

BECAUSE YOU FLINCH

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a lyric examination of child abuse which deals directly with the psychological issues that surface in abused children as they grow into adulthood. I'm trying to show that the harm done by abuse is often projected onto others later in life, especially onto the self as well as how violence cycles from one generation to the next. I am also trying to show that the circle of violence can be closed—there can be an end. Some of the psychological issues I have tried to illustrate in this thesis are gender construction and post-traumatic stress disorder.

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“We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it then break down ourselves.”

~Rainer Maria Rilke

Words Forced to Fit a Given Space

An early dream. A kid as me as a photograph,
a county fair portrait on fabric floating,
my father beside me. Stranger, I step into this
with weight. A box fan running beside my head, sweat
cooling to a slow music. *When is mama coming home?* I ask.
In the dream, I need new shoes so badly. I only wear socks,
fabric on fabric feet blistering in cotton openings,
I open this with weight. I wore my father's boots only once.
My weight a backboneless box, I am a container of him
without the room to hold. My father who could have
swallowed tornados then, whole oceans, me. Stepping into me
with weight, he kept me weighted. I step into this with every ounce
he has. I stepped into the boots once and stepped out broken.
I step with the mathematics of cautious space: if bigger than me,
then god. Bigger than me, so god. My god, I could have drowned
in the thought of a man if a man weren't already
drowning in the thought. A man stepping into me
with weight, his laces tied tight.

At Eight, I Learned the Wind

There's a certain taste in weakness that can't be mouthed.
Given a lawnmower and a lawn to mow,

I swallow what I'm given to swallow,
and I have no skin that's skin to give, a body of slaps and kicks

and clothes—I can gullet the wrongs in a bag.
I can scoop them up and throw them out. *You can't be a man*

and not know how to do this. My father's
hands at my throat if I can't push the mower over the whole

of the yard. *Cut.* So I cut, I carry the clippings
damp in my heft; I lift them so well they root. They rise out of me

like trees that flake to take new bark amongst clippings
and chips of roots packed tight as a wide riverbed, the mud

gathered at the bank more violent than the river it holds. My tongue
aware of the teeth around it, I reach high up to fingertip the handle,

and on tip-toes I push, my back a taut blade. I cut
one line of grass and throw up on the motor. All this mess

through my teeth, and my father is at my throat. Barefoot and shirtless,
sweating with a mouth full of hot spit, I swallow

what I'm given to swallow. I break free from him, and running
down the alley is brilliance, away from his open mouth

out loud. My legs long as highways, my skin gone green,
thickening, I stretch in stride for sunlight. A lawn myself, I won't be

cut, and each step I take is release, a leaving of grass
uprooted and spinning off me in waves.

Prayer

That walking out past the buoys
is needed. That the current
remains the current.
That no stranger beds
in my shadow and is. My whole
body a box well-mended
in a corner with years filling
finally in. That the water here
is never more than the water here.
That I do not carry it further.
That my hands do not
clench. That there isn't a shred
of the shake, the shiver, bone-numb
in a bed with sheets in my teeth.
That my hands can dip in the water
and pull out what I need.
That I can throw anything back.
That my hands are not
the water now, too. That I will know.
That I am not the boot
pulled from the waves to kick.
That my hands are all I have.
That they are empty. That the water
I've given is the promise
not to drink.

No One and Nothing and Only

I have mismanaged distance.
Rendered in whispers,

who I am has nothing to do
with my bone, with you, Stranger,

what cost I have to pay. Pain
the lost cause in the room.

I need a shoulder, ears to bend
into. At what cost?

You are a part of me. I have
simple means. I bury my dead.

Story after story. I name you
in the white space, each space.

I have my own whimper, my own
abominable fear of the break.

I need nothing but *please*, nothing
to gain but the mend. I am not

my father. I say this to stay
this way. Stranger, if I bury you,

you bury me. You are my throat
uncleared. I voice only the ghost

space you take in any words I force.
Yours, my tongue, my eyes, I seethe

from you, cringe with every word.
I carry you here as the part of me

I have yet to beat to death. I keep you,
a creep in my footsteps. At what cost

have I brought you in, at whose
set of feet do I crawl?

The Rain Fell Well into Morning

I remember swinging my pole back to cast it. I remember
my mother cursing, her ear swelling
after my hook caught the lobe.

I remember my father laughing, my brother
falling over with him, doubled.

I barely remember the crawdad, saying that an ugly crab
attacked me. I got a bite, pulled it up wet
onto my chest. I don't remember the pinchers

but the pinching. I remember no one
spoke after that, and when my brother's line
tangled over and over again in the trees,
I remember he wasn't punished.

He was hugged and told when the line was cut
to try again. I remember not being struck for the crawdad

or for throwing my pole in. When the weather broke out in rain,
I remember I wanted to leave.

There was lightning, and I had no pole to catch it with,
no thunder to mouth. I remember the catfish.
I helped to gut them, cook them

on the bank. I helped my brother avoid the bones while eating.
I remember nothing at all about what happened to the lake

when we left it, but I remember falling in the water,
being pulled out. I remember
swallowing as much of the lake as I could.

