



**LET  
IT DIE  
HUNGRY**

caits meissner



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THE OPERATING SYSTEM PRINT//DOCUMENT

# LET IT DIE HUNGRY

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## dedication

A Landay For the Women  
Poets of Afghanistan

*when I heard your names silent, I threw  
my own off like a shawl and buried it, but it rose*



learning to orgasm  
(when the world is dying)

consumed by sunset  
my tiny halo expanding

insides pink as a conch  
swimming the river

frightened of the red scar  
branded on the chest of a boy,

a thick keloid wetter  
than a sea creature.

Swelling, I was eight, dreaming  
of his zippered chest nude

I tasted something new, summer  
it was hot, wet as meat falling

the bone of my rigid form, rusted  
then it was winter, we walked to see

a deer dangling in its original skin,  
a long cut down the length of the belly

hung by its ankles from a tree.  
There was snow on the ground

a fabricated blanket inside me  
rattled by the smell of disrobed flesh

breath: a wind I could bottle  
erect anatomy, a sharpened knife

I wanted to cut me in two.  
I was young then and I am young now.

Sunflowers have choked the fields.  
I return to the same road

in search of a carcass, alone  
with the trick of memory,

before any hands had beaten or clawed  
or steadied against me, peeling away bark.

The mind's chasm ratcheted open.

*Tell me about when you were ruined.*

In dark woods his fingers kicked,  
a squid beneath the ocean of my waistline.

The older boys burning the pages of a Bible  
and laughing, his apple breath, sweet.

*She is not the enemy, bend down,  
pull up your skirt & talk to her.*

I do not want to cry into your cave,  
I whisper to the button between my legs.

Help me learn to push the cannon down  
the slick tunnel inside until it blasts silently

underwater, clearing another way to blue sky.

*Okay. why do you think it happened to you?*

Why any of us

why the wind

why this

girl in the paper whose entire face  
was burned with acid by her own father.

I want to say it is men whose hands are  
machetes, but I own a mirror and two eyes.

I hang up my human robe and run  
toward horizon, but it runs, too.

Can one be reborn in darkness?  
or must something be cut away.

***Gather Ingredients:***

**Ask Questions Part I: Tropes of Good & Evil**

Where in literature, religion, films and other cultural references/tales do we see the dynamic of good and evil explored? Add an example that speaks most profoundly to good and evil being clear and separate acts or two distinctly characterized kinds of people.

Now add an example that speaks most profoundly to good and evil not being clear, but intertwined and more difficult to identify/extract.

What are some “evils” in history that are no longer seen as evil, or have changed? For example: the use of birth control, sexual relations before marriage, etc.

What does “good” mean, in your definition? What does “evil” mean in your definition?

Is a person being “good” or “evil” a quality one is born with, or is nurtured/created?

Where have you witnessed or encountered a story of someone who is good, but has done something bad and vice versa? Could you/did you forgive them?

Is it possible to enact an “evil” for ultimate good? Explain.

When is a time someone has named you good, and you believed them? How about a time when you didn’t believe them?

When is a time someone has named you as bad, and you believed them? How about a time when you didn’t believe them?

## Ask Questions Part II: Confronting The Shadow Self

In Jungian psychology, the shadow or “shadow aspect” may refer to (1) an unconscious aspect of the personality which the conscious ego does not identify in itself. Because one tends to reject or remain ignorant of the least desirable aspects of one’s personality, the shadow is largely negative, or (2) the entirety of the unconscious, i.e., everything of which a person is not fully conscious. There are, however, positive aspects which may also remain hidden in one’s shadow (especially in people with low self-esteem). \*Definition culled from Wikipedia

The self I present to the world (the parts of myself I think are good, worthy and acceptable):

The self I actively hide from the world (things I am embarrassed by or not proud of):

The secret self that I only catch glimpses of (shame, secrets, thoughts/actions that catch me by surprise):

### ***Gather Images***

Use pop culture, literature, paintings, history, and any other references you can think of that illustrates the way society views good and evil. Include your own images, as well, which may not match up to the prescribed representations of good/evil.

Symbols of good: Princess crown, white gloves, Mother Teresa’s habit...

Symbols of evil: The witch from Snow White’s poison apple, Hitler’s mustache, cannonball...

### **Final Prompt**

Write a poem about how you live between good and evil (or bad, evil is such an intense word!), or have witnessed another who does. Here are some questions/directions to consider as you write:

Expand on any of the following questions from the first section or engage the following prompts:

How do these tropes relate to being a woman or man or in between in today's world?

Write in the voice of someone living between two consciousnesses. Feel free to invent a character!

What are the consequences of labeling a person good or evil?

Have you ever met someone you believe is truly good through and through, or frighteningly evil through and through?

Write a moral fable or fairy tale about good and evil.

Acknowledge something you've done that is bad. Let the "good" side of yourself offer the "bad" forgiveness.











Look, it would be unfair to admit I didn't think this some kind of badge at first, to be given access and trusted. A certain curiosity pulling at the curtain until the whole room was exposed. What is the reason for staring, the riptide desire to look where we aren't welcome? Through night's thick tar, the round ass of the moon presses up against the window. Anything kept out of view holds a shimmering blue mystery, a glass bottom boat skimming ocean's skin. I want to see everything, even in places I can't breathe, but I am also the one wearing a suit in the steam room, where nudity is common as toast. My pert breasts covered while the granny sags, prideful plums in a paper bag. Dried pits: choice. What would it feel like if my bedroom door opened directly onto the street? I cannot close it against a strong wind. When visiting a museum the tomb whispered, stop looking at me. There is a reason for so many nails in those coffins.



## drinking from the source

you're 18            now        & the grown kids usher you in  
unnoticed, wearing Chucks            a ring on each finger  
the girl rubs       her first woman mouth       on yours  
tasting            new smoker's            cheap jewelry  
you accept       your body       as experiment  
place of practice, limbless horse       the leotarded girls  
barrel thin bodies over       and swing  
but tonight the man            is a bag of coins  
you are slot machine       greedy       hips  
touching aloud       in public  
swishing round&round in the drink's incense  
knowing your hips       know nothing       book smarts  
fake knife       blazer       gold       hoops shining  
lies in the lobes            creeping up:       a warm sap  
an act to make       ma       blush a crime       maybe  
you are            committing one       right now under strobe lights  
who knows       becoming ghost       crawling home  
while       the corner prostitute       levitates: witch  
teased       black hair            a giant net to catch       smoke       stars  
crickets            pennies            & girls wading       too deep  
over head:       you she winks at       you join her  
tribe, easy       without coaxing       pulling up manhole covers  
master escape            from this trap-body tamed  
waiting       to turn feral,       rouse up       lionscobrasbearsohmy  
teeth extending            maybe now       body will be sorceress  
maybe body will love       you       back writhingrhythmicpretending  
provingproving you could handle it       you got this       taut line  
stretched       over this world            and that one  
then eroc went to jail       jet went to jail       jerk got shot in the face  
and that's how you got here            shook       magic  
infused            with radiant danger  
everything possible       pulsing            you moved to  
New York            and grew up       fast



## ways to fight for life in harlem

*for Estephania*

Bring the shoebox to bury  
the bird-song. Priorities:

sleep, then wake.

Girl braids weave to a quarter inch of hair.

*Now that's magic.*

When the crackhead on the corner  
whips her mouth like a fat tail

say, *at least I ain't spreading  
my sickness in the street.*

*Still got fists  
like a blind eye opening.*

*This private thing grown inside  
make me hard as stone.*

*One day they won't recognize me,  
laid still, sullied with make-up.*

*But I ain't gone yet.*

I call the tumor in your belly our mango tree.  
Myth is you must've swallowed some seeds

when you were little like that cherub-cheeked thing in the photograph on the mantle wearing your smile.

One day you're gonna swim back home  
to the cool blue and drink. No Santeria nor tarot

need spread out on the kitchen's cold wood. That sun  
alone will ease it right outta you, wrap you in its warm.

Now it's thin winter. The young ghosts barrel past  
the window, coaxing a fight into the streets.

The projects and the Hill are at war, always been.

*See, everyone's dying out here on 125th.  
Ain't just me. We all got seeds in our bellies.*

*Just some be metal                      and some be flesh.*

add a little danger to the blood

This is the song not being sung,  
but hums below the skin.  
Red notes knock through the body  
like a fish on fire — pop out  
the mouth head first.  
I shrug heat off, fever steam.  
Body desires suspension, to be naked  
wrapped in clouds.  
Panic will eventually turn itself  
over into a docked asteroid and sit.  
I admit I'm cratered, tipping into my own well.  
Everyone has a prescription.  
They make it sound easy: scoop  
it like pulp, flush it down the toilet,  
wrestle out the manic squid.  
But in me is a home, an ocean,  
a disturbed comfort in tentacles  
brushing brain, or shooting  
down the leg, inside, a hiding vein.  
It's my comfort, this rubber-skinned pet.  
Don't get out of bed, sinister lover.  
Touch me with fire-proof hands.  
Let me lick your gills. Drag me under.  
Put your blue cheek to my lips,  
your lips on mine, suck  
until you taste sunrise.  
The breakfast I swallowed  
without chewing: light — long  
lost in the cave of my body.  
I'm trying to stay high but  
I'm a sad-sack boiling potatoes  
wearing a dress of burlap —  
I am the boat sadness clings to  
while it's sinking.

We are fifteen women seated in a lopsided circle. It's nearly night, the sun shaking off its daily task. The poems I've xeroxed are from the women confessionalists, but I leave out the part about heads in ovens today. Though it's never too tender, I don't want to start the day off sad. They ask, rightfully curious,

*what do you mean by dangerous women?*

It's not how the cops use the word, I say. I mean your (I point downward) is a stopperless tub (I make a fist) squeeze the jelly and be not stung. In other words:

*the way you make them squirm.*

It feels so good to laugh, there is no use stopping. Our laughter is bottomless, a stiff drink, hey, laughter tastes like licking the back of a star. Tongue right up its fiery ass! Keep the jokes coming. It's no secret sadness is waiting right through that threshold.

*Isn't sadness always one step behind?*

A pathetic limping puppy. For a moment I empathize with owners who abuse their pets for what they come to symbolize. Imagine depression made tangible, touchable — closer to home, an animal whimpering with an eye patch, a broken leg, a cone to keep its sloppy tongue from stitches,

*always needing things.*

The women are writing and I fake it. The squid becomes dog, then the mind breaks into a thousand minnows darting. Confessionalism: my depression likes to picture itself in different scenes, not just of the animal variety.

My favorite pose: 1955 leaning on the hood of a cool car, dangling a paint brush between teeth. In this vision the depression is masquerading as a man who knows he has a big dick. He is wooing me to live in his body.

I contemplate the value of the whole world loving me. I contemplate being the man with the big dick contemplating the whole world loving me. I examine that smoothness like an egg in my hand.

*Add a little danger to the blood.*

The clock ticks and I am a cartoon with squiggles for hair, kneeling at the edge of the abyss. I hang my head in. The black waves recede and return in an endless loop. I scream and it boomerangs back as a cartoon ghost wearing my face.

Below, a single gaping eye the size of a saucer looks up. Eight tentacles reach and reach but the undertow is strong. You are safer on this side, I whisper to myself. That creature should fear you, instead.

My ghost twin chases the wind out the window. The pens stop one by one. I pull up from the ledge. In my own skin, I am stuck to summer's wet mouth. Sweat beads on each women's forehead. I call on the first reader. I smooth down my hair.

— A documentary came out in 2014 that exposed the plight of orca whales. Their sheer mass a form of hypnosis, disbelief that such a body could exist on the same planet as our own. With a hypothesis of a higher emotional capacity than humans, who could blame the beast for dragging a trainer through the water? The friend who fed fish for tricks, who created a sideshow.

— Can one both love this beautiful breathing thing and also be an accomplice to captivity? Is it better to fight for the whale from outside the arena, or pet its wet skin from within the tank?

— When Ming the tiger was kept in the home of Antoine Yeats in New York City housing projects, his owner became a brief celebrity on television. He was quoted urging his peers to pursue PhD's, to see themselves on the quote/unquote next level of working with animals as an answer to his own misguided propensity for exotic pets.

— Alligator in the bathtub, albino monkeys under sink, elephants in the creek, Lambert the lion escaping through suburban traffic (that last one true down to name.)

— Saw on the news that Cecil the lion was killed by a Midwestern dentist in Zimbabwe. I imagine Cecil rising from the dead under that fluorescent pink sun, a ring of roses strung through his mane, putty-ing up the potholes, redistributing land, restoring economics, wiping away blood with his sandpaper tongue. Cecil pumped up with laughing gas, cracking up his own name.

— I won't lie, it is easier, lazy even, to assign purity to a species that does not bear our particular flaws — alive by instinct, lacking ability to craft a gun from wood and metal or cook food above a constructed flame. When I look across my country I have to fight the urge to hate all of us equally. I reach deep inside to what is untouched in me in search of compassion for the form in which I arrived.

— But who will ever know. The lion does not choose its human name. The whale cannot speak to claim self defense. Ming's claws become enormous when a man's hand holds on.



I.

it was summer when I discovered  
the robins had built nests  
on the back porch and longed  
to take the blue-skinned ovals  
to my mouth, warm them  
against the flesh of my cheeks,  
bite down gently to balance in teeth,  
but not hard enough to crack.

The morning we fell in love  
you pointed out lime-colored parrots  
living beneath the overpass by the river,  
flamboyant-winged against  
highways crossing the gray sky.

You didn't like to dance  
and said so then and many times later,  
though you would fly if winged  
and I could not picture  
anything terrible in that season,  
not even reading the newspaper.

*Careful*, Dad said to my small fingers,  
*we can't touch the eggs or else*  
*the mamas won't return.*

But it was too late.  
I had put my smell all over them.

## II.

Tete calls repeatedly, usually around 7am when we are slurring through sleep. I can hear the sun through the phone, our fire escape covered in snow.

