
Gone to seed and swirling in sink water.
Blown away in this muted buzz,
I wish for cleverness
To switch on like a lightbulb
With safe yellow hues, but I am flickering
Christmas lights in February snow, exposed spectacle
Reminiscent of function and brilliance.
I unfix my gaze in the bathroom mirror
To see double, push lights grinning beyond
Their fragile globe containers.
I want to perform the same magic
With my tongue, crack myself
Open like a pistachio.
Migration I

My body is a star
Like furled butterfly wings slumbering
Inside a squirming caterpillar,
My thin cocoon peeled
By greedy, entitled fingers.
One kiss disintegrates me
Into a single pulsing artery.
Easier than the terror
Of not coming to his bed at all,
I try redressing my chrysalis,
Associate gritting my teeth with pleasure,
Emptiness with wanting
While hands do
What is expected.
He tries to rape me, and
Fragile wings puncture inward
   Under shooting pins,
   The Monarch moons
      Bottleneck into collapse.
Nurse, check my blood for a pulse.

Instead, she searches between my lines for evidence of damage.

Mother, please don’t cry when she says I am broken.

It takes years to stop shaking when I hold a tampon to swallow the dread of touching my own body.

Mother, grant me privacy,

turn away from my perforated edges where I am torn in half.
Duality of the Butterfly Betta

Ripped tissue paper fins flutter
Over brilliant wreckage
Of torn mirror scales on dull gravel.
The male’s velvet rose petals
Encircle his mate’s blunted
Dart body. She turns her belly
Toward the surface in mimesis of death
As he fertilizes the eggs
Inside her. Violence melts
Into unexpected tenderness
After her eggs find new homes
In the bubble nest treading surface.
When an egg falls, the father
Cradles his child in his mouth,
Returns it home to nested safety
While the female retreats.
I hold a small green net
Between my hands
And press my forehead
To cool glass.
Hey, I know we haven't talked in about 5 or 6 years but recently I stumbled upon old letters we wrote in high school and over the years I've bettered myself as a person and I figured I owed you an apology, but I never got around to it. But a recent family tragedy that involved me losing someone close to me made me realize how little time there really is. So from the bottom of my heart I'm very sorry for the way I was and how I treated you in the end of our relationship. I was selfish and rude and had no right to be the way I was. You never did anything to deserve that and I regret all that I did. I wish I could change it, but I cannot. All I can do is say I am sorry and hope someday you forgive me. Even if you don't read this or don't forgive me. at least I can go down saying I tried for what it's worth. I hope all is going well for you. I want to blame it all on being young but that's no excuse, though I know part of it does deal with the inexperience. If I could go back in time and kick my own ass I would. I see other people other men act the way I used to and it is disgusting to know I was once like that and apologizing to you has always been on my mind but part of me was always afraid to do it and thanks for your condolences. It hasn't been easy for any of us and unfortunately it happened but at the same time it has been a wake up call. Truth be told I'm very surprised to hear back from you especially so soon.
Hey,

Abuser’s Blackout Apology II

I cannot say I am sorry

I can blame it all on being young

It hasn't been easy for any of us

truth be told
Abuser’s Blackout Apology III

Hey,

I was selfish and rude and had no right to be the way I was. You never did anything to deserve that and I regret all that I did. I wish I could change it but I cannot. All I can do is say I am sorry and hope someday you forgive me. Even if you don’t read this or don’t forgive me, at least I can go down saying I tried. For what it’s worth, I hope all is going well for you.

I see other people, other men act the way I used to, and it is disgusting to know I was once like that. Apologizing to you has always been on my mind, but part of me was always afraid to do it. Thanks for your condolences. It hasn’t been easy for any of us, and unfortunately, it happened, but at the same time, it has been a wake-up call. Truth be told, I’m very surprised to hear back from you especially so soon.
Tightrope

My face fills the space between
my mother’s hands:

a balancing act
of perpendicular feet

on slacked rope between
two towering monoliths parallel.

She says there is nothing
wrong with you.