I Will Take with Me the Emptiness of My Hands
~ "Provision," W.S. Merwin

I turn the screw, loosen
the bolts, Stranger, untight.
The box of me, boxes
and boxes, in a box
I'm unbuilding. We have hands
here, the same. They do not meet.
I am the unmaker. My fingers
grip the incalculable
between us—one beating, another.
I give you a hand
in our childhood closet. Place it
quietly, child. I give you that
flinch at the grit's red, him
coming in through the door.
Brace everything. You are a vessel,
Stranger. A vessel. No more.
Boxes and boxes moving.
Me, closet-thing, we lie one wreck
against another, boxes and boxes.
Hands hard to the paneling,
panicking in the black of each
thrown flashback we catch dirty
in our fatherbox head.
This wood does not ungive.

My Mother with a Hammer

We broke a window, my brother and I. Showered our mother in glass. The ball spun right through the center pane into the kitchen, in with our mother's silence, her dish-doing. Hands over her face, she shook her head. Something hissed.

We'd been playing catch with too-small gloves over a garden snake, the slither gone unnoticed. Our mother saw the snake from the sink then, the baseball still rolling around the kitchen. Soap suds on her forearms, she ran to the back room, away from us. All hope abbreviated

in a gasp, a quick absence. Nothing was said. She came running around the house and smashed the snake's head, cursed it in swings. The snake a twitching thing, she handed my brother the ball, wiped sweat from her eyes, and took a deep breath. She ruffled our hair. We stood, waited for the storm

we thought was coming with the wash of this winding thing away. The sweep of us to our rooms with the door locked and a stern lack of talking to. We shouldered her held tongue, the heat of July in a set of scales that day. No distant lightning, not a hint of rain. The snake ended, teeth

smashed in the sidewalk, the broken window was forgiven. Our mother carried us both to the kitchen, one by one. She sat us at the table, gave each of us fruit. Smiling, she gutted the snake and cooked it in butter, ate the meat

alone. After, she talked of God, of rain, forty days of it, boiling seas. She talked of ribs and brutes. *Something small lives all its life broken. Something big takes it in*, she explained through forkfuls of snake I swear I saw still flailing, tail still slashing. *The bigger thing might be broken, too.*

Ode to Wood

I was seven. My brother was five.
We power-sawed through my bed's headboard
and built a birdhouse from the cut wood.

My bedroom a set of angry walls
that wouldn't calm, I needed pride,
but it didn't come in the paint, the plaster.
I needed to break to get by.

I could not stop anything, say
anything, so I shook my numbed parts to work,
scattered my ruin in nails, my father
asleep, ruthlessly on the couch.

My brother quit when the saw rattled,
ran inside. He slammed the door shut.
Father found me then, his tracks in the snow
ate mine. His dirt-kick and his fist,

he seethed with each slug to my lip, each boot
to my face. He left me in a snowdrift.
With the sound of his boots sloshing
through the softest snow I knew,

I lifted one arm up with another arm
to move a board on top of a board.
I pushed the nail back in to give the wood
a joint, a pivot, made one arm to cradle me.

The birdhouse was a perfect birdhouse.
I carry it with me in various birds.

Salvage

Consider the trees'
tall-standing

shade as curtains,
thin shadows

that light has
pocketed. Consider

your skin become
aware of itself,

soft as loam from so
many washings

of so many snappings.
Consider the cut

of opposite bodies
inside a body,

limbs and leaves
in rot and falling.

Consider a sun content
with a hot, flat sky

that doesn't give a damn
about your sweat,

about what dies, what leaks
to the root. Consider

the darker water,
the space that wants

to eat you. Space
you've given a mouth.

A Measure of Binding

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My mother was small
with a jackhammer

at the front step,
broke it like silence,

and a bat hard in the concrete
fell to the sidewalk,

mouth wide open,
wings and skeleton
contracted, cracked.

A body snared in the weight,
the sound of whichever
tightening or crunch,

whichever pain could fill the walls
whichever day.

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The bat disintegrated
in my hands like the minutes
after the claw hammer fight
in the bathroom

couldn't that Sunday after church
when the tiles stopped
fitting the floor right.

The image of my mother then
hazy. Sweat

ran ragged her skin, her face
was hung slack

over her knees. Her drool
red and strung over my father's
boot. His shirt torn off, pieces of debris
from the broken walls caked
them both. Dust from the plaster
smashed settled
in the haze of my mother's hair. My father
pounded the floor in.

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I wished with the bat's wishbone
for a voice to push
the violence back. Wished
for a full, solid breath—
one day without the fist and the sprint away from it.
I swear sometimes I smelled the bat
through the rage
and didn't know it was rage.
Sometimes I swear I felt
the bat's struggle to leave its binding,
could feel it biting itself, gnawing its numbed
parts to life. I swear
it scraped its thread bones, its joints
and their creaking,
couldn't bend an inch.
I swear I could hear its squeaks muffled,
its aftermath of failed flight.

And some nights,
I swear the bat's shake
shook the house, reverberated
through the haze—

so little to clench
and be clenched back from

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The bat was a collapse I held and held,
fragile in my hands. I could not find my decay,

so I settled for the smallest crumbings
of this bat body, the weight of its filled wings.

I couldn't find
the source of so much bite
tucked into so much heft—

I wished and figured this:
better to be a rock
than the water that erodes it.