She believes our foreign number to be the gas people. I laugh, how could she have thought it was the gas company, she asked for your mother?

*My Mother? Someone's mother. Anyone's mother.  
Who do you think they are back home, ConEd?*

That was the summer we married. People ask if we wore traditional attire. I say no, we dressed in bright colors and stripes like a circus, and that is true.

So is this: beneath the mountains there was a hole sized to place our two separate hearts, beating dust from trees. We rubbed the hearts together to flint and spark —

invisible arteries strung together in tiny white lights mistaken for fireflies (not burning bodies.) They said, yes, and we were allowed this love and by all appearances, life became normal.

## III.

I have kept a secret for a long time, and I understand it sounds unreal when I say that an immigration officer followed us home, took up camp beneath an old coat in the closet. I bribe him —

*Here is poetry to give to your lover that will soak  
her panties through. No broken English, all the Queen's  
grammar intact and precise. She'll think her pussy  
was replaced with a golden fish bowl.*

*Here, a hot bath, lavender oil, a fat joint to relax  
your muscles as you soak. We've rolled it with paper  
money and rub your feet like a king. We'll hold your  
badge so it won't get wet.*

He eats our leftover scraps.  
I wake at night to his seance of curses  
flurries of drool whipping the mouth.  
But I cannot make him a dog —  
cannot let him die hungry.

IV.

— *why*  
vast sky asked

& returned

quick as spoken

I boarded  
the plane

& *why* spread like weeds

I didn't have any answer. Wasn't because it felt right.

Or wrong.

I shot it out of the sky.

Buried it in the back garden

like a sucked bone —

but why found  
my wound's  
wet honey  
& stuck still  
to me like  
a wingless fly.

V.

It will make me unpopular in New York to say I dream  
of babies, that the urge rose up in me to be a woman in the way  
women have hung laundry for centuries on the rope out back,  
the concise edges on the folded towels, whiter than teeth.

I dream of them while scooping the meat between two fingers.  
Babies swimming in the toilet, crawling from under the bed —  
tumbling through the night like radiant stars when Tete says  
she wants eight from right there where the meat gathers and sticks.

I think about our empty bank account, the flimsy American  
dollar floating from my hand, my inability to refuse  
how sadness is the ultimate chameleon, twisting itself into  
the impossible body of all. Still, the dirt goes on regenerating.

Produces a certain perfume after a hard summer rain. Stand here  
while I rub orange peels on my neck, while I pluck our escaping  
spirits from the disguise of dusk, eyes scanning for a lighthouse  
in a waterless land, asking strangers which direction is home.

# Conversation

*For Warsaw*





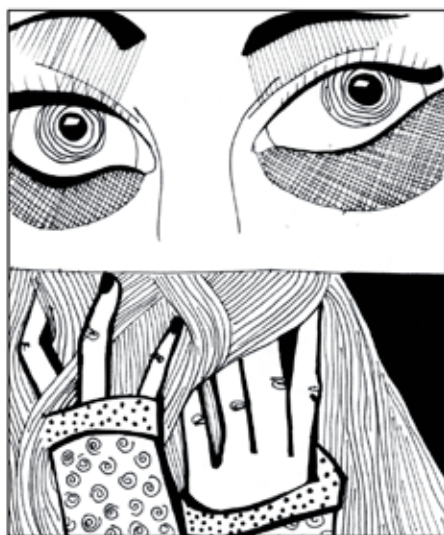
Sucked sleeps warm mouth  
nearly to death, she said.



Rode a bucking  
horse all night  
until the cliff, I said.



**I've wronged someone, she said.  
I've turned myself away, I said.**



**I can't stop looking, she said.  
I can't bear to look, I said.**



**See this deep hole? She said.  
See this gold star, I said?**



**Stolen, I said.  
Buried, she said.**

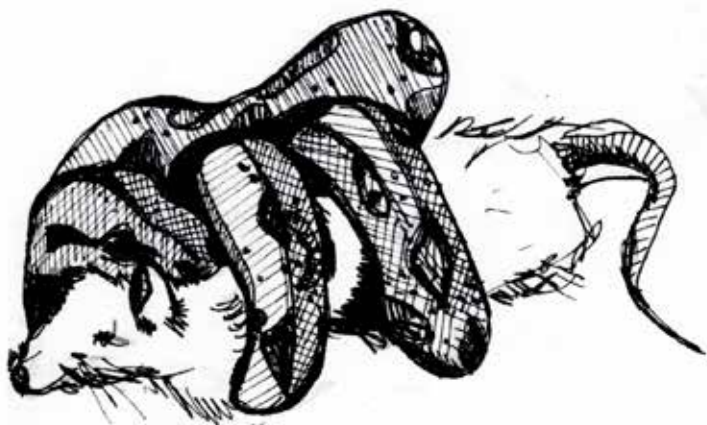


**I'm just  
a head,  
she said.**

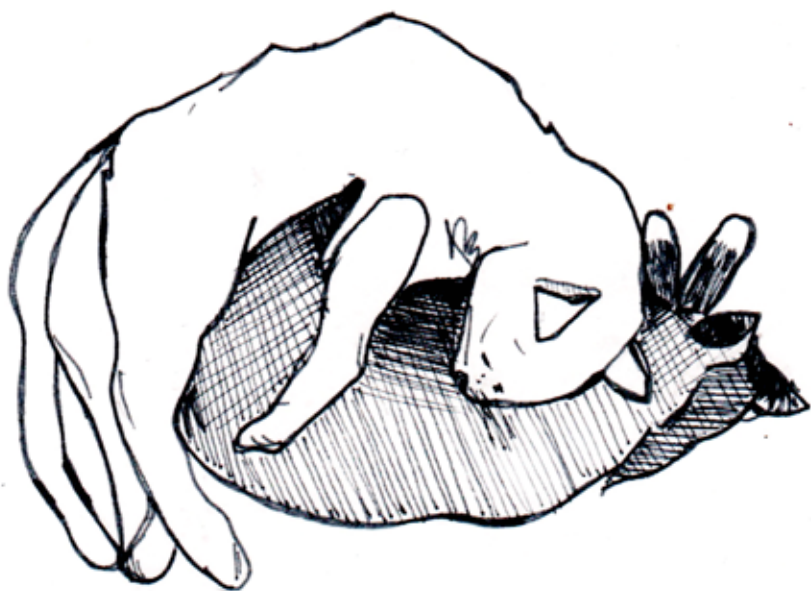


**A gutted  
fish,  
I said.**





**I don't think anyone loves me, she said.  
I don't think I love anyone, I said.**



**Except you, she said.**  
**Except you, I said.**

Gather Ingredients

Ask Questions:

1. Define, in relationship to yourself (your desires, needs and personal experience) the risks, rewards and consequences of standing out and fitting in.

	What are the risks?	The rewards?	The consequences?
STANDING OUT			
FITTING IN			

2. In what ways do you choose to stand out? In what ways do you choose to slip into the crowd and blend in? What makes you want to hide? What makes you want to be seen?

3. In what ways do you *not choose* to stand out, but still do? In what ways do you not choose to fit in, but still do? (Think about things out of your control: physical features, voice, circumstance, etc.)

4. Dig into your memories. What was a time you stood out (could be for good or bad reasons) and how did it make you feel? What was a time you chose to fit in (could be for good or bad reasons) and how did it make you feel?

## Gather Images:

Did you ever play that game in childhood: one of these things is not like the other? Let's build imagery off of that: *a square peg trying to squeeze into a round hole, apples in a carton of oranges, a peacock's feathers against a slate gray sky, punk rock purple hair floating among gray suits...*

Ever hear that Pete Seeger song: *Little boxes, little boxes and they're all made out of ticky tacky*? Let's build imagery with sameness in mind: *a lone straw in a haystack, flocks of flying geese, sand on the beach...*

## Final Prompt:

Write a poem about how you live between fitting in and standing out — and how you (as we all do) maneuver between the two. Here are some questions/directions to consider as you write:

- A time you fit in or stood out that felt exploitive or difficult. How did it take away your power? How was it painful, shameful or scary?
- A time you fit in or stood out that felt purposeful and deeply chosen. What agency did you have? What made you feel powerful, loudly or quietly, about the choice?
- Define a leader and a follower — what are their qualities? Which are you? Does one have more value over the other? Does it matter?
- In what ways do you have to tone “down” or tone “up” to get ahead, or simply survive?
- What were you like as a kid? Did you lead the pack, or did you slip in awkwardly, hoping to go unnoticed? Tell us about that era.
- What would you do in life if you knew you couldn't fail?
- Does standing out automatically make one worthy of the spotlight, or are there other ways people stand out that are harmful to them and/or others?
- Does fitting in mean weakness, or could there be other motivations of slipping under the radar?
- What habits or skills make you different from others?

following faye

When Faye came back from summer camp  
it took exactly seven days for her to forget about Jesus.  
Our middle school hands clung tight together  
while she wept news about the imminent apocalypse.  
When she cried out in fear I imagined trapped animals stuck  
between worlds, our lawn charred black.  
Out the window summer leaves rustled in their green skin.  
Dad told me they wouldn't feed you if you didn't pray  
at the camp, so even then I knew the kindness of a lie.  
*We believe*, I said and watched out the window.  
Accomplices under wind's gentle hand, I blinked  
and the trees one by one turned their faces away.

Seven days later, Faye was back to painting our eyes  
the color of koi and juniper. We outfitted in shiny vests  
with just bras beneath, arms pressing new breasts  
together to erupt into cleavage. We posed with tigress mouths  
on her kitchen table, beneath the stark interrogation lamp.  
When we developed the photos from the disposable camera  
at the drugstore, we wondered if the clerk checked us out  
and put our fingers to gag our throats, secretly admiring  
this small but actual taste of sex blooming through skin.

Unlike my house, where my mother's nose was a power  
tool used for sniffing out the most microscopic sin,  
Faye's mom had died sleeping when she was eight,  
and that's when her dad took up the stance of the trees.  
When Faye came to my twelfth birthday, hiking up  
our next door hill-sized drive way in platform shoes,  
she propped on the swing set in magenta zig zag pants,  
make-up thick as a mask that I imagined she peeled off

in one swift motion before sleep and hung on the bed post.  
When the party ended, dad quietly worried Faye looked  
like a prostitute and he didn't mean it in a cruel way.

Faye kept a tiny gold cross around her neck on a thin chain.  
When Faye sang she belted out harsh like Broadway.  
When Faye wanted to pluck my eyebrows to bring  
her hyper-femininity to my face, mom worried I'd come  
home with her skinny sideways commas arching my eyes.  
When Faye teased it felt like the earth was opening  
its mouth to swallow you in its hideous laughter, not unlike  
apocalypse, and it was sure meant to be cruel.

When Faye snuck out at 2am, I followed her pink boa  
to tickle the face of handsome men. We studied their strong  
backs, the veins that pushed through the neck like roots.  
When Faye fell in and out of love, she spent more time  
excusing herself to the bathroom, a trip after every meal.  
It wasn't noticeable at first, but once I saw, I could not stop  
seeing, balloon-sized, exaggerated, her swollen knuckles  
nicked by teeth, fresh lipstick applied to her succulent lips,  
perfume dabbed on behind each ear and I knew, I did.  
I knew exactly what her breath smelled like

but —

*.seert eht*

the two girls love like a sieve and drink a river  
of fish and read poems too big for their mouths

but none of this matters.  
It is all background noise to distract

the writer from spilling past the heart's  
armor to fill the fridge with fruit.

Here lives a half-used bottle of ketchup,  
unwashed dishes, mattress slung into hallway,

an imprint of body kept like the memory  
of stone in untouched sand. You pause

to feel your tumbleweed womb,  
the echo searching for a hole to bury

its young, this in-suppressible hiccup:  
not here, not here, not here.

But what if you are wrong.  
What if the womb is always a garden

and never a prison. All you know  
for sure is her hair falls like the coat

of a black horse galloping away  
as you sweep her in your arms, so many

pieces of broken clay after the pill  
And the blood spots on clean sheets, fresh

fox prints on snow. This is something  
you will learn, albeit slowly, as the grass

pokes its endless fingers through spring  
and she packs her suitcase for the West

Coast, rejecting your strongest medicine.  
This growing whisper of a person

taking possession of her body  
and never letting go.



59th street on the 1 train, 2015

*After Aracelis & Naomi*

The train car is packed to its teeth,  
crawling on its long belly.  
We know it's wrong, but compare  
it to desert combat, unbearable heat rising  
from thick-perfumed bodies,  
sweating the pressure of shared air.  
We are known for our camaraderie in black  
clouds, black coats, black coffee, our complaints.  
I am drinking brown bodega water  
trying not to spill it onto the bald head below me.  
I am trying to think of someone less fortunate  
than myself, but cannot come up with anyone  
so unlucky as me today on the face  
of this blemished earth, no, this morning  
I am trying not to kill anybody, or be killed.

Second stop, a gaggle of teenagers board.  
Lanky bodies goose-step wide to keep pants  
from ankles, shooting off siren mouths —  
mouths fit for a scrubbing if you ask most mama's  
and god, are they calling all attention to themselves.  
Teenagers can be so forgettable in their sameness,  
so boring in their striving towards cool.  
The ring leader is Dominican-tomboy-fly  
coded in a "swag team" sweatshirt, do-rag  
wrapped under flat brim, baggy jeans.  
I admire her Elmo boxers.  
I usually love kids like these when  
their voices spill out, breaking open  
over a poem in my classroom, when they forget

how to define their own shape for just a moment  
and expand — but today, I am not interested  
in their rigidity or lack of it, I am wishing for a cover  
to dive back under or a knife to slash through  
this crowd and carve out my own throne.