If only I could teach my dormant tongue
to flutter like my anxious fingers,

become a loosened leaf in the breeze,
show her the line

I toe between
her hands. I do not know

which step will snap,
which way I’ll fall,

what whipping wind,
what resting bird,

or misfired synapse,
cause unknown, disrupts

the stasis I maintain
amid the clouds above and haze below.
Part II: Unsent Letters from Rabbit to Dog
Nonviolent Disturbance Reported

A bullet descends from the sky’s gray winter
Nothing. An angel of death
Sniffs out families who forgot
To paint innocent lamb’s blood above their doorframes.
My brother, in his highchair while he smacks
Cherub hands against the plastic tray, red
With spaghetti sauce. Even high above the clouds,
The bullet sees a last-minute sacrifice.
Mother lifts his roly-poly body to wash
Sticky fingers. This is when the bullet pierces
Our sliding glass door. The sound of death: Cold, electric
Festering of a mirror neuron. Pulsating
In our mother’s pounding heart.
His infantile ear.
Birthday Presents

I

My little sister and I did not have toy guns before our brother was born. To play Cops and Robbers, we used rubber bands wrapped around our pointed index fingers and thumbs, made-believe a hundred deaths.

When he is old enough to be bored by rubber bands, a pair of plastic cap guns with orange tips await on the kitchen table. We enjoy adding realism to our imagination, or at least what we think is realism.

We like the acrid smoke smell after the pop pop pop. Sometimes the sound of death hides in children’s laughter.

II

There comes a point for many children when real becomes more desirable than imagination. On his birthday, our brother receives a pair of nerf guns with safety goggles, velcro darts stick to vests with white target lines. Little boys eat cake and ice cream and pretend to kill each other.

The semi-automatic nerf arrives next year, and he buys earthy spray paints, turns shiny childish blue into matte camouflage. Years pass and toys become heavier: Paintball. Airsoft. Boxes full of plastic and lead pellets in yellow grass yards.

My father and brother take turns aiming at the rabbits in the vegetable garden. When the aim is right, the rabbits scream.

III

Years later, my brother leaves home at seventeen and finds more trouble, tells me he bought a gun for protection and denies it later, smug, thinking I’ll miss what’s broken. During incarceration’s stillness at eighteen years old, he reads the comic book I gift him about the zombie apocalypse. His favorite character is the boy who learns to shoot, not for evil or even for fun, but to survive in a world that wants to consume him.
Is the end of the world a tale of horror,
Or fantasy, or somewhere in between?
Maybe it doesn’t matter, you see,
The guns are always there,
In the first scenes of a boy’s first act
As a hospital crucifix
In all of our hands.
Boyfriend

The mouth of the German Shepherd cradles
a sloppy, innocent pink tongue, licking
his owner’s forearm shoved between his jaws.
I’m gonna teach him to guard, you say, riling
your docile beast with light punches to his ribs.
You have no idea what you’re doing, I say.
Examine the disassembled Glock on your bedroom dresser,
note its shiny beetle parts placed like a neatly pinned specimen.
A second phallus makes you double the man,
makes you feel safe and maybe even a little gangster.
You know what needs to be cleaned and how.
All those screw-and-spring guts belong somewhere in the cavity.
To be reassembled and hidden in a deep denim pocket.
You tell me I should have a gun, too.
A pink Glock, you say. The color of bubblegum. Ready to pop.
I say, I do not want a gun. Do not buy me a gun.
You take me to a shooting range to see if I get the feel.
We push a lever to control the distance between us
and our targets. Our man-shaped papers run.
Black silhouettes in a vacuum.
A handgun is harder to fire than one might realize.
There is resistance in the trigger, each click before
the full pull contains the steel reaper’s question:
Are you sure? Are you sure?
Then, the sound of death:
An avalanche of stars filling black hole
caverns. Mallets made of comets crashing on
a cosmic gong. It lingers in my skull
so much longer than expected.
Saint Mary

Once, someone crossed
out your name after I wrote it down.
Theysought I made you up.
Translated from Italian,
your last name means Saint Mary.
Mother of God.