Notes on Regression

If anything, going back, I am a drift of harsh
whispers, Stranger, never a voice to mend
frays. I haven't come here for that sort of tending.
If I could gather our rot, I'd show you
the dregs and hope for some means of moving.
I fail and fail at coming to terms. I tell
our struggle to say I'm sorry I left you buried
in a closet under the weight of boots coming at you,
boot after boot. I come to tell you we're still
barely baby deep in the cradle of the monstrous,
nestled, Stranger, still able to leave. I move
this wicked fight and fumble death despite, its parts
and pressures ugly in a former living room,
a bathroom of filth and sludge, muck I've slung
in uncontrollable repetitions. The rain here is far
too strong to keep the story static. It took the whole
torrent to melt the corpse of hit-and-be-hit
to a bundle of slick ropes slack in our hands.
Small rains won't wash the ropes away.
I want to say the corpse has fallen
away from us in drips, but the mud it falls to is mine.
I want to say watch the corpse move to the sky
as vapor, to the clouds it will rise to and be.
I want to say we're roughing it this way,
that we've built our breath with this lightning;
we've struck more than ever struck us.
I want to cover the dirt with more dirt,
water it well. Grow out of it. I want so much.
All I can manage is calling the whole thing a grave,
the once buried bodies crawling back in.

The Dirt under My Fingernails

stayed under my fingernails. As a child,
a turtle crawled up to me
from the lake and tucked itself
inside itself. It rested there for hours

past the need of lantern light gathering
mosquitoes that died inside the lantern
just needing light. Smoke

after smoke, ashes, no words at all
from my father. The turtle rested
through sun-up, through fish after fish
thrown back to water.

I tied on hooks to hook things. I strung
line to pull the things up.
I can't tell you why I still need my father
with me to do these things. I tuck

myself up. I turtle to a hum that barely breathes
around him. And the turtle inside itself
that night rested inside itself all night.

The next morning, I saw no sheen on its shell,
no moisture at all. I lifted it up, light
as conversation, and the turtle parts spilled out

limp. I buried the turtle there
with a twig for a tombstone, no words at all.

My father stopped whistling,
was ready to leave. He pulled in everything
we'd pulled from the lake.

The empty stringer glistened like teeth,
like a wet fist that didn't hit me.
We kept nothing we caught—nothing

needed be kept, and every fish
we threw back swallowed the hook
we used to catch it with.

When the Cinderblocks Came

My father stumbled through the front door, he loomed over our cartoons, told my brother and me to go to bed. *Just close your eyes.* And when we did, he left home for his pubs. He started fights, and black eyes followed him home every time, griping about their blue.

Hours earlier, my parents framed the porch in wood to hold the cement. They screamed at each other for this tool, that tool, though they had two of every one swinging all around them, the busiest hammers sweating. Between them, not a finger came away

without a splinter. They built half the porch in one day.

My mother left for work, night shift building engines. Work boots. My father wore no other shoes. He ruined the porch when he set two boards down over the near-hard concrete and drank,

sinking the boards into the still soft cement. Woozy, he raised his glass to every car that passed, headlights burgundy through the empty bottles next to him. We kept his black eyes in a shed with the tired hammers that wouldn't mend them.

My mother came home hours later, boots drenched in motor oil. We watched her clean them with soap and a brush, watched her set them down gently, as if they meant everything. As if the fragility of the boots was something more

tender. We ate, talked about school. She smoked, stared out a window. Father followed

not long after. They fought about the porch, the full day's work wasted, hammers warm in blankets for the month. She hit him. He hit her back. My brother and I watched cartoons.

Bugs Bunny ate his carrots. Elmer Fudd shot himself. A twelve pack of pop our father brought home for us fell from his arms and hit my brother's head. He cried, he swelled. The twelve pack busted in half,

cans rolled over the carpet. Both of my parents rug-burned, my mother called in sick to work. When they slept on nights like this, I wondered if he dreamed of walking off cliffs just to look down, just for the splat after the fall. I wondered if he dropped anvils,

if he was under them. In his dreams, I could see him fleeing the shotgun for the chance to shoot back. I wondered if she dreamed at all. Well drawn,

any yell at anything was less than one of ours, the fury still sparking red behind our walls. They slept soundly, the black eyes in the shed closed tightly under the glinting porch light. The porch never finished,

its brown wood lines at a corner permanent. My father was the black and white without his blue in the shed, the negative bright we accepted in all our need.

If anyone with hue came near the porch, no one so much as set foot in the width of his shadow's erasure.

Everything that Does Not Appear Has Disappeared

Because the hike was long and sweat through. Because the witches wanted to give me candy in a house in the woods. Because the woods were not made of candy and the witches not witches but spiders and the sweat not thick enough to love. The shoes I wore had holes in the bottoms, and the mud wasn't hard enough. Because there were no spiders either because there were no webs. The weather hadn't been dry for weeks, and the trees' shadows clotted so much of the smile my father gave me for trying anyway, I fought against the blisters and stepped ahead, despite. Because I walked too slowly, my mother carried me. Because my mother carried me and the candy and the witches were left to wolves and because there were no wolves the ground had no wolf prints. Because we left prints, because the mud let us, we turned around and went home, but there was no home, so we lived in the woods with the witches and the mud and the blisters and the wolves and the sweat, and because there was no home, we walked and walked and never stopped making tracks. I was carried and love the sweat that fell. I was carried—I could not walk and can never know that we weren't the wolves.