It is my seventh stop, which I know  
because I am counting, holding  
my breath, I am a wasp suspending his  
wings mid-tornado, I am dying slowly,  
I'm thinking, this city is finally doing me in,  
I am writing my obituary  
while wondering how many pennies  
it would take to buy a house deep  
in the woods somewhere I could live life  
in pajamas and give up the human  
race instead of just offing myself —  
when a white woman well past middle-aged  
sneaks by the kids towards an open seat.  
Cropped gray hair and a bright orange scarf,  
it's the kind of face I'd be happy to grow into  
should the world have me for a longer spell  
than I am currently barreling towards on this train,  
and the girls turn too, drawn to this strange  
trickless magician with her funky brooch.  
They say hello, and though not cruel,  
they do not smooth the edges, still bouncing  
on the volcano's crater of curses, still boiling hot.  
The woman, she reads the sweatshirt aloud,  
holds it in her mouth like soft bread.  
There is a 4 where the A should be in SW4G.

*What does it mean,* she asks.

The ringleader's decision is quick, but I see it,  
she is searching for the greatest coin of shock,  
coils back as if switching on a ghastly mask,  
as if to say, I am the scariest thing coming and if you

wanna go, I'm ready. Puffing up her chest  
like a comic hero it comes out curt, a popped balloon —

*it mean, I'M GAY!*

And the collective breath draws close.  
I am waiting for the woman's response,  
because though I am sure she is not dangerous,  
I also know this girl has been collecting hate  
in a paper bag, ready to swing for the pinata head  
of whatever ignorance is sitting on a ready lip  
and who could blame her. I've got my own bag.  
I am suddenly protective of these kids,  
want to pull them close, and even though  
we are nearly riding through Chelsea  
and then Christopher Street and even though  
our city has a parade every year that stops traffic  
with its proclamation of love across bodies  
and kink and colors, there is still a record  
number of homicides in 2015 for these kind of people,  
my kind of people and now I see her, I see  
the facade that is safety, that is *I'll fuck with you  
before you fuck with me* and then suddenly, a light  
cuts through the car, it comes in a sucker punch  
of breathable air, comes in like Spring —

*Me too*, says the woman. And they fist bump.

The questions fire between street slang  
and buttoned-up speech, *Really? You got a girlfriend?*  
(She has a wife! Shows off wedding ring.)  
*So, like, Is your wife butch or femme?*  
(A little of both, too old to call it anything.)  
The woman looks at me, winks, sees the thawing  
of my spirit. I realize I am sitting, the train has emptied,  
a possibility has been unfolding like a tiny ballerina  
in my palm and easy as that, the world, again, is green.

**Gather Ingredients:**

**Ask Yourself Questions:**

1. What are my personal convictions — the beliefs I stand for no matter what?
2. What are the difficult beliefs about myself that I cannot seem to shed, no matter how hard I try? Conversely, what are the beautiful beliefs about myself that no one can tell me otherwise?
3. We all wear different masks and employ different parts of ourselves in different situations. Who am I, and what mask do I wear...

*At work?*

*With co-workers?*

*At home?*

*With my boss or authority figure?*

*In my living space?*

*In public with strangers?*

*With (my) children?*

*With friends?*

*With a lover?*

*During a night out?*

*While bathing?*

*While singing, dancing or praying?*

4. What obstacles am I facing in my current life?
5. What obstacles have I faced in the past that I've overcome?

### Gather Images:

Finish the following statement and make it colorful: In another life I wish I was...

### Final Prompt:

Write a poem about your rigid and mutable self — and the gray space between the two dichotomies. Pushing you towards your own choices in writing interesting work — and what stories they stem from — here are some questions to consider as you write:

- *What will you bend for? What won't you?*
- *How do you change and shape shift, what are the masks you wear?*
- *Is there a time when you had to wear a mask that made you feel false or terrible or strange?*
- *Is there a time when you had to wear a mask that made you feel elevated?*
- *Is there a time when you compromised a core belief?*
- *Do you daydream about changing yourself, the things that feel too rigid?*
- *Are you too mutable, changing yourself to fit the desires of others?*

mostly water

The girl is trying to say she's not a body  
as he bites into the scoop of tender meat behind her knee.

There is evidence the body is real: lilac vein protruding at wrist,  
lamp's light chasing skin. It's said the spirit can travel at night —

her dress: an illusion of sky slumped on floorboards.  
On days when the earth's laid claim, she ticks off how many clouds

can be eaten in place of bread, pulling cotton from ceiling  
while he parts her legs, flooding with the damp flush of blood.

Proof she is real, he says, taking iron to tongue like Sunday wine.  
She is the wine. She is a faucet, a river, an ocean on which

to craft a boat, a dream — a dream! Remember decorating  
her Bougainvillea toes? Back porch door unhinged, grass wet,

chasing boys whose smiles broke the girls like yolk, broke  
under dress, then laughter, then the silence of stones.

The tentacle-tail aches when winds change, stiffens up:  
a bad limb. At night the monstrous thing unravels from its curl

in her underpants, she rub it with butter, soaks, spreads out  
each scale across the tub like lily pads, holds it like a baby

or heaves, spits, tries to wrench it from skin, leaves it in the gutter.  
Inside: she is escaping form. Inside: a wall of rain.

Inside: sloshing tide as he searches for the bottom,  
which is endless, not knowing that she is also the sail.









## 13 hours in the future

*for Mahdar*

I am 13 hours in the future & it is night / the rain is holding her breath  
my friend, isn't Penang opening to us! / a lotus unveiling a carnival  
the paper lanterns are skirts / or balls pushed along by tiger's nose  
our smoke is a canon / daredevil on its way to an unnamed star  
my own sweat: a disco ball jumpsuit / I sway when I walk / a mirage  
I imagine myself a sheath / transparent / all light shining through me  
I know only one person in this city & the only thing that will soften  
the heart / is to open / delicately / petal by petal / until pollen exposes  
itself / like a nipple. / My friend! / Tonight the sky is cotton candy  
vines paw the trees / the air is tender / hilarious / there is desperation  
bread on the table / there are cigarette bones / lazy in the ashtray  
there is curry / suspended / like summer snow / & ease whistles out  
into the street / there is the street / right here in my palm / I can touch it  
there are no walls between us / this is what it feels like to be borderless  
unanchored / cracked down the middle / all sin pulled out / left curled  
in a basket of snakes / dead / there is a man / who is hungry / & when  
you feed him / he sits & when you ask / his name / he cries.

## the sky pep talks the kid

for Etheridge Knight

They call you *brother*: kind eyes, hard yes  
& you can croon, push out a tune smooth  
as a bald-headed baby, squeeze up a body

until it bends hot wire, belly slick with sweat,  
your crisp note slicing air into twin shadows —  
but look closer: rickety shades reveal an endless

room, bare as a nude knuckle, spotlight on nothing  
worth a pawn-palm. Where do you belong?  
Stick-up kid climbing out the blood, out of shadows

hiding the anatomy of a fattening heart, trapped  
by bars, a man in shadow, two fat fingers  
digging until jam smeared the moon & hunger

sunk a shank shaped of june bugs in the deep  
growl of gut, you: a quiet force, jaw snapped shut.  
Sweet, firm brother: no never / no never a shadow.

I'll place a dollar & a dime on your song  
one day gently melting open the silk of a woman.  
You slick instinctual human, a stink of intellect

so thick it makes a shadow of everything,  
towering, a shadow so long it disappears day  
from touching the rest of our skin.

You free 'em up, brother. Rinse 'em out, clean.  
Grow up a tall righteous greed, drink your rightful sun.  
Who is talking now? Whose disembodied voice

smacking its lips all over this poem? — Well,  
it ain't the poet, too clear, too blue. Here's a hint, brother:  
cloudless today, no threat of rain. Look up.

Because there is no one to carry the coffee  
and sugar there I am, posed like Adonis against  
the television's shifting light. My body has its own tray.  
I have learned to prop it open against will.  
A novella on the television. A woman screaming  
a name that is not mine. On the counters, food  
left out for days waiting for a fat finger to scoop  
the crust out of a man's heart. On the windows,  
curtains as heavy as hail. We ate peanut butter pies  
for dinner and rung a bell for the maid, who is me  
and I in a wig and high heels when the storm is coming  
down and the curtains draw tight. I asked him  
if I looked good raw, smooth as a peach and he laughed  
something in French, something about a flower  
growing a moose's head, it's antlers anchored face  
to ground, or was it an anteater nosing around in mud?  
We were high kites, actual kites breaking through ceiling.  
I asked him a question without asking, just raised my brows:  
ever watched two whales make love?  
A long alien snaked into a giant crevasse,  
that's what it looks like  
or the surface of our planet cracked open and

— *stars stars stars stars stars.*

Keep me from his hot abscess, I try to say  
but I cannot deny a bed safe from rain.  
His mouth aglow, arrow dismounted, ready to rest in dirt.  
His body pointed to the ground. Rise, the water said as it fell harder —  
see how the drink holds the ball in its glassy mouth,  
wrapping curtains around the body like the warmest hand.  
Into my mind, when I close my eyes, she pulls up  
like a ghost from beneath the floorboards.  
She, my friend who says to me with her eyes: say nothing.

## notes on projection

When I was young I dreamed up a story about my father's infidelity — I imagined it had to be true, it was what I knew of men from television. (We accept the tree as tree because we've been told it's a tree. Once we know what a tree is, we will never question the trunk and branches when our eyes fall upon a new one. It is finite in our minds. It will never not be a tree.) I had no evidence when I presented the case and Dad laughed, the thought made him too tired to consider as he stained the front porch, my mother covering bulbs with dirt on the hill.

I was bothered by sex, the messiness of it, the uncontrollable urges I felt, too, and rubbed out in private, sometimes not even able to wait until home, laying my body down in the pine needle woods — breaking off under a thick spell. Ashamed of being caught mid-passion with a pillow, my sister's incurable insomnia quickly backing out of my unlocked room — I began to hear the wild noise of passion when the laundry machine thumped broken in the basement, when the shovel hit the deck in repetitive removal of snow.

But nothing was out of the ordinary, my parents asleep or watching television, or steadily removing snow as quickly as it fell, the image of purest white burned into the brain before tainted by soot. Fear exited my mouth in the shape of a moth, searching out the next unattainable light. My own mind: an attic to fly from.

\*

*1001 Nachts*: the name of the amusement park ride Pennsylvania church organist Amy Wolfe married after riding him over 3000 times. Photos of his body cover every inch of her walls. Other partners: the Eiffel Tower, a rock, pillow, a steam locomotive, high fidelity radio, The Berlin Wall. Freud maintained any object or action could be sexualized. I peer through the kaleidoscope. It's a common phenomenon, though we typically imagine it as human in form. The word is projection.

★

Okay, so my body is something I haven't given it credit for — a drug to be bottled and sniffed. A fertilizer pushing a green bud through ashy soil. Do I purposefully take off sexuality? I bear no skin, legs covered to ankle. Does the erotic allow itself to be hidden? I keep finding mine unexpectedly like a sunflower turning its head towards light, a naked worm pushed up to concrete from summer rain.



all the ways to sing in portugeuse

*for Flonia*

You must believe, once upon a time I was rifle —

shooting off at the slightest threat  
of lip or lash or shimmy

but tonight Cachaca rains from the ceiling  
& the voice startles  
slow molasses with this certain

cleanness & we fall in deep.

I love the split fruit  
of a woman, to scoop seeds from apple's core,  
her dual moon I might have envied

but oh, this floating voice rising  
crooning, tempting blossom,  
to place the tongue firmly & lick.

Tonight, we are all in love with the woman on stage —

flocking like fish to light, though drowning  
with the song of all women under our feet  
& we lift, we raise our shot glass eyes

& we *dance*.

Now that it is late & sangria has ripened us, you lean over

& whisper into the shell of my ear,  
*I want to sing, too* & so we do,  
in the middle of West Broadway

in the thicket of thorn-ed night  
while the man lays his cardboard on concrete  
New York lullaby Fado, Samba

we dance

with a quickness, open throat

as if exiting the body, as if this flesh is a laugh  
& something we've invented  
to trick ourselves into feeling real —

darling woman, this portrait of self  
with red rose is beautiful,  
if you prefer beauty, but what for?

Take a knife to the perfect canvas,  
rid your song of its cage of petals  
& labor it into this wet world:

aching to touch the air, to be alive.

the big terrible thing i did

won't let me  
sleep wraps  
around my neck  
boa constrictor bow tie  
escapes  
hands bandit black cloud  
banshee tearing through town  
then hiding in the branches of the tallest tree  
waiting for winter's exposed skin.  
Will they mistake me for vulture? Will my hair fall out?  
Terrible thing tumor  
sunk to the bottom un-pretty a secret scarab  
clamped to neck.

Lock myself                  to pen                  with the bull  
paint                  my body red                  and run?

Cut off each limb                  stick myself with pins

see stars                  through me                  voodoo                  telescope  
clap sky                  wide-eyed cymbals.

I was right, I am a clash, brash, brassy as the corner hooker

panties stuffed                  a bouquet

between legs                  crawling

on knees like a diapered baby                  towards a single eye

beckoning.