*Blessed are thou among women,*
billions of penitent voices have said.
I want to sleep in my own bed for once.
You. Drunk. Crying into the carpet.
You need me because you hate
being alone. You grab my ankle
and don’t let go. When you are sober,
you hold my wrists down.
You are already in bed, riddled with questions:

*What do you need to wear all that make-up for?*
*You’re just going to work. You look like a prostitute.*
*You trying to impress someone?*
*You cheating on me? You are, aren’t you.*

Nothing to confess.
Once, there was a fist-sized
hole in painted drywall.
Still I say, *Hail Mary. Hail Mary.*
I don’t know anything besides.
I have no saints.

You worry. Tell me again that you will buy me a gun.
I always say no. Too many things could go wrong.
Too much to clean, too many parts.

But I do know all the parts on your gun:
A magazine I cannot read.
The dark-star, cyclops-eye of the barrel
Scrutinizing my blank face.
A trigger with your finger on it.

You are not bothered by resistance.
The dog’s apex whine—
An airliner before impact.
You are still aiming at my head after
you pull the trigger.
I didn’t check to see if it was loaded, you say.

Schrödinger’s bullet.
A Note on Target Shooting

When making holes,

demonstrate consistency accuracy.

Shoot different bullets

through the same hole,

become master of empty space,

a tight cluster of ragged punched paper.
Preparing for Home Invasion

Your alarm every night:
The sound of—

Dog ears stand at attention.  
Gonna investigate, you say.

You keep fully-loaded magazines in your sock drawer.  
They whisper when you push one in.

Invite the bullet into its chamber.  
You never turn on the lights.

What do you seek in emptiness?
Hollow shapes contain all possibilities.

You ascend the creaking steps, disappointed.
Blowing wind and groaning houses tricked you again.

No break-in. No one to shoot.  
You describe to me in detail

The things you will do to any motherfucker  
Who enters your home uninvited,

Your eyes wide with fantasy-shine.  
An almost-erotic excitement.

Hungry for fire.
Three Conversations

Did he point a gun at you?
    *I don’t know what you said to that detective.*
    
    *Often,*

Did you ever feel threatened?
    *I owe my livelihood to you.*
    
    *I felt angry.*

Did you ever feel like you were in danger?
    *I abused you.*
    
    *He pulled the trigger many times.*

Thank you for your time.
    *I’m not trying to ask for your forgiveness.*
    
    *I am still a predestined hole*

You were very helpful.
    *I’m not asking for anything.*
    
    *waiting for the eventual bullet*

Goodbye.
    *I just wanted to say I’m sorry.*
    
    *to pierce it*
    *fill it*
    *exit.*
Second Date

Your name sounds like the rolling tumbleweed before a high noon shootout scene. You play flashy guitars and wear cowboy boots, ride motorcycles and like the band Poison, and you spent a little time for threatening a guy with your gun while you were all drunk at a party.

But things are different now. I appreciate your honesty.

You are driving me home at the end of our second date in your nice, bone-white car that shines so brilliantly, we see our reflections in the body. Then your mother calls. You scream at her for twenty minutes.

You, red-faced, white-knuckled. I brace my feet against the car’s immaculate floor, grip the edges of my seat as we weave around traffic.

Unpredictable acceleration and deceleration. I imagine an accident: reflections ripple, the body breaks. Metal squeals like a pig.

*Sorry you had to hear that, you say.*

*My mom and I are actually really close.*

You are honest. Unafraid to show your weapon: a fist for a mouth.
Safe

Fathers unlock heavy,
Creaking metal doors.

Sons stow loaded weapons
In glove compartments.

Grandmothers wring
Blue-veined hands,
Bending like so many rivers.

Doe-eyed daughters wake tangled
In bedsheets with stuffed puppy dogs
And shotguns.

Tired mothers’ backs are to the wall
And the men count bricks
Behind their heads.

A pink fingernail whitens
On the trigger-hook.
Something is going to happen.
The Sound of Death as Flashback

Seismic neuron waves
pulsate from a secret
center in my murky brain—
displaced ricochets
in my white skull.

Look inside me
at what stirs under my storm clouds.

See the rabbits tremble in my marrow,
Dogs gnash their teeth on my bones.