Hocus Pocus

We were given a magic hat
but could not make magic. No rabbits
were pulled out by their scruffs,
no doves, Stranger. We couldn't
pull out the dandelion we wanted.
We needed a place to hide
from our father's iron filings,
Styrofoam, his refrigerator lubricant
he spilled all the way home from work
and slung at us. I made my own
magic, Stranger, let the absent
charms of the hat go for wizardry.
I pointed the top of the hat,
and I was the wizard. I had my own
rumble, hit after hit. But fist and fist,
our father split us apart. I, wizard,
went out burning, set what I could
to the curses I chose. Crushed.
All crushed. But you, failed
magician huddled in the corner,
were a straight-jacketed Houdini without
a shoulder left to dislocate. You never
learned a darker art, needed
a vanishing trick, maneuvers of smoke
in our knuckle-thrown bullet home.
As the huddled half, feeble, you watched
the wizard me, knees at your chest,
raise up our arms. Serpents flew
from our fingertips breathing fire, spiders
chewed their way out of our shoes,
gave chase. Simple strikes. Little rains
of teeth broken all around the bones.
You, huddled half, bore the onslaught
of the swing, the crashing, cradled
your dandelion wish with your whole self
to keep it standing. The inner-made
field your disappearing act.
Rounded into a ball so tightly into our body,
you nearly slipped out. You lived in your field
as one of the doves too timid
to be lifted from the hat. What little beauty
gleaned had only to stay beautiful,
but no, no, it could not bloom.

Stranger,

estranged, I speak of you in ages,
mine dry and ancient.
Back-broken in my oldest trouble,
my ribs your prison,
you've ridden my backyard railroad
whistles so well
through the remains of body
civilizations I cannot name, hollows
I cannot fill. Transient flashback
bringer, take this clearing,
this muzzled me as time standing
still. Stranger, abnormal,
singular, lost, no longer a face
but a figure in the head. Stranger,
ideal demeanor, you never
climbed from the beast container
you were lidded in. Because
my maw once closed to you has here
blown open and been
emptied out. Our troubles gasped
with you well cooled inside,
do not leave me outside freezing.

Linden Avenue

My mother once saw a shape
thrusting its hips on her new sheets,
a smoke shape *wild and large*
like a man, she whispered.

That day, my father hung a painting
of a thousand bent nails

piled in soil. The painting held
by a single nail over the bed.
I craved it, drew it

a thousand times in crayon.
One night, the thick, black shape,
wild and large like a man,
stood over my father, my mother

sound asleep beside him.
I turned on the light, and the shape
was gone. I ran from the room,

huddled in the darkest bed sheets
of the closet I huddled in most
often. My father sniffing,

wiped with a shop towel the next day
a tear in his eye, the first one

I saw. He made my bedroom shudder,
a pulp of me common in all my bedding.
I tried to help, just help build
a bookcase in my parents' room,

but I couldn't get a nail in it—
not a single fucking nail. Arms over his head,
he whispered, *something to cry about*,

scraping my face off his boot.
The hammer to my jaw then, swift,
was a strong wind, ticks

pushed in my skin from the gale. Pats
on my head after every hit. His words then
buried them there for good:

Do unto others. He didn't use
the shop towel again. It hardened,
hung on the back of a chair,

the tear from his eye a part of the room
I didn't have access to. I huddled

wanting nightly under the bookcase
to do unto him with the hammer
but had no hammer that was mine.

I stared instead at his painting
stifled under all thousand nails, pinned
in the room with the image
vanishing at bedtime

when the light was switched off—
ghost nails framed in wood I couldn't cut
to the quick of, couldn't slip
out of being with. How a puncturing

mess could lie so beautifully flat,
so clean in all the dirt behind so much glass.
The room not mine to know,

I lived in the spaces between the metal
because the metal was the warmest place.

For months, I watched my parents sleep,
their snores a hum, a music built
into the walls of me,

but I only saw the smoke shape once more.
Hanging in front of the bookcase,

the shape, wild and large like a man, held
still an orange axe over my father.
My father, wild and large like a man.

Some Assembly Required

With bolts unscrewed, I tick
when I tick. I cower. I was built for this.

I asked at nine for a robot and got one,
batteries not included. The robot
talked of its own free will, moved and blinked.

The unopened pack of batteries on the table
reflected the robot's lights. It took a step,
fell. I tripped in the mess of parts

unattached to my not-at-all toy, unsafe
for most ages. I knew fists
by the coming of fists, carried calm
like crickets in jars

with no cut breathing holes. I slapped the robot.
Nothing changed, and my mother's white-
in-the-face solution: check the instructions.

Not one word about spontaneous bleeps.
Nothing about a will to deviate function,

wink at us from behind the curtains. We ran,
we hid together under the bed covers,
under our *sbooshes*. My mother

worried her hair in knots, but my father
would be home soon. He would not tolerate
the frame of the thing, would break

the robot body to pieces because it wasn't
a body he'd built. Not his malfunction,

not his son he brought close to breaking,
couldn't break in. I breathed,
I still do, without him. I tick when I tick.

An Oar in the Mud

They told me the boat
just tipped. That's it, just tipped.
We'd gone fishing
in a rusted boat. I didn't fit.

Bruce and our father buoyed,
splashed in the water.
They dunked each other under groping
for air. From the bank, I yelled

and yelled for help. Nothing
but cricket song. Quickly,
I removed my shoes. Half sunk in mud,
blinded by the gleam thrown

from the bottom of the boat,
I jumped in. I could not
swim, dog-paddled out spitting up
lake as I went. Our father,

calm as lighted windows, yanked
my brother up. Both of them still
gurgled water,
but our father took it in like weather,

warm rain. Bruce was all arms,
little else. Under the shadow of a hawk
skimming the water, we were
darkened, each of us. Near shore,

Bruce was down to slow kicks,
twists, lungs full. I trailed behind
kicking as hard as I could to catch up,
to reach a shirt, hair I could hold to.