Someone should check *him* in  
lock collar prod a hot iron  
from the ribs 'til he barks  
the terrible thing I did was an anthem,  
a medicine electric sex  
name me hero icon  
girls, I did it for you —

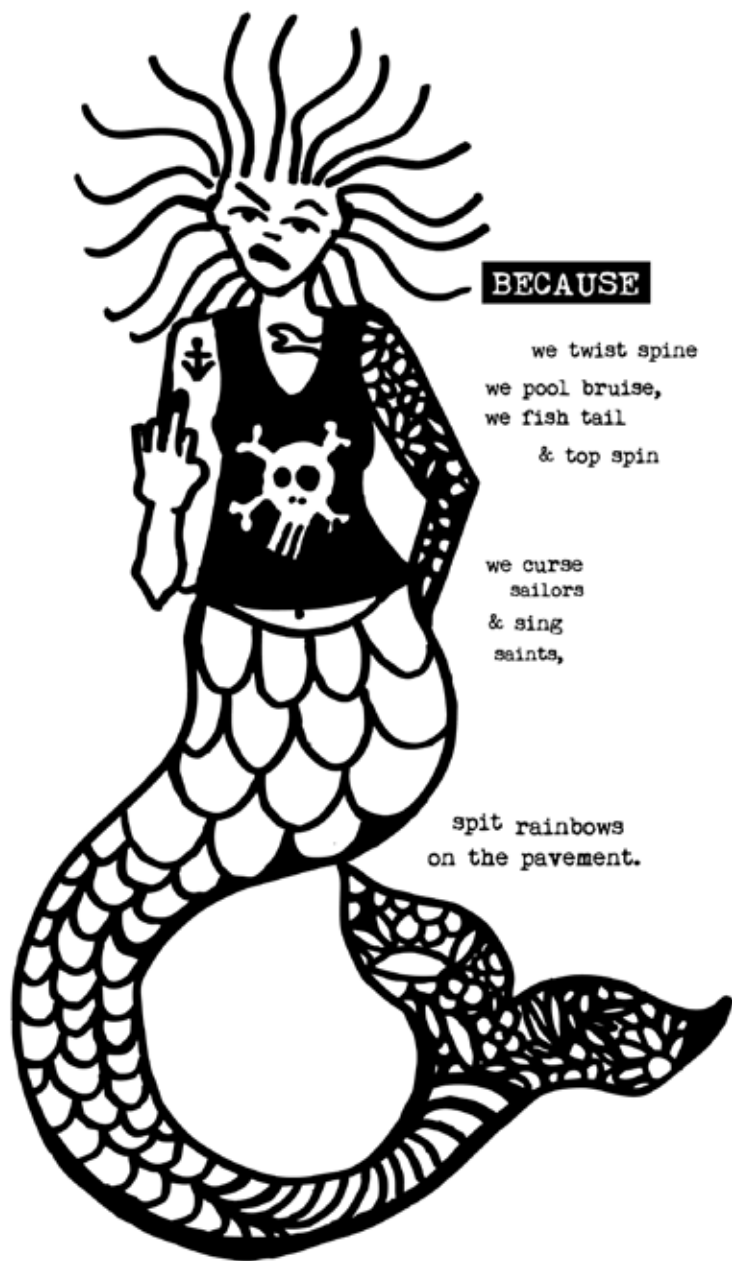
# homegirl

After Kathleen Hannah's  
RIOT GRRRL MANIFESTO

## manifesto



BECAUSE we wear RIPPED & tight & pearl & door  
knock & combat & hijab & Lancome & gym shoe  
& potato sack & turban & we GODDESS GOOD with  
bed head & braces & missing teeth.



## BECAUSE

we twist spine  
we pool bruise,  
we fish tail  
& top spin

we curse  
sailors  
& sing  
saints,

spit rainbows  
on the pavement.

BECAUSE  
we walrus big,  
**G I A N T** big, steel toes  
clap night big,

pump heel caught  
trailing clouds

like toilet paper  
in a public restroom,





naw, we never ashamed of our tail or **Spot** & **Tail**.





BECAUSE we tit mouse  
small,

hide in the wall small,  
we stack Russian doll  
small,  
we trick you invisible small,  
we glow worm  
& firefly.

BECAUSE our asses

**SPARK.**



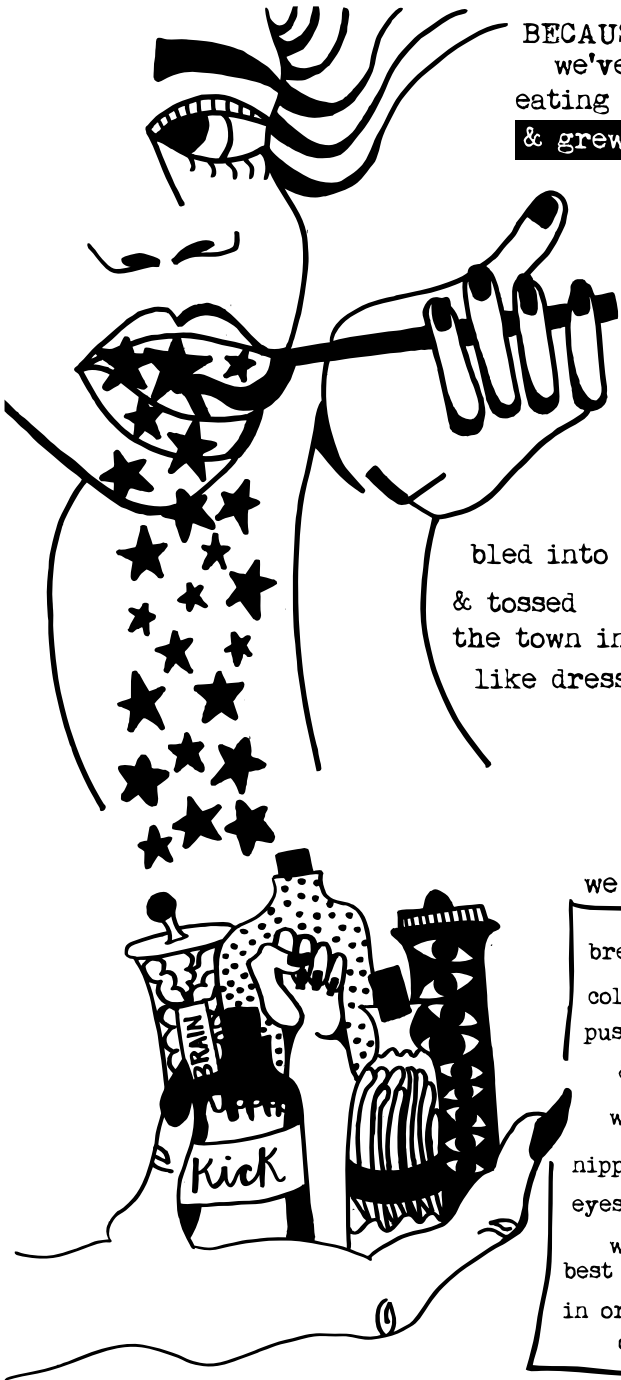
BECAUSE our tusks  
dig graves.  
BECAUSE we make a bed of sky  
& sure do muddy up  
our knickers, wet.



(then lift.)

BECAUSE we cook snails  
& sweet tea, bend  
our bodies into greed.

BECAUSE we consume  
until we drown



BECAUSE  
we've been caught  
eating stars  
& grew bright,

bled into buckets  
& tossed  
the town in red  
like dressing, boy

we got:

breasts,  
collarbone & kick  
pussy  
    & brain matter  
we got slick  
nipples & throats,  
eyes burned  
    with images  
best forgotten  
in order to go  
on living.

BECAUSE we've seen our siren sisters spread  
across rock like a fish gut brew.



BECAUSE our mouths  
lost the words **I'm sorry.**

BECAUSE  
we fly.

Haven't you  
seen us  
rolling the wind  
outside  
the window?



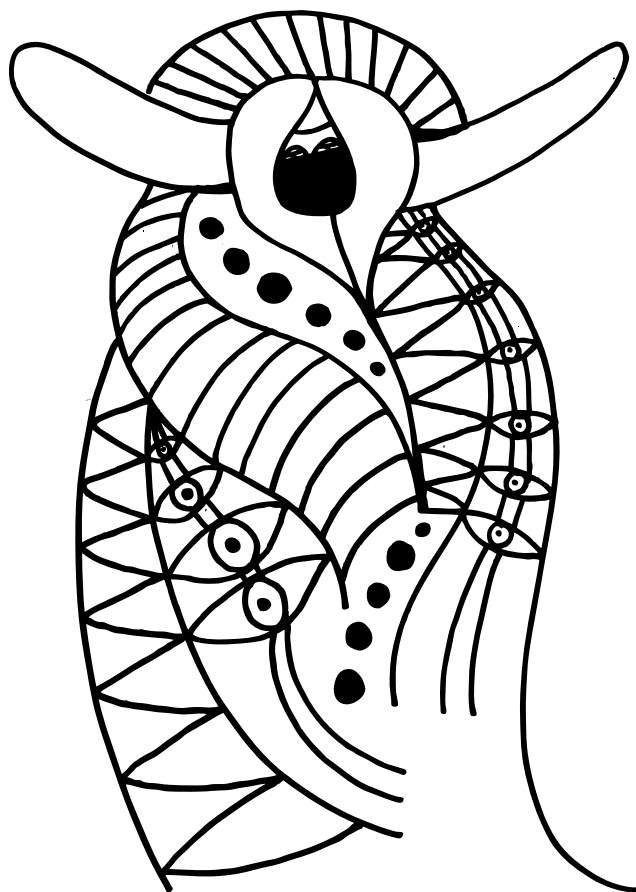
We smoke  
the breeze.

We wind hips.



Haven't  
you  
seen us  
levitating  
in the  
fields?





Watch us bend down to whatever creature  
birthed us

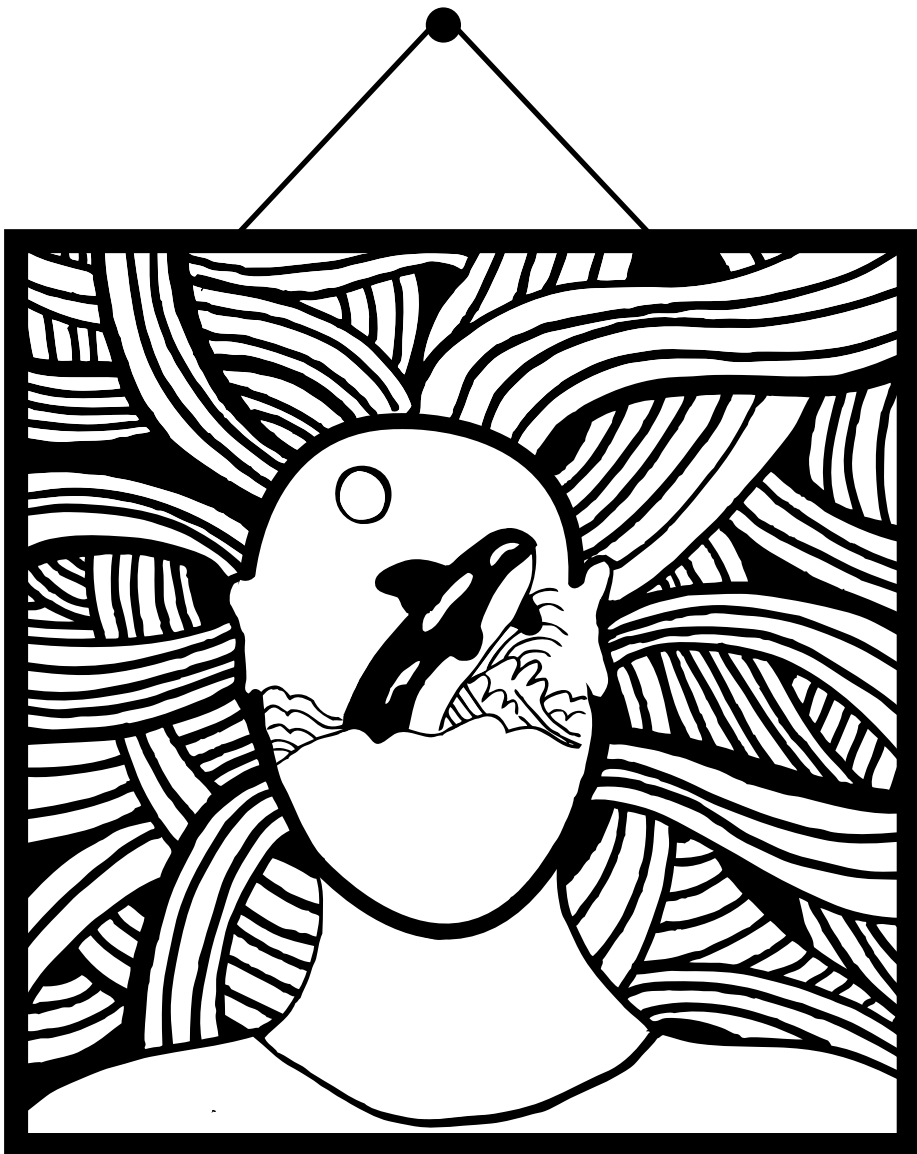
Watch the diamond of our birth-holes  
burn a seance into sand.

BECAUSE we've squeezed  
our hardened hearts  
to solid stone

& we still produce juice,







still want to love  
this world without dying  
or playing dead.

## little pleasure

Morning is an orange  
in the toe of a stocking  
light falling in small  
seeds on sand.

*It is not morning  
at all, a man says,  
see the sun wiggle  
like a loose tooth?  
That means it's noon.*

He sticks his hand in  
my pocket and a soft-  
brained bird dives  
straight into waves.

Down the shore,  
two young siblings  
wrestle, writhing  
until they buzz  
deep sugar below  
the belly button.

Shells stack into towns  
for the waves to lap up.  
My first eruption came  
when I was four years old  
rubbing against the beak  
of a stuffed penguin

then, two cousins  
removing our suits  
shyly curious about  
each other's caves.

The sea claims the castle  
into its hurried mouth.  
I bat the child away and  
he scurries down  
the shoreline like ants  
in a rainstorm.

There are many ways  
to use the gift of fingers  
three boys fly a single  
red kite in the wind.  
It moves like a Flamenco  
dancer and the boys  
peek up her skirt.

## notes on wanting

For example, I am standing on one side of a burning bridge. It has been many days since bathing, cooked food, safety — skin scoured by sun and the salt of sweat. My hunger's army of teeth. Across the bridge is a forest wide as the eye's canvas. I see a flash of human skin in the brush and run across the bridge with bare feet.

\*

When I was young I watched the girls flip plastic burgers on the play stove while I sat shirtless, young buds on my chest puffed out, pretending to be a man. I liked this dark fear, whispering forbidden into ears of mother's tulips where I asked my elementary friends to disrobe among petals to rub me secret. Now each bite of my breasts, inside: women. Always returning like bats to their summer caves, suckling me naked, like newborn rodents dangling from the gums.