When the storm lifts, watch cool blood
rain drops on glass window skin—
how they still quake
from low and distant rumbling thunder.

Their memories of lightning linger
so much longer than expected.
To My Son, Still Unnamed, Who Inhabits Me

I take in the honey-yellow ultrasound image of your serene, sleeping face. You are an unnamed resident in a body that is no longer totally mine. I am okay with this now. You are not a home invader, but an inhabitant. A growing part of me.

Society has deemed you a boy.

Before we decide a name for you, I wonder: What kind of man could you become? The mothers of Smith and Saint Mary once cradled their small baby boys in their arms. Fed them milk and mashed foods. Held their hands while crossing dangerous streets.

Your hands will slip away from mine to hold on to other things. Will you be close enough for me to cover your ears against sounds of death before you wander too far away?

Or will your hands become weapons? Will your fingers rest in the curve of a trigger, unbothered by resistance? What, or who, would come into your crosshairs?

Your father was a hunter. When he was a teenager, he and his grandfather would awake before dawn to perch in a tree stand. Pray for prey. In his perch, he practiced his predator skills. A forest is loud, but he learned how to listen for unique sounds. When something bigger stirs, the squirrels will chitter. Branches break.

Once, the forest moved, and your father waited for a buck. An animal with weapons. A small doe appeared instead. Not desirable. Your father raised his rifle scope to his eye to watch it anyway.

At any minute, I could have ended its life, he tells me. But I didn’t.

And how did that make you feel? I ask your father, not meaning to sound like a therapist, but I do anyway. I’m not sure if he will answer. Your father doesn’t talk about his feelings often. Says he doesn’t know how to talk about emotions. But your father doesn’t take long to answer this time.

It made me feel powerful.

For Christmas, I buy your father a grey t-shirt with an oak tree in the center. I spent hours searching for the right design and finally settled on the tree. He smiles when he opens the present, says thank you.

That’s not all! I say. Look underneath.

He finds the grey newborn onesie with an acorn in the center. I didn’t expect your father to cry. I’ve probably only seen him cry three times in the six years we’ve been together. Your father is a very good man, and the love of my life. But like all other men in my life, or the men that have passed through, he holds a hollow space within.
I am still working on stopping myself from feeling responsible. To cease filling gaps made by male pain. I am so tired of emptying myself into men’s empty spaces as they dig their caverns into me.

My son, I think I want to teach you how to weep, like your father is, here, now. His tears of love for you wash through me, fill my soul. I think weeping is the sound of life.

Six years old, BB gun in hand, your father works his small-booted legs through the overgrown thickets with his family. He breaks into a sweat — the jacket he needed this morning has become too hot now, even in the shady trees. He works hard to clamor over sprawling, mossy branches and—

_watch the ground for pheasant nests!_ someone says. There are plenty of signs of life to watch for on the ground. Deer beds. Snake holes. Gopher holes. Rabbit holes.

Soon there is a flash of wing. A ring. An eye. The men and women raise their guns and fire into thrush. No warning for small ears.

So many sounds of death, so loud! Your father throws down his child’s gun and covers his ears as the birdshot whizzes by. Good god, the screeching! Blood and feathers explode like fireworks. The drooling dogs whine, eager to retrieve the bodies when the shooting is done.

Your father’s ears ring when he lowers his shaking hands. Before the hunters cheer and collect their quarry, there is an unnatural silence. Nothing stirs. Your father holds his breath. Listens to the forest hold its breath. Everything waits to run.
Part III: Inhabited
genesis chapter three verse twenty / cusp

adam named  the entire world alight with our breath  god called me

his wife  non-name  and created the dawn  i made myself into

eve, because  i am the cusp of darker earth.