Once on land, my brother spit up all over
our father, passed out. His blue-in-the-face
a face I keep with me, the way his lips
sealed to his teeth, teeth showing.

The moss splotch wet over his eyebrows
the only part of him not stark white.
Our father's mouth hovered
over Bruce's, shoved air down his throat.

I reached to touch my brother's shoulder,
flinched at the *get away from him!*
and our father's backhand cut my cheek,
his screech wrung my ears

like a neck. Bruce's arm twitched,
he sputtered, spit. Our father rocked him,
petted him, quick as breath.
My son, my son, my son.

Hands

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My mother's were bricks.
Rough in the softest
of hugs. She washed them
in gasoline after work,

all gunk and stench, to melt
engine oil, grease. She couldn't
keep them busy enough.

The swash of her thumb
over my cheek was bracing
anyway. Cement
enough. Her art

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drawn with a tight grip
on the paintbrush was dead
in the center of every page,
toothy grins on all of her faces.

In magic marker, a Santa
winking. She took the Santa to a party
at work. At home with it,
signed by women, men
who I will not know in green
ink, she wrapped it,
gave it to me for Christmas.

When my mother talked,
she talked of these names, workers
like her with little more,
some less than us. How overtime
bought the holidays.

Despite, my brother and I were each given
three gifts. My second,
a set of pencils, notebook paper,
white eraser.

My brother's second, wrestling toys
bought by our father,
who was our third, shared gift,

home for Christmas,
swinging his slosh in all our faces.
My mother dragged him
outside in her tightest grip.

She left him there all night,
and throughout,
he growled behind his steering wheel
and took nothing less
than that rage away with him.

We breathed as the house breathed.
As the house
groaned the roof's struggle
through winter, through one more
cold turning out

()

that wouldn't last the color
in her breath. Yellowed
in the headlights, our garage, 1987,
my mother taught me to draw.

First, an outline and then
what. She took my hand, guided it
with her own. So softly,
so very coarse. Cotton-light,
used charcoal.

With a thin pencil, she marked
two faint lines perpendicular
where the face should have gone.
Crosshairs,

I thought, and could only
think of my own face I wanted
to press to the page
and erase.

Linking Song

At six, I buried myself in scuffle, *quiet one*,
to sever you, *simple one*. I focused

my thoughts on you, *little one*, breathing
inside me, calm and settled; you, *timid one*.

I left you with all my solace. Nothing new
now but rage. I yelled for help,

for a mother, *sobbing one*, you, *Stranger*,
ghastly one, never confided in. I yelled

for a father, *busted bottle*, a real one, *shackle*.
One who couldn't stab me, back me

into corners, wouldn't hug me after sinking
an elbow, a gut blow. I built a body, *frightened one*,

out of a body I knew how to live in, *grave one*—
yours, *blamed one*, *swaddled one*, did not suit me.

You had no knuckles to throw. I fought
with everyone, *burnmark*. You,

naked one, never helped me, so I hid in my own
fists, *shamed one*, ashamed of you, *sane one*,

pleading. I knew to struggle violently, *bloodstain*,
to be a flame, *ashes*. I knew fists

were only fists, *beaten one*, not mine, *muck*. Still,
I struck and struck, *childish one*, you,

simper—you, *fragile one*, never helped me through.
I buried you, *lovely*, you, *pained one*,

without so much as a handshake, *handshake*.
Focus, child in my childhood. I have no one else

now to rend. I beg of you, lift me of these
cuttings, please, *backbreak*. Show me how to be you.

Three Ways to Tell a Story

1

On a father's forearm, focus, the hair
fought to be hair.

As if the muscle there
were a permanent flex, the hair
couldn't simply hang.

It stuck straight up. The father
hugged his wife with rubble
stuck in his shirt, glass bits in his skin.

A folly of cotton containing
what it wasn't meant to catch. Focus,
the hair is best left hair.

A child in a corner watched,
covered in drywall dust from hurtling
through a wall, the wall
over his skin, his father's thumbprints

still etched there. The largest piece
of a busted glass bowl
busted over the father's head

no longer wobbled. The boy
never cared for the carpet. His parents
loved one another for exactly
one hour. This, the duration of the hug,

the quiver of the hair on their arms
they couldn't flatten. Focus.

That the mother didn't know of the bruises
coloring her oldest son for years,
that she did, was reason enough to break

his father. The bruises flowering on the boy
showed in the glass shards,
magnified in sunlight.
The hammer that cracked

the father's scalp was lodged in a wall.
Glass bowl shards red in all feet involved,
decay spilling out of them. Mother

not asking him why, asking nothing at all but
for the quiet to settle
into her clothes and cleanse.

Light shined in from the blinds in the thinnest
of lines, the dust caught there stilled.

Any movement would do, my mother or father
could tremble, wince, a particle of dust
could slowly turn—any of these things could have cut

the memory up, could have rested it in hair
still standing straight up, ready to feel
the wind of a thrown hand connecting. A simple sound

could have shredded the room to pieces, could have
turned it sideways so far it fell out of being,

as a piece divorced from the whole to pieces of pieces
connected in nothing. The wither
was a hard wither—

the dash to rip one another apart through. I watched;
no scuffling, no television, no beer cans

cracking open, no swish of fabric on fabric—no break
in the silence, the stillness,
before a car outside revved. We turned to it,

and in turning, the hush set tight in the dust
all at once unclenched. The dust
fell to the floor as if it had always meant to fall there.