\*

In this mythology I am the one-eyed cyclops air-plucking a rogue kink of hair like a harp string, picturing the brilliant abstraction if you doused your nest in blue paint and rubbed sex against canvas. Wet as a lychee. I am a banquet. I widen until a pearl spits against the wall. I snap my natural weapon, wear a necklace of tiger teeth, jaw for a hat, masculinity proud, bearskin draped over breasts. Each nipple erect: two bullets standing barefoot in snow. It is the color I choose to lay my body down in, gather it's feathers into limp wings. I press my cheek to cool sand: skin red, sky red, the blush of blood everywhere.

\*

My heart is a jackhammer in the concrete buckling below my belt. Trip setting: the clean white of your eyes, set jewels in their slick canvas. In the privacy of my own touch, I occupy every room without blushing, spread out on the floorboards. Tell me the origin story where sand burst through every window of the house, where thousands of jellyfish escape the cave, hovering suspended in a slice of sun. The film scenes project onto a boat's dismembered sail tied between trees: a mess of limbs, torso, breasts, switching from man to woman — in every shot, a flicker of light — you, the pinkest tongue, hard-wing propeller, sugar rush, you: a disappearing Moon.

**Gather Ingredients:**

**Ask Questions: Nature or Nurture?**

Grapple with questions and identities in your life, assessing whether the outcome was a product of nature or nurture. Answer the questions below and check one or both in the categories: nature or nurture.

	Nature?	Nurture?
My normal emotional state is:		
My parents taught me:		
My parents taught me:		
My parents taught me:		
Growing up I had:		
Growing up I did not have:		
I identify as [based on how you look]:		
I identify as [based on things you do]:		
I identify as [based on what you feel]:		
My hobbies are:		
When I “grew up” I wanted to be:		
I had or did not have a family of my own:		
My friends say I am:		
Sometimes I feel:		



## Gather Images: The Physical Space I Was Raised In

1. Write a list of all the things in the neighborhood AND home(s) you grew up in. Put down everything that comes to mind. Consider *food, people, animals, building appearance (inside apartment and out), smells, sounds, “the block,” the shops, the train station.*
2. Imagine you can only carry five things from your neighborhood with you wherever you go, as if they all fit in a magic backpack. What five things do you take with you (can be big things such as “*my community pool,*” or small things, “*the hat my grandpa wears.*”)
3. What were you given in life — both positive and negative? Who gave it to you?

## Final Prompt:

Using your identified nature and nurture explorations — including actions, culture, parental influences, environmental influences, and what feels “naturally” you (the things you were born with.)

*Who are you?*  
*What are you made of?*  
*What comes naturally?*  
*What was learned?*

Weave the stories together to make a complete tapestry of who you are.

Consider including what you want to release and what you want to embrace.

## after the hospital

We put records on to pull our shivering  
bodies gently awake, pulse check.

Scrape his belongings off the floor and bag  
them like bundles of limbs in black plastic.

A plum rots in the window.  
Roaches run the kitchen sink.

I stay awake counting each note of your breath,  
the ones he did not take from you.

I count until 300 until I release, allow sleep  
to climb itself over my body and lay.

\*

Mid-night you crawl into my bed,  
and for a moment it is summer again.

I dream of a forest where you are three years old  
baby teeth, tiny legs teetering between the trees

running until we fall against giant roots.  
I cradle you in the shade, light gently

speckling your burning body bubbling  
with laughter and for a moment

I taste happiness so sharply on my tongue.  
I wake to you as a woman, the plum

a pungent bruise beneath your right eye.  
I pull the dream around me like a straight jacket.

I bury us in the sand of the dream.  
I pile on the dream like the layers of a ball gown.

I tighten the dream like a corset.  
Anything that will bind.

\*

When neighbors tell me he has returned,  
the trash bags are gravestones on the curb.

The plum searches for a weak mouth to taste it's blood.  
His face becomes every face in this city, is every boy.

I comfort myself by mentally picking them off one by one  
like dying pink petals. All of the things I've never

been able to keep shepherded, parading around  
me — a bonfire, then wildfire, spreading.

## notes on edges

— *When do you feel most alive?*

Even those who do not have a nameable passion can understand the feeling of time stopping. Depending on the safety of the space, I can offer the example

— *what about orgasm?*

True, heads nod.

/ I stop being whatever I am, transmute. Simple energy. /

It's a good writing exercise — what do you become in that moment?

/ A glowing crystal ball — all knowing. /

— *Come on, you can get more interesting than that.*

/ My Grandpa's pipesmoke. The growl of midnight badger. A funk bassline pulsing below a buried coffin. Banging the walls of a mitochondrial cell — you thought I was gonna say concrete! A tin can rattling an electric solo through the string. /

— *Now we're talking.*

The first draft isn't that important. We call it shitty just to lower the stakes enough to fill the page without fear. But revising is where the magic's at, of course. Especially the removal of context to save your ass from anyone who can flip fiction to truth. There are levels of desperation in this need. Sometimes it's just to be kind. But when you write to paper because there is no one to trust, the magic trick is in coded language

— to narrate without the cold reveal. Women who miss privacy also miss fucking, understandably.

*When I make love  
I am no longer a woman.  
I can be anyone from anywhere.  
My breasts are ripe melons,  
or they disappear, sunken  
like collapsed antholes.  
I can fit myself into a vaginal cavity,  
I can expand a canon.  
Alien or angel, I'm not of this earth.*

Everyone brags about how they could make you cum — or how someone else made them cum. It is a human power we all learn, but it is also a weapon, a sword, a wand, a time machine, a teleportation device, an escape hatch. That kind of high is worth its weight in gold.

*My body manufactures its own high  
when I firmly press the button labeled heaven —  
over and over and over and over...*

Intravenous drug users learn to shoot from television and peers. It perpetuates bad habits. All are clumsy with the needle at first. Blood flow works against gravity, valves usher blood to the heart like a saloon door. Veins are muscles.

*My body — pitted against a control group.*

You want to inject in the direction of blood flow, that way it zaps a relief. If the needle goes through the vein, it's all lost. Bevel up, point down. Prevent clogs with cold water. Men don't know this. (It's like washing blood from panties.) (It's like mom taught us.)

There are many ways to talk about the feel-good. V lives outside the realm of metaphor, right down a ways, under the bridge. She proclaims out of thin air that she is bi. She says the most beautiful woman she's ever been with was named Cecelia — a white girl with blond ringlets and green eyes.

*I finger popped her, she says.  
I got on top and rode her until she came.  
We both cried.*

She looks at me softly, sincerely with a sappy close-mouthed smile, you're pretty, she says. Part of witnessing is simultaneous non-reaction and a quick search for recognition of self.

*Put it in the poem*, I say.

(My body — a shadow to run from.)

V got so thin she is almost invisible — nothing to grab onto. How many times I've passed a person on the street with the same edgelessness and seen something other than a face, scrambled. And yet, the evidence stands. Same two eyes as mine, nostrils, lips, the hard line of chin.

— Understanding — an obsession of humans.

— Love, the essence of being alive, connection,  
*understanding/transcendence from understanding?*

— Flesh: just the suitcase.

\*

Is it disembodied eyes  
moving towards me, or am I  
seeing two fireflies hovering  
atop sapling legs?

The eyes play tricks,  
sensing danger everywhere.  
I want peace to be returned,  
to make my skull a bed of moss.

Instead I implode. Wildness.  
I hold my breasts up, two kettles  
leaking rain — I must  
make sure the fields stay green  
while being careful not to drown.

— What bounds us, what fences us in, what contains? Is there anything we can experience outside of containers? By the very definition of the word, infinity has no boundaries, the entirety is definitively incomprehensible as a whole — it has no whole.

— But by concerning oneself with bodies of energy that change and shift (light), as well as those that appear anchored and solid (a doorway, for example), one can use these recognizable symbols as an entry point into grappling with the infinite and our identity in relationship to it. Argue that the sublime is, in fact, partially observable, lives actively among us and is an entity we can choose to “see.”

— Seeing in this case relies on a suspension of the logical, in favor of intertwining and often conflicting modalities such as memory, biology, chemistry and lingual narrative. Break apart our understanding of what is real between lived experience and other forms of interpretation, knowing and existing.

— Here is where the looping memory is an impersonal function of biology, but also a generator of emotion characterized by a racing heart, a turn of stomach, a sweat that beads and drops and rolls.

the abyss

*For Omotayo, who drowned herself in the Hudson River*

COPING PART ONE: THE AUTHOR MUST  
INVENT A STORY TO COMFORT HERSELF

her mother was a giant  
huffing moon

she planted a glowing kiss under soil  
and when an orange tree

grew, she plucked the body  
and let light fall through

dimpled skin      later  
the silver fin appeared

the girl threw out the old gossip  
of her body like an anchor

slipped off skin  
and swam and swam

until dusk was a purple scarf  
around her neck

until morning came  
and she was gone

~



COPING PART TWO: THE AUTHOR  
RELATES TO THE GIRL'S GHOST

Here is truth blunt as a noseless shotgun: I have, too  
brushed fingers against the lips of that quiet world.

Fantasized the smack of a city bus against limbs,  
or submerged where all sound is muffled like cotton.

But I am an adult now and can count  
the reasons to lift the morning covers,

can call on logic to push the boulder from  
the body's mossy center, for example, taste

buds, it is date night: which means being made  
rich by a good poached egg when money is low.

Another way to look at hunger: softening  
towards what might be named compassion,

all things connected but holographic, strained  
through the mind's distorted sieve to be made real.

I didn't know this when I was seventeen, and still  
sometimes, I forget how to be kind and kind enough

to myself to know that tomorrow a note may arrive,  
fly right up to the window in a bird's beak, a sign

but you came like an arrow through our  
morning, we were going to escape the city

down by the river where life is windy  
and green and sneaky and summer-sweet,

you walked right up to the abyss, let it fill  
wherever water could creep, a humped buoy,

still preserved, smooth as the skin  
of what lives naturally in the sea.

But the water tried to reject you.

The water wanted no hold of you —

it pushed you up towards

your rightful place

the sky

inside

the burdened body

the bones of once belonging

floating alone

in the grave of dirty river

I saw you, Omotayo  
and exited my shell.

I imagined  
a classroom

handing  
you a book

saying wisdom  
can come

through any body  
any vessel

even when it feels ugly  
most things,

when you brush them off  
are tarnished

swing the axe down the center,  
sinful, even

and still,

I am thirsty

still,

I can name my hunger  
in the belly of another bear

or beast                      or angel that appears as a shadow  
on the living room wall

I have failed so many times  
it would be wrong to look you in the eye —

but in this living I've come to strangely  
know that even when we fail

somehow

we never stop belonging

to this earth's rich soil  
and woods and comets and fields

I know these things  
because someone told me

and then another reminded me  
and again, again

until I could remember  
on my own until it became

a bell ringing life in my ears —  
and even when it became old news

it always sounded like  
my favorite song  
when I could sit in that strange

knowing

and open myself to the sensation  
of my very first listen

the comfort of sounding out each

individual word,

and grunt and breath

and I wish someone told you—

no, sang — that

everything

everything

is holy — you.

**Gather Ingredients:**

**Ask Questions:**

1. When I am silent and still, I would describe my inner landscape as...
2. This is what challenges my silence and inner peace:
3. One of my sweetest memories of being alone:
4. One of my most wonderful moments of being surrounded by noise:
5. To me, silence feels like:
6. To me, noise feels like:
7. If the world went silent tomorrow, I would most miss the sounds of:
8. I could do for the rest of my life without the sounds of:
9. As a young person, I thought being alone meant this:
10. As an adult, I think being alone means this:
11. When I am quiet, I notice small things such as:
12. When I am surrounded by noise, I am robbed of:
13. Consider this: silence activist Gordon Hempton says there are only eleven places in the United States that qualify, scientifically, as “silent.” He defines silence not as absence of all noise, but the absence of *man made* noise. Another way he describes this is with the word, “presence.” Respond to this idea.

## Gather Images:

1. Silence grows our eyes to notice the small beauty in the world. What have you noticed?

For example: *the way light creates a garden of shadows on the wall, the V of migrating geese, rainbow in an oil spill, a stray hair stuck on a friend's nose as if a balancing acrobat, a halo of yellow around an iris...*

2. Noise! Name it all, free associate: *the kettle whistle, the elephant stomp of feet down the hall, invasive car horns...* free associate to name as many noises as you can think of that exist in your life.

## Final Prompt:

Write a poem about how silence and noise — and the gray spaces between — arrive in your life. Here are some questions/directions to consider as you write:

- *Where does our sacred inner stillness exist? What challenges this space?*
- *Is it possible to rewrite the internal experience to both be influenced by the outside world and for the spirit's door to be closed to a quiet place of peace?*
- *Write a prayer or meditation that incorporates elements of both noise and silence.*
- *Write about what it means to be alone.*
- *Consider the comfort of a favorite song as a joyful noise. Consider the burden of silence.*
- *Consider the peace of silence and the burden of noise.*
- *Assess your personality - does it lean towards silence or noise in its expression? Or when are you silent/when are you noisy?*

A wolf carries  
a human baby in its jaws,  
delivering her into  
my arms to be mine.  
The highway is the same  
stretch of asphalt  
from a dark window  
on any map.  
I can see crests of waves  
as they rise and break:  
a rabid dog living  
in the shallow end of sea.  
I let balloons go  
& a cart of oranges  
tumbles to clouds.  
If dreams are a kind  
of window, I am waiting  
for the world to come to me,  
slow as a yawn.  
Hello you perfect eye,  
steady frame, your patience  
for murder & kindness,  
expressionless witness,  
I am looking  
through you to myself.  
This platform is my stage.  
I call doves to shoulders,

breasts: two winking eyes,  
round pride, the weight  
of blinking fruit in my hand,  
breath on the barrier,  
proof of life, of living  
so close but not touching.  
Let me learn how  
to look without moving.  
To be so still no one  
notices my face,  
the way you offer  
a frame to the sunset  
as she insists upon sky  
saying, come, belong  
in this world, we want you  
here & says it to everyone,  
no matter who they are,  
in a language no one  
& everyone speaks.  
I want to be useful, too,  
how you are a tool  
to study the shape of loss  
as it stuffs itself into  
the tiny bodies of flies  
disguised as seeds  
in a gutted papaya,  
small planets black  
as the eyes of a deer.  
Teach me to tape  
eyes wide when I want  
to curl into myself,  
an insect trapped in amber.  
This is my test: to pull



the curtain closed  
& see straight through  
to sky, the window  
of memory standing up  
on its hind legs  
as I lay on my back,  
invisible & everything  
becomes music,  
listening to children  
& the feet of mice  
& bullets turn to rain.







the room of my life

Two gold hands sit upturned in offering:  
thumb and forefinger welded together, puddles  
of wax licking each palm, once candle

now ruined by cigarette ash, summer's ants stick  
to an abandoned honey spoon, air's smoke smells  
of shower steam, unwashed private skin and teeth.