i made a mother from my deepest hunger—

she would become  a full body  an inhabited body

the mother of all the living  not yet named.
Abecedarian for My Hallucinations

As winter expands on the prairie,
Beetles crawl on my steering wheel. I
Consider the seven plagues of Egypt and
Demarcate my mind with lamb’s blood.
Every zipped shroud feels
Familiar to me, as intimate as
Gomorrah to salt. Bless her labored breath,
Hallowed be her every footstep along the
Interstate’s shoulder. Are we really
Jezebels and heathen bitches? I
Know the rearview mirror
Lies.
My car is full of carbon monoxide.
(No it’s not. Yes it is.)
Object permanence is only a theory:
Pick the visions which
Quilt my eyes. Mark which pale trees to
Remember in daylight to see if they died.
Shadow beasts never cross into my headlights—
They slink backwards
Under my gaze like nightmare
Vaseline.
W…w…w…as original as a
Xerox copy.
Yellow turns blue: a flame in my mouth, hot as the flick of a
Zippo lighter.
Ode to Tinnitus as Seascape

O, frozen wave donning white-crested crown,
You are captured in stasis by your god-painter.
The thick, cerulean brushstrokes never settled
On your advance or retreat and abandoned you
to the drying canvas, declared you finished,
and damned you to aesthetic purgatory.
Your call is a dog-whistle to most, but eternal
siren’s echo to me. Uninhabited shells fill my ears,
Carry your voice across desert and prairie,

I will always heed your call and know your name.
I kneel before you on the shore just out of frame.
Canine Desire

Woman, you pluck the heartstring from your chest
to spin into a bolt of shadow—not for a funeral shroud,
but for your transformation.

On the kitchen table you leave a feast
for gorgeous hairy dancers who trace starlight
in their wild circles and lithe lines.

After they eat your rabbit shanks,
drink hot bone broth and full-bodied wines,
they promise to invite you to your bounty
intertwine you into their packsong.
You imagine learning notes of wet breath and caked mud
and gristle in canine teeth. Finally, you can let go,
be tangled—chase pink-toed prey into damp crevasses
wriggle on the rocky earth to scratch unreachable itches
and lick the bloody, salted soil.

You could even forget your name and be a wolf
forever had the dancers not shed their hair
and left promises forgotten like the floor’s crumbs.

Unravel the drying bones of your fantasies from your chest,
Human. Forget that you ever called to them in your dreams.

Twist those hoarse, echoing howls
back into the skein of your sore throat.
Disappearing (and How to Stop)

Some days, it’s like
a fast-approaching wall of fire
in a wheat field, a great and terrible
conflagration hungry to destroy
what feeds me.
Sometimes it’s a stricken tree in
a lightning storm, ablaze from the inside out.
Other days, it’s the soft flame
of a church candle snuffed
after every service. I grow weary
of ashen destinies,
wish to reignite as a kaleidoscopic prism,
a rainbow merry-go-round
of splendor, to be held
in a warm hand up to the sun
dazzle your delicate eyes.
Witness me
dismember and re-member
my own body,
without fire,
as eternal
dancing light.
making and naming

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. –Genesis 2:25

settled deep in your lowest rib, i hold
god’s breath inside you before you even know
i am there. in this way, we make language
and name the beasts. god crafted your sleeping body
from earth’s smallest particles, each infused
with a particular loneliness, and from your body
he now shapes me. hello adam. now that i am made,
i want to name the parts of me that are no longer you.
we slip in and out of ourselves in a clean sweat
and discover all the ways my thighs are not your lips,
and how my spine is my spine because it is not your
curved, wet tongue. we work on each other in a frenzy,
feeling both light and heavy like a feather and a stone dropped
at the same time. but you’re still not sure where you end
and i begin. i can’t recall if we ever found a word
for the cavity in your chest where i once lived.
adam and adam

here is my body in the center

of the garden this body still

without a name. these fingers trace

the rough bark of this thing

we named tree whose shade

cools this skin from hot sun.

if i am unnamed, then am i adam, too?

we are two beings of one body

of one god, expelling his breath

over all creation.

the creature we call serpent bellycrawls

toward me like a baby yes, a baby

everything we name is precious,

even hunger.
Anglerfish

Whispers of the fisher’s apology churn,
Pressurized by dark ocean’s weight.
There, a monstrous diamond turns,
A glorious, bioluminescent fruit ripe for the plucking.
God, he can almost taste her, the sweet mythology of forgiveness,
Before unseen, long-toothed jaws close around his bloated head,
And her hook-jagged throat swallows him whole.
He was barely a bite—A pitiful morsel.
She could eat the whole world
And still be hungry.
Black eyes turn upward,
Her beautiful freakish body alight
Like a galaxy with laughter.
Becoming Chimera

Trimester I

Two pink lines:
Invasion.
Inhabitation.
Locus slides
Backwards, displaced
By lizardy embryo’s
Faint beacon.