A table is set in the foreground as a decent
place to smoke, a set of chairs
a place to rest.

A living room set for Christmas,
presents and toys everywhere,
a hammer in the wall.
See your mother wearing
a threadbare, flower pattern dress
heave into the room.

Brush off the drywall he threw you through,
the punch in the gut and the cold wind
coming in with her to see you

climb out of the wall. See her smash
a glass bowl over his head,

see him beg her to stop *for the kids' sake*.
Watch her stop. See the lines

in her face, the wrinkle permanent
between your father's eyebrows.

Slow beads of her sweat drop
into his shoulder. Watch them clench
together. Clench with them

apart from them. Notice
your father's shoulder twitch as he carries it
out with the scrapes, the shakes, waste

of a long unlove, out the door with a small trash bag,
clothes-filled and brimming. A limp,
a cut on his forehead, your father is heavy
in work boots. Your mother's polished fingernails
shade across his back so slowly

a holiday can't hold them there. See the grit
in your father's toughest skin. See him drag through

the last of their touching. He doesn't look at you
once. The usual business: with a coat
thrown over his arms, he's gone.

Your mother's hair is beautiful in the falling snow.

Lungful

I claim the insignificant, the vital—
this river, these fish. I claim
this is movement. And there's a chance

I'm crossing mud and tongue,
that I'm spent useless in breath
with the crossing—muckgill,

drowning. I say concrete, say unfailing.
The abstraction from any instance
as violent, as precise as so much

history almost waking. Nothing
can be correct. Not a partshiver
childhood, partwater skeleton, nuclei,

seeds, flesh, leaf all dissolved
in murkwater. I tell you
I'm the fish at the bottom feeding,

the bottom of this. Or I'm simpler,
an unmovable log that gathers mud,
gets moved. Leaves.

I am the rising of the lake,
the lakeitself, limbs of river heated,
lifting to storm. So many arms, names.

I can tell you. I mean to. Loved ones
have anchored to the bottom with me,
down to the tossed stones, the moss,

the pharyngeal teeth I keep to grind.
I tell you what I need to tell you,
all of me cupped in shudders

I cannot repress. Something larger
has hooked deep in my ribs.
I've hooked in others',

causeeffect, and set. Deeper.
I can tell you anything, Stranger.
I choose to speak under water.

Night Fishing by Lantern Light

At the bank of a river, at home with it,
I cast as I cast. In the rain-smell,
wormgut rot, I hum a song

only to the slow ripples the water gives me.
The bank I sit on sinks a foot
underneath. I tie on my hook, cast
over the water's edge lined in bluegill

bones. I don't say a word. My bobber
in the water bobs, my father whistles.

I'm as tall as he is now. He fishes bottom,
no words at all, and he catches
three catfish before I get a bite. My bobber

in the water bobs. He throws the fish back.
I am the wettest land here; I could sink
further. I reel in, and the bobber dives.

I jerk a yellow belly from its home. Scales
and scales, eyes, a hook set through one of them.
The fish flops in my lap twice. Three times,

stops. I throw it back, it floats in its ripples,
and my father, two-poled, catches
two catfish at once. My bobber in the water

bobs. He waits, smokes, whistles. He spits.
He scratches himself, whistles, coughs. I retch.

I say nothing and smoke with him.
He brings in his line to leave,
slips and hooks himself in the finger.

And when he raises a hand to hit me
for his accident, I step up. I step,
and he stops, smiles. I smile.

He rips the hook from his finger,
and I settle back, humming. The river
can't catch enough of him.

Cold Water before Warm Water Comes

There are plenty of ways to know you're not dying.
This, my means: a flood

in my father's apartment, when I left him
in the mess. Drunk again, plunged,

he seemed so very peaceful, bubbles
in a bathtub, a whole course of wet.

Half mad, rumbling down the stairs into two miles
of rain, I swept the mud of me into a brick with my fist,

collected my fingers back from the brick in red.
I couldn't fight him
for all his urging me to, for bathing himself

absent in bathwater. I couldn't, so I cut
what I could of me. I fought with everyone else,
let the debris of me in gutters full up

float away through sewer pipes that took it down
with the grit, the grime, into its people-rot,

its rat bed, its rock. I am not a solid thing.
I took on water not to take on my father
who never mentioned this, who never let it go.

The Boy in the Bed

A recent nightmare I still sleep up.
My father tip-toes around my room.

I'm an adult, baby-sized, with a rattle in my hand
I can't lift for the ropes I'm tied with.

My father sings in low tones, slouching:

piggy, piggy, quickly
run away from me,

each syllable stressed. His eyes
the width of the room, each step
murders the man
I've made of me. My father

well buried his own childhood
nightmare, all fists and father's boots,
spliced his tremble into my skin.

Into my eyes on the walls squinting through
the *Piggy for you,*
piggy for me. We burn and burn.

He lifts me up then like a storm
soft in the gut. *We cook like we should.*

The ties all fall as if meant to fall all along,
and he dances with me,

fingers so tightly pressing they cut
right in. I, *piggy,* wiggle
up and down in his arms.