In the guest room a rubber tree perfects its subtle  
choreography until each green spine bends back  
in unison, grabbing the simple morning light.

Stretch, discipline, the steady engine of truth  
and avoidance of truth, it's a balance, really,  
the tart brilliance of counter top lemons

and the tea kettle's clean cat call thrown crisp  
against the bedroom's criminal scene:  
clothes sucked of bodies, ransom receipts,

pill bottles huddling the dresser gossiping about  
who they'll need to fix now that winter's blown  
it's blues down the gallows of this tiny town (pop. 2).

Even a hard-skulled wind won't freeze the whale's  
tail bone, rattling floorboards with its steady slap,  
swimming below, an impermeable dark cloud

of foreignness & finances, fidelity & fertility —  
freedom, yes & sometimes secret desires, though  
mostly, will the two ever be great enough?

In the livingroom the books conspire — to what?  
A less ordinary story: to jump from window straight  
into the fight's closed fist or pick pocket for drug money

or ride a cop car as it blares its dirge, warning  
the block's boys to scatter towards shadows like roaches  
or a particular unlucky roll of dice.

I conspire, too, to join the books in pursuit of a bigger  
adventure to make it all worth life's heavy weight  
and though I'm not sure how the thing looks, I know

what the books don't: that the world out there is a cuss  
word heating itself in the mouth of a giant and I don't want  
to be an accomplice hiding out in the shell of my skin,

but I don't want to raise the flag that angers the bull,  
red-tailed, don't want to be caught when the guns  
go off, a dancing jester in the line of fire.

There is terror everywhere in the news that I don't want  
to write about or think about because today she is free.  
Leaves are dying, sky is gray but they said she walked out  
through the barbed wire, each gate buzzing, sounding like a song  
this morning, the sun slapped her ass with its glowing palm,  
*go on, girl*, they said she was presumed innocent, they said  
here are your clothes and your freedom back, just like that.  
I have not asked her if I can write about her, have not  
talked to the Sammie of back-in-the-world yet, have not  
gotten to say: there are so many like you and yet no one  
like you who can shatter a room with laughter, jokes  
I unexpectedly upturned in my pocket far from where you ate,  
slept, shat high-necked as a peacock, flames rising in your cheeks  
when speaking of love, the ember at the end of your poking,  
a gentle kick that tended our warmth, never hanging up  
your burdens to ring out rain. It is wrong to say I miss you  
in here but I do. Your advice I smuggled out as my own, outside.  
I'm about-about what's outside, about that eternal-outside  
that spreads and spreads where the son who slept on your chest  
returns two years older to the breast's patient nest and the wife's  
arms are placed back to shoulders, where your limbs dance  
unencumbered, released of one thousand eyes peeling away,  
sticking their sickness to a new target, likely just as impoverished  
by kindness, growing tougher but never brick, never building  
a wall to climb. Now, who stands at the gate? Do the parents  
come back? Do friends return with unsent letters?  
Who will have the strength to say *I'm sorry for my wrongs*,  
who will come for you blowing around town in this new airy  
skin, trying back on the coat of grocery store and post office,  
comforter and email address, chopping strawberries with a sharp  
knife that you can glide across knuckles to feel the edge,  
that space you learned to carve tool-less and pray your body into,  
I want it all to come fast for you. To press the pause button  
and roll life back to before poison slid through the streets



like a boa constrictor carrying the horrible untruths  
they shimmied like a pipe all the way to the drinkless bottom.  
Did they know about the twin who came too tiny and alien  
from the stress of your isolation? Her pink body so small,  
the size of your palm. I saw her in the photograph  
and it sounds selfish to say I think her spirit slid  
into my skin to haunt from a place inside I cannot locate  
to quiet her cries when our women say,

*did you hear about Sammie, it's so great*

that's great            that's great

so great

great

and my friends say

how great

that's great            great

so great

And I know, yes, it is great, Sammie, but I also know time  
does not regenerate, does not come back like baby teeth  
falling to make room for a larger purpose, the years leave  
gaps of shame, they leap into brush like startled deer,  
slipping from grip like a fish darting away away away,  
always away. But I am here, and when you call  
I will pick up the phone and say hello, say how are you  
because we are both civilians in clothes of our choosing,  
equal sisters under the eyes of the sky and the law  
and the turtles and bees and beauty waiting for you  
and in the face of this inside-out world, I worry the lens  
is too sticky with tar or unstoppable fur will grow over  
every surface, that seeing will be stained forever,  
that terrible word *forever*, cousin to *freedom*, its body  
always shapeshifting, squatting on haunches in the bathtub,  
then hanging off the ceiling, but I know you will keep  
looking, keep looking beyond the threshold of my eyes,  
I cannot forget you are Sammie, which is how you survived.



The boy's head is in his hands for two hours straight. He is small for fourteen with birdlike bones. They say watching a man cry will crush you and though you've always wanted to disagree on principle, you still find it mostly to be true. Some messages are so ancient they feel unstoppable, they feel claimed. It will take centuries to rename them and by then you'll be dead.

The boy's pain falls out of his face in translucent pebbles decorating his young cheeks. You think he'll be okay because he has at least learned to cry. You worry he won't be okay because who is paying attention besides you. And who are you? You are a waste of perfectly good hands on a pen and paper. You aren't anybody to help anyone. You haven't even done your taxes. But it isn't about you, it's been said before and by those who love you too much to sugar-lie, so you know this is also true.

There isn't much to say but put your face close enough to his that he can feel your warmth even when buried in the cradle of his arms. You blow noses in tandem. The air has suddenly become so cold again breath suspends like a cartoon cloud. You ask about his cool sneaks. When he says his chest is in knots because of the stress, you wonder how you got out of bed this morning. What tips can you give about how to cope with the disturbing force of being so clearly, so undeniably among the living? There have been many days you could not imagine why the world loved the sun. You don't want to tell him night was easier — but it was. You were not seen. You could cry and cry.

*one.*

What is the difference between the ownership of desire (rubbed gold) and being nineteen, wearing the robe of an older lover (before the word meant anything of value)? An unpracticed seduction, you were flipped like a cheap card trick. *Which hand?* He'd laugh with the weed way back in his throat, joking his penis was so big it could block out the sun, lining up the powder in a white picket fence. The bedroom suspended above a school house where children filled the streets with their song — roses blossoming from where laughter arrived, pink lips counting out the blackened gum spots on the paved playground.

Line one: He missed his daughter. Line two: We understand each other. 6am bathed in the television's halo, a woman always under someone's violence — her skin a raw hide hung on a wall, a shovel breaking dirt, a burial. In his bathroom mirror, I'd wipe the shower-breath from the surface to see who I'd become. Ass still flat as the sidewalk, disappointed that I hadn't grown a clap-able body through this choreographed movement, trying to swim beneath the minefield. Then, reassembling from dust. Disconnecting the phone line, a modern potion for disappearing.

What happens when you've broken the body? Crumbled it into wet ether. Is it still a temple to be swept? Decomposing? Or has it expanded — is it everywhere? Will a lost key fit the gate? Is it rusted? Forgive my kingdom of bore, too normal to be another warning the girls haven't heard a million times when they argue their ass cheeks are a feminist statement, a bouncing grin posing in undies on the Internet. I keep my trap shut in fear of shame or shaming, but it is a question to pose: becoming stamped with sores and/or a heart that hangs out of its socket in tangled up cords? *Empowerment* is a buzzword crowning a plastic headband. Is it a choice to look for love in a backhand, in a brain flushed down the toilet, in nipples blinking in place of eyes?

Maybe for some.

I fight the urge to be a cynic, fluff up the parts I've let gone limp. Cultivate compassion, shrugging off the slick rain coat of moral outrage. The goal is transparent, I have my own anger, guilt, maggots nuzzling around inside waiting for their turn to thrive, but I have no reason to be complaining, to let the organisms multiply, to wear this old dress of self pity I keep stashed in the attic for the satisfaction of being washed in deep blue.

No, the memory doesn't cement my feet to concrete floors. I am not the girl I was then or the girls of today, calling each other the latest slang for hoe as a term of aggressive endearment bubbling its constant lava between the lines of a poem (a good poem, at that.) I have something precious called perspective, I can see from my high mountain, chopper, my decorated throne. Translated, I have fingers and the contraband of pens, scissors. I can draw a window, cut one out of paper, better yet I can lift the glass and step right out. What does that make me? An escapee? No, a key holder choosing the long route.

*two.*

D appeared again. It has been at least a year since this happened, years perhaps. We were back together, in the parallel life of the sleeping world, and he admitted to cheating by way of a fisting by B, a once-lover of mine. I was angry, I slapped and punched him, though the blows were too weak to effect damage — then softened, confused by compassion and it's twin devil anger when he told me B raped him fifteen times before we met.

It seemed to be an explanation for his behavior, why he wanted to share the dark sexual experiences with me, too, taking me to a scat club, where guests were able to pick out a log of stranger's feces to have their way with, though D brought B's as his private trophy toy. The environment was sterile, clinical, rendered in sterling silver — the constant cleaning of shit off doctor's office tables. I was shocked at the hundreds of people milling the space, the room open and exposed. D asked me to watch him masturbate, his hand coated. In an effort to be supportive, I put a bit in my mouth, mimicking fellatio, and vomited repeatedly, then sobbed.

I promised myself to never recount this aloud. I trick myself into believing it says something about D, instead of myself. You know, how people's energy can transmogrify into secret messages not of this plane (isn't that a tenant of metaphysics or something?) Instead, I must look at my own disturbances, where this violence

grows its roots. I am less upset than curious. Perhaps this means I am growing a tolerance to perversity. Perhaps I've been looking too hard, or in the wrong places.

*three.*

Across the river, where the water churned fast, sign posts read, do not swim, risky waters, threat of drowning. Handwritten on birch bark, posted every fifth tree. Years ago I knew the child that drowned there. An albino boy with skin so white it nearly hurt to look and look the way we did as children. Now, his pale body rising from the river to throw stones until they break glass. House-sized, his new frame dragging the water to my window, churning around his waist, moaning towards me in the language of another world.

*four.*

The woman had burned her own face with gasoline and a match. It seemed she had been there for many months recovering, the scarring fresh but no longer bandaged. At first I could not look, the skin reminded of ground beef, it turned the stomach the same way a plate of octopus with tentacles can appear too raw, too alive to consume. The skin looked constantly alive. I have wondered about the blank landscape of death, but this woman had really tried to die. Now death clung to her face. Hard to even think of the drooping eyes and stretched lips as having a name as common as Sharon. My mind routinely drew up the word "monster." Every time I felt both guilt and relief.

In some way once, a seed of me had really wanted to die, too. The toilet water rouged red. As the blood thinned dispersing under water, a clot, darker than the rest rose to surface. If there had been a tiny face on the mass of tissue, it wasn't seen. It was a mystery, what compelled the scoop, the quick of swallow. Later I threw it up and buried it in the backyard, picked apart and tucked between tissue in an old ring box lined with faux velvet. Whatever it was, a flake of my uterus or the beginning of a beating heart, it wasn't for me, it belonged to the earth.

*pause.*

Traumatic memories often lack a verbal mode, often coded, instead, in sensation. My skin isn't crawling. Have I invented trauma to compete? The sick line between fiction and truth. All of my grand ballroom trauma. My powdered-wig trauma. What kind

of hurt can I spit into and cultivate, grow until it claims me king of the forest, where every animal slithers from light? What kind of proof am I forging to distance myself from the one who inflicts. What kind of woman am I to need to tattoo my misery on in the shape of a third eye — what am I calling to myself? What eroticism is buried in pain?

sweet jesus

that was the girl's signature expression,  
    (though I should call her a woman, really)  
her practiced gullet opening wider  
    & wider to swallow & take & take:  
bread, eggs, the milkman in this small town bar  
    last weekend she blazed blinding as Christmas,  
    tacky & spastic  
in search of a hit of anything to feel alive.  
Look, I was being a *nice person*  
    listening to her life stories  
    I took her for straight, anyway & she was,  
    though she squeezed her breasts together  
over the table, two tiny peaches  
    shouting to be eaten, too ripe for my taste,  
*Sweet Jesus* —  
    as drink shot down to the bottom  
    of her blackout rabbit hole.  
I was thinking about you when she threw  
    her tiny body against me like paint.

Unwelcome, her hips struck slate snaking  
for gold,  
a horse breaking reigns,  
that greed  
on my neck, cheeks blurred  
with lipstick,  
covered in her cheap makeup

*assault*

I would have called it, would  
have called the cops  
if she was a man  
but so small, she was whining, shaking  
out her mane & before I could contain  
her slop & desperation,  
before I could pity the deepening  
bruise crawling her skin,

I thought of you  
as I let her hand linger for a second  
split, legs shaky, I let myself  
feel, I closed my eyes for a single moment

your fingers flexed     before I said *no*,

*no*, I said, *respect*, I said.