Trimester II

Embodiment hides
In dull, pulsing aches.
Form out-of-joint,
Torqued pelvis,
Sore spine,
This body both mine
And not mine.
From inside, a wing-flutter,
A hoof-kick.
A pale face.

Trimester III

This happens every time:
Women with venom
Tongues shriek fire.
On their knees,
Dangerous figures
Full and buzzing,
Flesh breaks
for flesh.
I will open
like this, too.
Morning Sickness Nightmare

She does not feel
the seed trembling heavy
in the cracks of her parched throat.
In the darkness
it blossoms, without
any water, secret
and quiet and
taffy pink,
pushing through
her certain gravel path
daring to imply the stones are
lighter than her worry.
She vomits *soupe du jour*:
eggs and toast
and avocado and banana
a whole multivitamin!
a little of whatever
was for dinner last night,
and shocks of flowers.
The bulbs are
undigested and complete,
swimming in the murky bile water like
perfect full moons
cradled by thick clouds
magical yet somewhat ominous.
She howls into the bowl and
hundreds of roses drip
from her tongue, her teeth
leave no marks on the
bloody roses
and bone-white roses
and lace-yellow roses
and she promises these children
that they will never wilt,
never fall apart,
before she flushes them
down the toilet.
**Becoming Chimera (with Mirror)**

Bodies beg to break surface  
From the roiling amniotic blood river  
Flowing from my naked body  
Rendered unfamiliar, monstrous,  
Opened. My stirruped legs  
Lost feeling an hour ago,  
Somehow this child feels nowhere  
And everywhere.  
I suck down ice chips  
Before I vomit.  
They say I push  
In all the wrong places,  
Damming up the rapids  
Between clenched teeth.  
I want to scream,  
*Cut this baby*  
*Out of me.*  
Instead, I plead,  
*Take the mirror*  
*Away,*  
Touch the fine, mucus-mucked hair  
On the child’s head, and for a crowning moment,  
I know exactly where we are  
Before my legs collapse  
Onto sweat-soaked sheets,  
And he submerges back inside.
First Feed
—after Sylvia Plath’s “Morning Song”

A wound as big as a dinner plate opens inside me when
I birth your/my placenta into a plastic bowl.
Balloon belly now emptied of all contents,
Pulsing breasts thick with liquid gold.
This body we shared is cow-heavy for you.
Release your croaking cry into midnight spring,
Mourn the loss of your/my safe, adrenaline-stitched cocoon.
Your tickling lips migrate toward a new home on my chest
To your/my nipple: a flat pink rose. Gums sink into thorns.
Nurses grab my breasts, contort them into unfamiliar shapes,
But nothing fits your mouth. Feeding you
Should have been encoded inside us,
A deep and promised connection taken—
    Maybe nothing is instinct.
I empty myself into a plastic cup. I, non-name,
No more your mother than your tongue is the syringe slurping
My/your dull stars. I bleed, I empty, I thirst.
I am no floral, Victorian-nightgowned Sylvia.
Even so, she and I know what it means to body
A blank wall, to be a cloud effaced,
To feel faraway love
Lapping like a distant sea.
A is for Apple, B is for Bear

I do not notice that stars flicker until
I am twenty-seven and already a mother.

Earlier today we traipsed through
the local apple orchard with our baby on my hip.
I was feeling domestic and folksy as we crushed
rotten fruit underfoot and sought hidden gems
in the trees. You were growing frustrated
at brown spots and holes and lopsidedness,
thinking there were hardly any good ones
and declared your preference for supermarket apples.

The supermarket isn’t real life. I reply,
but then again, the orchard wasn’t real life either.