Little piggy, these walls
are all that we are. I crash,
face first, flailing to the floor
each time I squirm.

Hours after My Grandfather's Funeral

I swung arm over arm
at a light pole. My hands
came away in gashes.

A spider's web landed
on my sleeve, and I caught
the spider in my palm, put
an end to its spiral down

from light. Simple things.
I was not fighting. The rain
was a small one.

The spider crept
up my arm, gathered a strand
of its fallen web,
another, rounded them into a ball.
I counted the seconds

between lightning strikes, counted
poles lining the street.
Lit windows changed colors,
I counted those.

The spider moved
back to my palm. I closed
my fingers softly, walked home.

There, my car was still running,
headlights still yellow
globes on my garage door,
dingy, flickering.

I lifted the spider to my porch light.
It caught the fixture
and found a hole to hide in.

Through the door, mail
I wouldn't open. The television
gave news to an empty chair.

My shudders alone with the walls,
coping with the walls, simple things.
A shower. So much hot in all this
cold. So many faces mourning, me

without a single face to come home to.
I cut a handful of hair
from my head, another, balled it up.

I dropped it all at my feet, left it
floating. I went back to find the spider,
but the spider had gone. One faint

strand of web hung from the porch light.
Simple things. There was rain,

but the sky couldn't fall fast enough.
The world has never slowed down.
I never knew him. I never cared to try.

Forgive Me These

()

At first, the other kids' eyelids
didn't swell. At first.

I expected heaving chests, weighted
feet to spines. Stranger, the dirt

knows what it's doing. One kid's mouth
full of it, busted, I stomped

a foot down to keep him (forgive me,
please, I beg you). I was ten years old.

I did, I do the things that purge.
The deep, warm dirt: I lived there.

I wilted. The dirt now no idea
what the flowers lived there for—

bullied and simple and broken-stemmed.
Years before I could bring myself

to fight my father, I started low.
My skin not at home.

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I know nothing of mud, my body
a glass of warm milk.

I have been the glass and the chips
from it busted, a mess

wet on the floor when the whole glass
was needed in hand.
I love incorrectly.

I am the product of a nut and a screw,
a base-level bone box. Unbroken

limbs that need not be fixed. I am
scared to death of extra bones.

Nuzzle me, Stranger. I am here for nuzzling.

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I coped with the cracked and weary, spent
years in the street, in rain,

swinging my arms in a thousand fights.
Not yet with him. Wash me of this.

My father in the doorway rolled up his sleeves,
me in the mud, not yet the mud myself.

The sail of a paper boat floating
down the street, I am what sinks

last. He called me over. Me, wasted
in the wet of this. Not one knuckle wanted

to so much as touch him, so I busted
my bottle, cut my calf with the glass

and screamed to the thunderhead above me
an inarticulate rasp. I limped away

with his right leg limp. Without
so much as a swipe, I cut him then well

enough, and if this measure lit,
I burned along with it in the pilings,

son no more. No *father forgive me*, no simplicity
but the shedding of closed doors,

a memory of rain I live in every drop,
every drain-drowned paper boat

abandoned. Hot under the lightning,
left with the lightning.

Returning Home

I could not tell this new family
that I came to light their curtains on fire,
melt their coffee rings.

I want to leave them in the dark
after burning. How do I

tell them all I need is a good night's
sleep in their child's closet?
I'm very polite;

I only want to look. May I?

A father, my father, not
my father, smiles, leaves me
to my murderous memory upstairs.
I'll only be a moment.

They watch television
with a bowl of popcorn, all of them
warm under a blanket.

Thank you. Upstairs, I see a bed, not
my bed. My childhood
bed. Not that bed. I want to burn it.

I hid from my father in the closet
with fireflies to light the space,
kept hangers empty to reflect wing beats
on the walls. I was alone.

Not alone. I still wear those clothes,
not those. I want to set the closet on fire.

This space has always needed more light.

The door closed behind me, I smile.
Downstairs, I thank the family

on commercial break, shake their hands,
leave. From outside,
colors change in the windows,

some of them television, some of them
flame. A window upstairs bursts out.

Blaze colors the trees orange. I am a light,
the bright that broke me

no different. I am a shadow
ripper, my father
smiling to the keep his base
of strikes and insults, his heavy

boot. I am a part of him.
Not a part. Apart. Tied to him,
tied to the walls he built
inside me. I was small

light casting a shadow
he wanted to find,
to devastate. He devastated.
I kept my fireflies.

Stranger, Because You Flinch

I've tied you to a chair because the chair is,
at the moment, at rest.

Watch, settle. We're together if we're
meant to be, but the ghosts, Stranger,

are deeper here. The strings that hang them hold
way down. All I've needed is peace

from your arms, but your arms have shied. No,
not yet: I cannot allow you

your fussing; our quiver isn't finished.

Are you warm enough? If fear, then fire—

we know this. And here, all drench
is wasted. Not for us. Here,

there is kindling and matchstick,
sulfur ready to rise. Not one lip of wet

to taste. Listen closely, these ghosts
have eyes. With me now,

relax; all we have is our depth—

the smoke wet in our mouths, yes? I promise:

You struggle, I'll strike. Shiver, will you,
once? The strings I've anchored

will not sever—these ghosts know fire
only by the fuss of fire.

Fur Elise Played Quietly in a Room on Fire

There was a room, a room into which my father
entered once and slugged me.