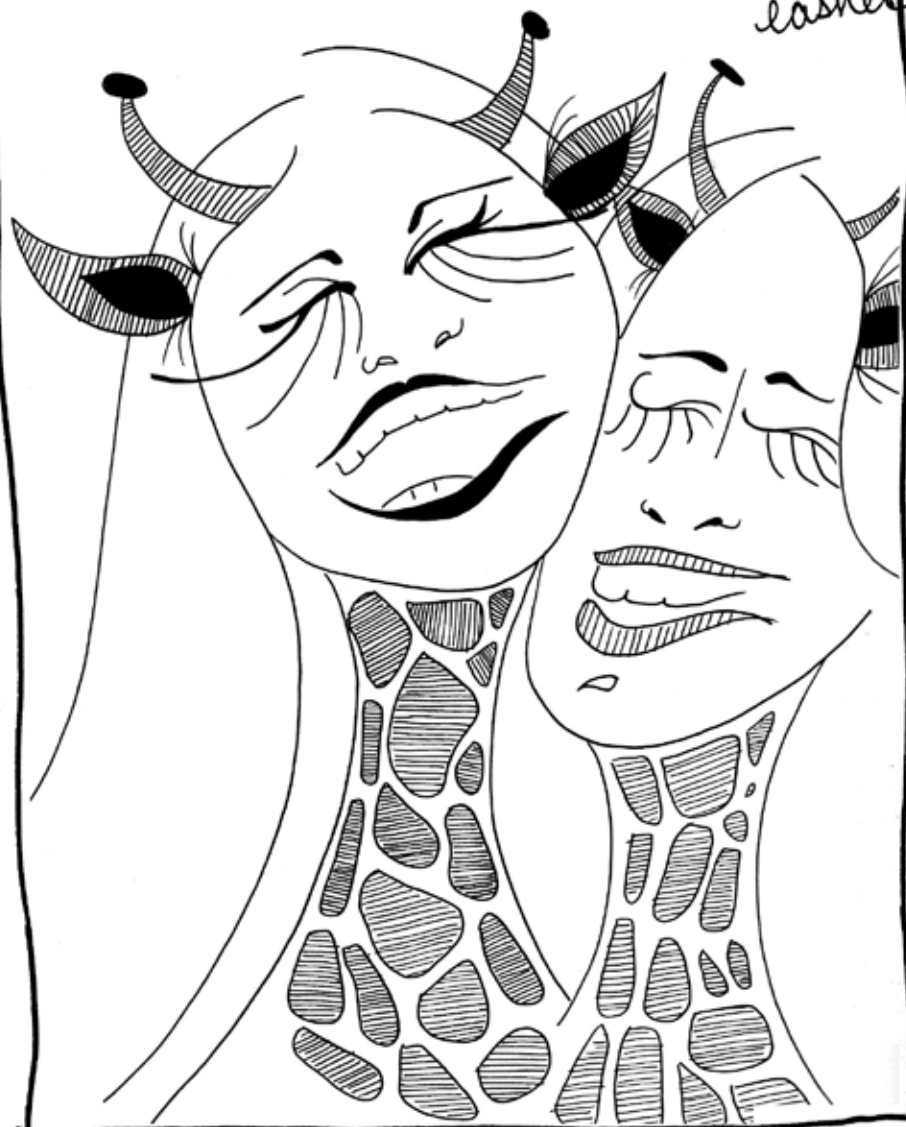
& though I didn't say it aloud:

if it is going to be  
then let it be your cave  
I wander into  
thirsty for buried light.  
Let it be an answer  
to the question you hold  
in teeth like a glass eye  
unblinking.  
Let it be this song  
I've been singing  
all over the city  
and home and everybody  
knows, *sweet Jesus*,  
how I invite you  
to haunt me, magic  
did you slip a ghost  
to her body and offer  
the tongue like caviar?  
Did you come find me  
where you knew  
we'd be spot lit alone,  
back up against cold  
concrete just to feel  
the thrill of being  
different people  
tonight on the other side  
of this beckoning  
rainbow spreading sky.  
Was it you, *sweet Jesus*,  
whipping air over & over,  
voice smooth & warmed  
for winter, or was it just  
the wind caught red-handed  
calling my name.





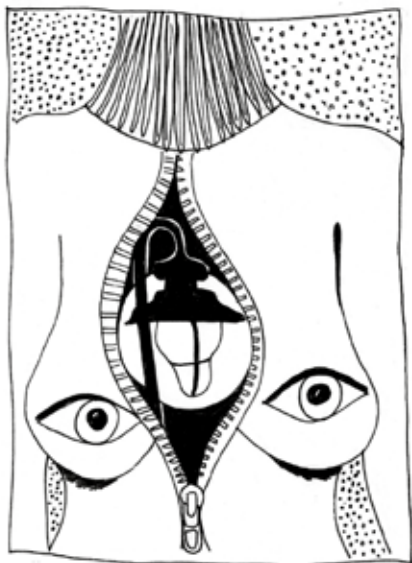
beauty is  
everywhere, distracting with  
long legs and  
lashes



MEANWHILE—

US UGLIES PLAN THE TAKEOVER





WHILE BUSY GOING  
UNNOTICED— WE ARE  
PLANTING HOLES INTO

*sky*



WE DONT PONDER TO  
AIR (WHOSE FACE  
IS BOREDOM) ABOUT



WE ARE  
TURNING  
PITY INTO  
SOMETHING  
USEFUL  
AND BY USEFUL  
*we mean*



THIS POEM IS RIGGED AND THESE WORDS ARE JEWELS



**LOOK,**  
**WE ARE**  
**LIKELY** *intercepting*  
**YOUR THOUGHTS AS**  
**YOU THINK.**

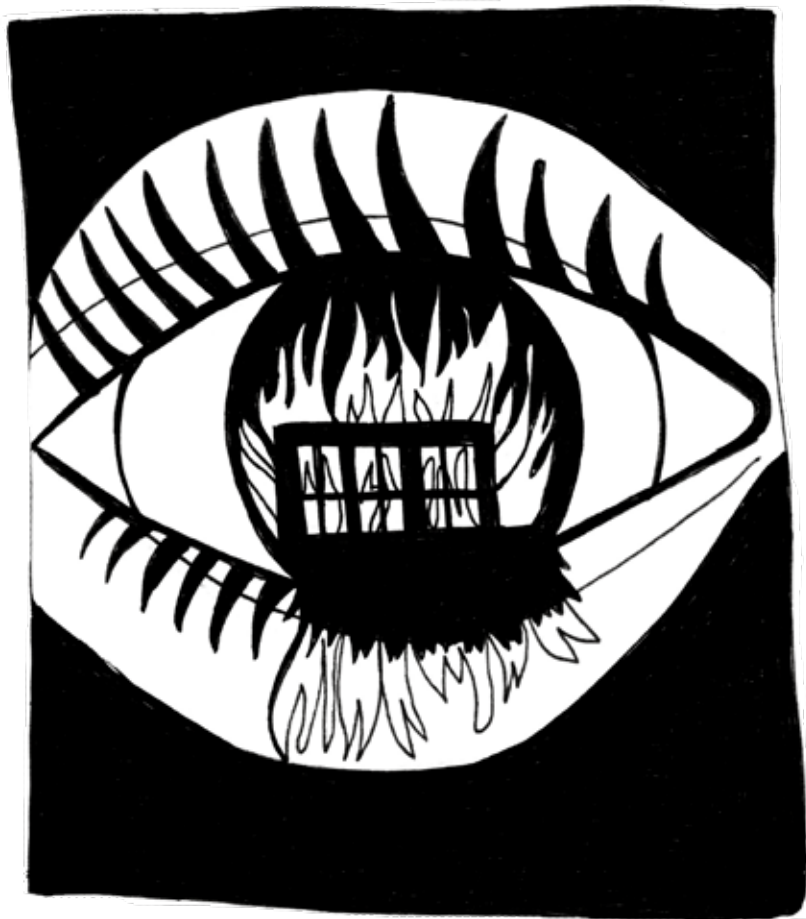
**WE ARE**  
**LIKELY**  
**ABOUT to**  
**MAKE**  
**it RAIN.**



You'll  
know us  
by our  
messy  
shirts,  
mouths full  
of stars  
falling like  
spaghetti into  
the dark  
toilet  
water  
of  
night.



**BELIEVE IT OR NOT**  
we have knowledge



**THAT THE SUN'S WARMTH**  
**IS A WARNING, THAT LIGHT**  
is an oner





AND WE'RE ALL ABOUT TO BLOW.

advice

*After Yona Harvey*

When my friend tells me he fell in love with a bird  
I snatch the red sheath from the camera's singular eye,  
check his vision for blue milk, knock them of smog.  
Through the keyhole, in shadowed mask, a heap  
of a woman sits dismantling wings & I could count  
the sins one could do to a man with those hands.  
Woman, I know you, clawing & cawing through wound.  
Are we forced into sisterhood for this warm trap we possess?  
That imminent swirl of life in brown blood?  
I love many women for this alone & some for much more  
& in the simplest soft alive, I love this woman, too,  
even the sound of her sharpening breath slicing a gash  
into night's smooth chest, yes, I've too held a knife, even  
tonight walking to the train I thought, what if a good-  
looking crooner pulls me into a bar & kisses me bone-hard?  
Puts a glass to hand, takes me home to his books & records.  
They'd be the same books & records everyone I've ever loved  
owns, because they are always the same records — but the sex  
would be obsessive & furious & I'd feel *wanted*,  
my breasts two salt licks, utilitarian, my na-na stuck  
with glitter, this man can't get enough of my purpose  
on his tongue, & when he tires of me, I'll call & get the machine  
& I'll call & get no sleep, I'll call with a finely crafted story  
to convince him to stay & when a good one finally comes along,  
I'll cling to his shadow & call it *passion*.  
But fuck all that. I feel a responsibility to clarify what I meant  
when I said, "her love for him breaks my heart."  
I wasn't being romantic, I was talking about really being broken,  
about Frida & Diego, sick of watching over & over how  
my friends mistake charisma for soul mate, dragging a storm  
cloud over head, showing it off like a bouquet of lilies.  
& it's not just women snapping matchsticks, it's all of them.

Don't they know they were made to strike, light the world on fire?  
Don't they know they are useless when wet?  
I can tell you, because I know, that there are good men  
in the world who will not sleep with your sister or whose  
work isn't such a *deep calling* they can't bear the burden  
of balancing a heart & a paintbrush, there are good women  
who will pass on a book after it's been made a home of  
& who will not be too loose nor stingy with the words *I am sorry*.  
They will be sorry sometimes, but it will be okay, because  
you will be sorry, too, sometimes & because my friend hasn't  
left bed or showered in two days, when he says, *should I stay*,  
I know that it is not a question so much as a call for a life raft  
& shit, I don't know, I'm always choosing the treacherous path  
but we claimed this year as our own, we stripped off our clothes  
& rubbed the dirt on for adornment, we know the only way  
is through the moat, we roll up our pants & wade deep  
but the thing about us he forgot is that we grew gills quietly  
when no one was looking, so who needs wings, we've got  
something better, we can disappear beneath water's disguise  
& yes, of course, I tell him to swim & swim & swim.  
Look, about the girl — because he was worried & maybe  
we *are* sisters, maybe that's just how this whole thing works  
— the pain of solitude is its own evolution towards walking upright  
on two sturdy legs & this may be loving too, I justify, setting  
down the harpoon to click open a door that leads to anywhere but here.  
Shapeless, I am not a separatist clinging to a body  
I did not ask to be born in, I am only wicked with concern.  
Yes, it is a choice to stand naked in any human form,  
lashed by rain when there are so many umbrellas to grab  
ahold of, swimming through the streets like looping seals —  
or follow the drops straight to the widening sea.

## notes on leaving

— The simile is cracking, but you aren't a dramatic damsel nor damaged vase. Swap that tired tale out for a portal. To the sun. Or a volcano. Let lava and light pour from every key hole: the eyes and ears, the nostrils and mouth. When you walk out the door, what waits on the other side? Everything.

— Witness: the hard line between your humanity and theirs. It wasn't drawn by your hands, but there it remains, a cold fact. The metal gates un-metaphored.

— Remember when you each stripped off armor and placed it cautiously in the center of the room? The breastplates touching, uninhibited of human emotion, ghosted. You mimicked the cool metal suits, you hollowed and emptied. You crawled out from snake skin and demonized no one. For a moment, everything/one held a piece of God.

— The trick was to become a fishing net, if you are to metamorphose. Water walks freely in and out, what is caught is only for the purpose of survival.

— You remember them now, suddenly, when a blackberry juices the tongue, with a skirt that hugs the hips, calculating a restaurant tip, dancing in a field where you swear UFOs may have landed because you're levitating up from your own sweat. On the screened in porch, peeling corn husks, whisking away the green silk slips down to yellow nakedness.

— You forget them when you bathe alone, deliciously alone, when you offer ache to fresh water and soak. You forget them when the velvet of the night robe brushes your thigh. You forget when your sister calls pummeling out another inside joke that splits you into an avalanche of laughter or the pause of the heart when catching a lone star in the city sky.

— By forget you mean you are ashamed at the way you do not bend your neck to pray, the way a friend does when thanking the cows and the soil and the farmers for every

meal. You bring the fork down like a shovel and ruin. You palm real money in your pocket but it is never enough. You quit things because you simply feel sad today. Every morning you press snooze twice. You do not clean the coffee pot until the next batch (or the next.) You complain about everything.

—- You've been known to seek evidence, so let it be known this remembering and forgetting alike is the proof you do not pity. This is good, the twin habits of awake and asleep. No one is too precious and exalted. No one is flattened nor crucified, no one held to magnifying glass, no one dropped to gutter. The line simply rescinds, erasing itself slowly with the trick of time, and you think of them like any old person you've come to love without condition.