Now the baby sleeps. The three-pound paper bag
of honeygolds rests plump on the chipped kitchen countertop.
Fruit flies buzz around the bag, the full trashcan, and the wet sink.
We sip whiskey and suck ice on the back porch of our rental, watching
a quaint valley darken and invite the bats to their dinner.

Of course stars flicker! You say, gently teasing. What do you think
the song Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star is talking about?
I guess I never looked long enough.
What else have I missed?

I gaze upward seeking Ursa Major,
the only constellation I know how to find—there!
Nuzzled in a great, black blanket, interrupted by batwing
amongst dazzles of red and yellow
and white, the colors of diamonds and apples.
I already know that most of the honeygolds will turn
mushy and soft before we at them all,
and I will throw most of them away,
and that’s what real life is.

And I will need to kill the fruit flies.
I will be the one who takes the cider vinegar down
from the cupboard and mixes it with
a drop of dish soap in a glass cup.

Now a piece of space rock
burns in the atmosphere.
The baby stirs, fussing and hungry.
I cannot shake the feeling that I will soon be very old.
The Stay-at-Home Mother Confesses

When it’s 2 A.M. and I cannot sleep,
after the baby’s fussing quiets and my husband’s snores

return, I fantasize about my past lovers and even the ones
I could have had. Sometimes I wish to keep little secrets of my own

again, hidden away like a chipped painting of an angel on a wall
underneath old flyers and unanswered help wanted signs,

to have desires without fear of being flat, my gaze frozen on an existence
unseen and unknown. In my half-awake dreams, I hold small hands

and guide unsure, pigeon-toed steps, and in others, I fly
on the back of a motorcycle, my arms wrapped tight around

someone’s waist, and in others still, I am the one true god.
When the sun rises, the spot next to me already empty

and my child not yet awake, gentle loneliness flits in and out of me like
a moth’s shadow. Soft as a whisper, I shed my covers
and begin another day.
Migration II

The microwave beeps, and the kitchen
smells like peaches and cream. I quicken
my grip on the butterknife and slice
a banana thin so my son does not choke.
I grow lightheaded blowing on the sugary mush
before serving it with a sippy cup of soy milk, and
I think I am doing most of this right.

After breakfast, I take him to the butterfly garden
He thinks the butterflies are swimming,
And I say yes, baby, swimming and flying
Are quite similar. Does he remember

When we read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and poked
Our fingers in the holes?
   When the book ended, he fell
caught hold of my chest, and asked, *Wha’s dis?*
I said *Breast,* and he asked to see.

*No, my breasts are private now.*
And with a simple ease, he accepted
That we no longer share my body.

One butterfly rests on his arm, enticed
By sticky peach smear on my child’s sleeve,
And he burrows into my legs, seeking
Safety in this fragile world.

I lift his small frame and hold him close.
A round pink cheek melts into my shoulder,
And we become solid, centered like the sun.
Hundreds of butterflies gravitate around us
Like little, living planets.
Survival

If I could be a catfish,
a massive, ancient bottomfeeder,
I would anchor the hooks from my lips onto my gills
become a river medusa with silver hair.
Early memories are thick with poison air
and fisher’s scissors down my throat
when they snipped their lines
and threw me back into the lake,
bleeding and dazed, but alive,
below the confusing surface world
that is only a flickering mirage.
I stop counting the white-crossed scars
on my body and start counting the days I survive.
I name the inky shadows
in the corners of my eyes my whiskers,
let them tendril the place where water
accepts gifts from the sky:
These sunken leaves from maple and oak trees
my unfixed swirling constellations.
I will live as free as they until I die,
and my body nourishes all who were my kin.
New Church

A brittle leaf petitions my attention,
Wandering under my knee to poke my skin
Before crumbling to bits. Be witness, it asks
In its undoing, To the transient beauty of simple things.
Warm, I cease dog-earing a book of poetry
To perch on the house’s cement stoop,
Ready for summer dusk sermon.