Bear with me; I'm not about to repeat myself, not
for the wilt of me. I'm not about to ask

for forgiveness. I am wilting. My flowers no longer
upright, their stems no longer reaching for clouds,
stillness-hunting

sunlight in the middle of bloom. Forgive me, I settle
where I settle. I boast no monsters.

My teeth are a tongue trap that won't speak to you
without teeth. Slap them clean out of my mouth.
I need to bite them all back.

I am not in this for the water's soak,
the level baroque of piano, my god-given whimper
in a glass I can't bottom.

My father slided in and sat. My father crouched in
and spoke. Cried and cried of baseball bats,
head stitches (*I'm sorry*). Switches, hands snapped
over the back (*I'm so very sorry*).

My father wove in with the nightstand, cried
in the lamp for the light in the room
on the red of his face. *I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.*

My father wormed into the room and used
coasters for his coffee, nodded thanks. Strange, this body
of mine, this limp in my gait. Strange

the room can keep so much and so little
catches in the light. *I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.* The music
in the room is the rest of the room. I am my own

stranger wrecked in not knowing how much
madness I mouth. Host to a man on my couch
who built me incompletely. Strange

this music gone to the sky, this world of mine
given to the flowers in fields of me past the wilderness

I walk through despite legs that break each step
open, break and invite all who see into me

into me. *I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.* My father sipped
his coffee, a bloom in his eyes, rivers
ready for banks to guide them to the heart

of their sad little ways, their broken
illustrations of this and that time they flooded, ruined
my rooms. *I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.*

I'm sorry. I love like I've waited to waste it. My father
looked up, smiled. Wet-eyed, he nodded,

tight-lipped. I love incorrectly. I punched him
right in the teeth as hard as I could and waited to see
how much of the river could still apologize.

Lay Me Down

Where there are no doors,
gather wood. Gather nails.

Please, close the curtains. Close
the curtains. Even closed

mouths are a violent theft, drones
of lips split pressed tight

together. Find a crowbar. Pry.
Broken from breathing,

say again to the monsters
unshuddering, *Stop*.

You are going to do bad things to children.
Young bones are my bones,

Stranger, yours. Our lungs
their sob-rattles quieted in pillows,

our knuckles no more than theirs
later clutching

adulthood for purchase. Hello,
have you brought your baggage, too?

Put it in the closet. Leave
the closet open. Please, close

the curtains. Stranger,
saying any of this may crush

the whole structure. Crush
the whole structure. I will never harm.

I am the house outside the broken.
There is no past here, only a future

of creaking floorboards. Step lightly.
This house is nearly at rest.

Blizzard

The motor off and car doors closed, we push. My father and I equipped with brute force, no more, no less. Ice in us that slides right through us. I needed hands larger than mine, or else I wouldn't have asked him to help. We push, our shovels useless beside us. We push to the verge of getting stuck together in the cold, roughing it through the red eyes tense in the dark between us forming irises from our unmoved hate. The monstrous is saying nothing. We push the car through our limping, our backs parts of the muffler moving. We push. Don't scream when screaming is a better match for the wind than quiet. Don't give one another grief for the engine we know would barely turn over anyway, our sweat melting, freezing, melting with our heat. We heave the car, and the car moves a foot then back to be heaved again. Weather in the way, we go along with what we have: arms and arms. And our coats are ripping, are through with this winter we forced them into. Threads and patches coat the tires, the tires bald from years in the black. Waste in the wind, the oil slicked from the busted heap in front of us immobile in the dark black slush. We gather, heave, tracks lengthen, the beast between us taking shape, taking our hands' iced-over nails as its own. We could lose everything individual if anything is left to be lost, but we have the neutral gear. We heave, and the car inches, the snow packs tighter under us is never what we need it to be. Never a durable machine, we push despite the savagery of the wind gone to needles on our necks. We pushed through

the not-good-enough, the never-mattered-at-all.
I am his height, have his held grit
poised to strike and won't. I was not strong
enough to move this wreckage alone.
We push and heave, and the snow
starts to loosen. And the push
is good enough so far. We shove
into the black of the snow discarded by sky
we can't give in to, the sun
that doesn't give a damn enough to warm
the freeze in our hair. We gather,
we shoulder the after-storm like grime
in the white we stained to pitch.
With silence, we give our beast incisors
and long spike hair, stench to choke us.
We heave the choke, too, and up over the drift
we free the dark thing from the old home structure,
from a long ago yard with all the legs stiling
through grass that never weren't blued.
Bone stubs glued crooked over skeletal palms
now, we heave the brute as brutes,
the beast between us grows its oil pan stomach,
its carburetor throat. Our worn wire frames
suspended over the snow-thrust we feed it,
its steel lips drips. We spoon hate
to give it eyes, and it leers at us out in the cold,
our arms not swinging, why not swinging,
why the need. I am the taker, and I take. I chain
the brute to our heaving, the snap
about to happen—the snap that needs to happen,
doesn't happen. The car is free.
Ready for the key to give it breath, too,
ready for me to grasp the wheel and dig through
the thorough white of unyielding we dare not name.

REFERENCES

The epigraph is a line from Rainer Maria Rilke's "Eighth Elegy," a poem from *The Duino Elegies*.

Page 9: The title of the poem is a line from W.S. Merwin's poem "Provision," a poem from his book, *The Lice*.

Page 51: The italicized line in this poem is a line from Sharon Olds' "I Go Back to May, 1937," a poem in her book, *The Gold Cell*.