A stray orange cat is caught off-guard.
We lock eyes. I blink first,
And the little pastor sneaks into the bushes.
A mosquito kisses my elbow
Before slipping into the citronella candle,
Drowning in waxy baptism.
My husband’s intricate guitar melody strums
through the open window, joining the choral cicada hum,

And I think I am ready to be soft again,
To let cool white wine pool on my tongue,
Make communion far less temporary.
Don’t go yet, I pray, I love you,
Please stay awhile longer.
Apostate

I. Little Communion

The baby wants to feed,
But their bodies are too warm.
The window air conditioner vibrates
The air, can’t soothe the sticky infant’s skin
Against his sore, sweating mother.

He breaks away from her chest like
A beetle, and she is a half-eaten leaf—
Breasts swollen, nipples oozing
Blood and milk and lanolin cream,

Her body broken and given
Without reprieve. I want to tell her
Feeding him will get easier,
That she will cease pulling away like a tide,
Build a restful home that has enough room for her, too.
But she might not believe me just yet.

Now, outside the living room window,
Two men beat into each other
By their backyard bonfire.
The muted heavy thwacks
Descend to make freshly-bruised flesh,
The same sound a fist made when it sank
Into my thigh ten years ago.

I hold my sleeping infant son closer
To my chest—how do I make room for
A gentle place between the violence outside

And violent memories within?
The neighbor’s dogs bark,
Teeth bared, hackles raised.
Sometimes all the tenderness
One can give is a lullaby
In the midst of a world in flames.
II. Remembrance

I wanted to label each bruise, bite, and invisible wound,  
Name every person who inflicted my injuries. But I admit  
I am a bit snagged, ensnared in tangled truths,  
Where ink bursts in the chamber before licking paper.

No longer wanting to be a diagram of grief, I thought  
Uncharting back into embodiment needed to hurt,  
To purple my fingers with nylon line,  
rip the fishhook from my throat, and  
Gather shallow breaths in the crouching rabbit’s nostrils,  
To always lie in wait for sniffing dogs to recede.

And suddenly, I find myself almost thirty,  
Naked and leaking breastmilk in the bathroom,  
Feeling pretty damn weary about metaphoric  
Reclamation. It needs to be real.

I cup my hands under my chest to gather milk  
And bring it to my lips, surprised to find I am  
Delicious, full-bodied, tangible and sweet.  
How did I ever think I could be anything else?

I drip through my fingers, my forearms  
And elbows, down into pools around my feet,  
Anointed in white ink.
III. eve’s final thoughts after escaping eden

i am
a chalice.

i hold
and am held.

drink from me

like this supper
is your last,

in the name of
myself—

the Mother,
the Lover,

and the Holy Blasfemme,
amen.
IV. Parable

There was a brief moment where nothing bad happened anywhere in the world.
We were all somehow part of it, and it slipped by us, unknown and unceremonious.
You were probably wiping yeasty slobber from your baby’s neck,
Or chopping a carrot for soup on the first day of autumn,
Or maybe you were doing something sexier, like having
The best orgasm you’ve had in ages. You didn’t know it, but
The fire finished burning the horizon away.
Every empty, dark hole held space for eve to dazzle it
With her vastness, giving birth to endless stars.
When the moment passes, and earth’s complications resume,
You find yourself alone in front of a mirror,
Catching a glimpse of a proud, wide-eyed child
Staring back at you and smiling, as if to say
Look at you, you beloved thing,
Look at everything you’ve made.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of these works have appeared in the following journals:

*Kestrel: A Journal of Literature and Art*— “Tightrope” and “Trashfish Elegy”  
*Persephone’s Daughters*— “Nurse, check my blood for a pulse.”  
*Pithead Chapel*— “making and naming”  
*Still: The Journal*— “Unsent Letters from Rabbit to Dog”


I would like to give thanks to Sara, Emily, and Mimi for being there and helping me weather storms big and small; to Chris for becoming better and stronger; to Lee for believing in my writing and for your guidance; to Ben and Cindy for reading; to Meggin for the conversations, games, and pothos cutting; to Elin, Kerstin, Molly, Erin, and the members of Goth Frat; to Avery for your poems; to Christine Blasey Ford for your bravery; to Natalie for your smiles and snuggles while I wrote; to Dustin for creating a home with me and supporting me; to Henry for being the first one and changing my life.