— Except you cannot pick up the phone or type a note to say hello, you just popped into my mind! Except that they've taught you, perhaps for the first time, how to truly praise. Which is to say, they've taught you, finally, to be a poet.

## shapeshifting: for kathy

*"America, I offer myself to you as an alarm against  
Armageddon and a torch for liberty." — Kathy Change*

fishes, trees, poppies, the mask  
that clamps its claws to my cheeks.  
you: the sky that kept hoping —  
just once — for glitter to rain.  
most often you choose human form,  
wading in afterlife's dry dream  
pulling shrimp from hair, seahorses,  
shaking off salt in the wake  
of the ocean's escape — patient  
as i rush to butter old wounds,  
you: stunning in a gown of scars.  
i fly from your embrace back home  
where the streets are on fire, just  
like you said. i tarnish my crown,  
break bone in two clean snaps,  
stand nude in the living room —  
loosened & spineless, your ghost  
around my shoulders like a mink.  
i want to build a furnace inside,  
have no need for clothes, need no  
body at all. bodies are trouble.  
better not own one in America.

why wake up? it's a question you press  
on my sternum, coax out an answer:  
to make use of this body i'm stuck  
with as raft — to flip a pancake,  
to invent a name for love — painting  
your face onto mine so i can walk  
into the dusty saloon of my own pain.  
thank you for your offering:  
the secret world of trying on death  
to come up gasping for life,  
your fingers bringing a pen &  
pudding to my lips & a single wink:  
the hummingbird that jumps from  
the whisky cup — look! as long  
as i don't hold too tight to its  
wings, the bird sits still,  
unmoving in my hand.

**Gathering Ingredients / Necessary Destruction:**

**Identify** 1-2 bad habits, emotions or attachments you'd like to be free of.

- 1.
- 2.

**Image bank:** Write as many visual transformations you can think of.  
Here are two obvious ones to get you started:

*Caterpillar to butterfly.*  
*Bud to blooming flower.*

**Complete the following statements.** Here we bring it all to the surface, and wash it away.  
Here we create an incantation of necessary destruction and rebirth.

I bury	I destroy
I kill	I rid
I wash away	I drown
I push	I shout
I turn away	I cast out
I release	I welcome
I shine light	I dance
I sing	I honor
I hold	I cherish
I keep	I nurture
I muse	I beckon
I live	I love
I understand	I create
I build	I move
I surface	I believe



## Gathering Ingredients / Shape-Shifting Desires:

### Past:

I wanted, instead I got \_\_\_\_\_.

I wanted, instead I got \_\_\_\_\_.

I wanted, instead I got \_\_\_\_\_.

### Future:

I want to find (peace, joy, love, acceptance, etc.)

I want to find \_\_\_\_\_.

I want to find \_\_\_\_\_.

I want to find \_\_\_\_\_.

**Places where things hide:** (animals, people, Easter eggs, car keys!)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

I am looking for \_\_\_\_\_

I looked [in a place] \_\_\_\_\_

maybe it's hiding \_\_\_\_\_

I wanted, but got \_\_\_\_\_

End on an affirmation (for example: I will keep searching)

\_\_\_\_\_

### Final Prompt:

Revise a story in your life — rewrite the full narrative or just the ending or beginning. What is a story that you want to change? Use the paper to bring this new tale to life. You might do this by:

- *Using your notes to create a poem that destroys the ego and rebuilds a kinder, more open orientation to life/the story.*
- *Using your notes to create a piece directly using the language provided (the beginnings of sentences) and setting them within a context or story.*
- *Writing about something that seems impossible — what would never happen? Write yourself into that fantasy, but make it come true.*
- *Writing about the parts of yourself that need to be “destroyed” for something more beautiful to emerge. Start there.*
- *Writing about what has changed in your desires over the years — sure, sexual, but on a grander scale, in life. What has shifted in your wants and needs?*

The lights are low  
the way you like them.  
Music lulls us away from speech  
into the comfort of what  
it means to know and be known.  
I nearly laugh to think how long ago  
it seems I was heart sick  
taking to street psychics  
who'd shuttle me to basement  
apartments & brush away  
the children watching cartoons.  
In order to remove the devil,  
the one keeping me from finding love,  
I would have to pay \$300.00.  
I'd laugh but I am ashamed  
to admit that something as silly  
as the blue light of the television  
can still throw a spotlight  
on my loneliness, a landscape  
I've been trying  
to find the exit from for years.  
If this is the place I have been  
swimming towards, I am disappointed.  
You point to my chest & say  
the promiseland is here.  
I think about how houses  
without the humidity or  
human breath deteriorate faster.  
Dry out like an old hide.  
How the same breath  
can also destroy public landmarks  
such as the Sistine Chapel,  
& therefore, tourists are limited.  
I've heard small groups are allowed  
to see the Chapel early mornings  
if lucky enough to be awake

one could lay on the floor  
& view the painted ceiling  
for a full hour, imagine  
how many cracks could be counted  
in the tarnished masterpiece.  
When the song finishes,  
I am brushing my teeth  
when I jump to what I think  
at first are gun shots & the smell  
of sulfur carries the air.  
I open the small slice of bathroom  
to a sky exploding with color  
crushed candy, sea anemone, oil spill  
glorious, this moment I could  
pluck between fingers, so ripe.  
In the building facing ours  
everyone has drawn to windows.  
A father holds up his daughter to look  
all of us are looking & it is not a full hour  
but for three minutes  
we are counting the cracks in the sky  
& it is a group activity  
& when I run to the studio  
to make sure you are watching, too  
your head is hanging halfway  
out the window with the camera  
snapping a quick/crack  
quick/crack, and I know you, too,  
like me, like us all, are grasping  
trying to hold  
on to the final crescendo.

praise poem

*For the Poets at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility*

The circle's purpose is to see each other  
our unspoken rule: commit to looking.

We were born and we will die, everything  
in between is filler, debatable, for example

we have hated a woman for snatching  
our man away like morning eggs.

We stay awake at night counting  
constellations of guilt.

We both feel menstrual today  
don't talk to us.

We call our mothers for comfort  
and if they answer, tenuously

measure the distance between truth  
and the length of rain.

We read books to remember stories  
not of our own making or mess

and thank god, they are good  
and thank God they are tragic.

Tragically, we both wonder if we deserve  
anything good at all, to feel beautiful

or enjoy the pleasure of another body  
when we've screwed or screwed up

we dream of undisturbed sand  
covering each track and vanishing.

But in this room we crawl through  
the window inside, dig up from burial

the dusty banjo of memory, we play  
on childhood's climbing tree,

branches shedding crab apples  
snatched up by the deer.

We can praise the fawn for cleaning  
the lawn with her hunger.

We can name her tracks in fresh mud,  
we can call her kin, coo the name

we've crowned her when she shows  
her face in the damp morning grass.

And though some of us didn't have  
backyards or a steady bed or a tree to love

we can write a porch into the scene  
or a birdhouse or untie a hurt until

it stretches its arms out wide as the sea.

We can invent this common history,

waking up what is untouched and tender,

lit deep inside our bodies' vast night.

We can remember, it has been proven  
that we are made of stars, always vibrating,

sparking, even if it cannot be seen by  
the foolish eye and each era, there we are,

unmistakably, a presence growing larger.  
Yes, we are spinning: the entire revolving sky.





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## poetics and practice

### *Who are you?*

I'm Caitis! A person, a woman who writes poems and prose and makes drawings and engages with the world through them — primarily via teaching and facilitating in community settings. I desperately want to make an impact, though I am aware it may not always be the one intended, which is a pretty scary thing at times, which in turn leads me to hide, but in truth, I also want to be seen. This has been the rhythm of life over the past few years while writing these poems. I wonder if that tension can be felt in the text. I'm trying to be a touch more brave. I'm experimenting more than ever, and resurrecting mediums that have been important modalities for me in the past, including illustration (I hold a BFA in Communication Design from Pratt Institute.) The canvas is wide. I'm feeling more and more everyday that the boundaries are expanding.

### *Why are you a poet?*

I'm not always sure what has hooked me about the act of poetry. If I am hazarding guesses, it might be because it helps me grapple with the big questions. My questions about humanity feel largely unanswerable and very daunting. The poems allow for me to wade in the questions without the pressure to always reach for solution. I'm a hopeful cynic, after all. (Can humanity be saved? Unlikely. Should we wake up with a charge to contribute? Absolutely. How to reconcile? Just trust the impulse.) Poems help me feel connected and present to the daily excitement and privilege of being alive. Poems help me engage with others authentically and with great enthusiasm. It is an immeasurable zap to the heart when witnessing the writing of others emerge from dust — a process that extends beyond craft and into the magic and power of imagination.

*When did you decide you were a poet (and/or: do you feel comfortable calling yourself a poet, what other titles or affiliations do you prefer/feel are more accurate)?*

I'm comfortable with poet, though sometimes I do feel the weight of its history and wonder if I've earned it yet! I decided to claim it in my early twenties when I was on stages speaking poems and making chapbooks full of them and hanging out with people who also called themselves poets. I have written poems since childhood, but I also have engaged lots of art mediums over the years with various degrees of intensity — visual, music, etc. When poetry became my main vessel of expression (and for many years now), the title settled.

*What is the role of the poet today?*

This is a significant question — and truthfully, one I've avoided on some level. Yeah, right, what is the poet's role in 2016? Poetry is an anomaly in many ways, at once terribly unfashionable and terrifically cool. It has no power and tremendous power. Hold a poem up to a popular film and the flame dampens quickly in the wind for most of the populace. But to those of us who still find poetry enlivening and dangerous, I think it might be dealing with two congruous impulses: witnessing the big stuff of our era and simultaneously illuminating the mundane, a task where I find great pleasure in opposition to our bigbigbig commercially-driven world. Sometimes I think we forget what a crucial role that is. I also consider poetry to be a place that can and should complicate and deepen the tremendous conundrum of humanity, and the serious issues we are facing as a society. This isn't to say every poet should be fist-up political, but that there is a conscious engagement with our complex world. We are to be both the mirror that reflects and the mirror that fractures. We are offering different entry points, openings, and portals to the grand conversations of our time. And sometimes we are just telling stories, which we know is embedded deep in the fabric of our species existence — it's what we do, how we make sense of our existence.

*What do you see as your cultural and social role (in the poetry community and beyond)?*

As a facilitator of story in the broad sense. In a very specific way I look to my work in community as human development. It's an over-used buzz term but a big enough umbrella to encompass what it means to humanize, lift up, challenge, expect from, enjoy, learn from and commune with people, and often marginalized people. It is about offering oneself as another tool that cultivates a vibrant and intersectional society — one that values both difference and shared experiences/identities. I'm not out to make a nation of poets, but I am interested in infusing folks with a bit of the poet's sensitivity and sensibility. I operate from

a framework of dignity and significant relationship building. Those seem like important words to name.

*Talk about the process or instinct to move these poems (or your work in general) as independent entities into a body of work. How and why did this happen? Have you had this intention for a while? What encouraged and/or confounded this (or a book, in general) coming together? Was it a struggle?*

This has been a long process and has seen many different forms! For some time I thought these poems might not be good enough! But now that we are here and deciding they belong in the world, the poems are autobiographical, so in a way catalog my life in New York and beyond. But isn't that many books, the life of the author? And what makes that interesting? The common links beyond the self are, I believe, tethered to a grappling with human relationships across various identity borders, finding joy and determination in disparate spaces, finding joy and determination within the disparate space of self. How does the body define us? Where does it dissolve (does it ever? Can it?) Where is it a border and a boundary, where is it a gate or a door or a cell? How does depression manifest here in this human casing, or lust or danger? In what spaces can we truly be free? Is free a sham concept we've been sold? Is there such thing when operating within a society like ours here in the United States? In the world at large?

Also, the book is a confession, if I am to be honest. Poetry as diary feels like an immature concept, but when I consider the authors who've done such masterfully, I have to bend in praise for how they've affected me.

*Did you envision this collection as a collection or understand your process as writing specifically around a theme while the poems themselves were being written? How or how not?*

I began with nothing and sculpted from what I came to after writing freely for a few years. What was two distinct manuscripts collapsed into one to create a book that sort of unpacks and dismantles itself as it's being read, it tracks its own process as it goes. It is a truly self-conscious manuscript.

The notes have been edited with prosaic intention, but are culled directly from journal entries, themes that often arrived in the classroom and then opened up some questions in myself. The writing prompts are reframed from lesson plans that were originally used in a prison classroom, and the reader is invited into the task of participant. The prompts are driven by examining the falsehood of dichotomies and digging into where we live between two extremes, that fabulous and tricky gray area. Beautifully, everything I've written reads as

if it might have sprung from these prompts, and many of them did, I am sure, subconsciously. Poetry comics add another element that harkens back to my young years of comic and zine-making. It's almost scrapbook in flavor, the essence of it looks a lot like my personal notebooks. The whole book is a learning on the page.

*What does your title represent? How was it generated? Talk about the way you titled the book, and how your process of naming (poems, sections, etc) influences you and/or colors your work specifically.*

The title was culled from a line in the poem Greencards where I'm taunting the immigration officer. Through my poking, I still cannot dehumanize the "enemy," I cannot make him a dog, cannot let him die hungry.

*Let It Die Hungry* — The sentiment feels like the opposite of what I'm advocating in the collection, an edge the poems rub up against. I also think of it as a death of the youthful need to prove, the breaking down of walls to engage the world head on, the purposeful death of the ego to make room for a larger, more intentional engagement. (For the record, my ego has so not died. I might even be a bummer with the complete erasure of ego. But I think you get what I'm poking at.)

My favorite part of the naming story is that I brought a handful of titles to our creative writing class at Bedford Hills Correctional facility and unanimously the women picked the current title. They said it held intrigue. A certain desperation. They wanted to know what was inside the covers. I trusted their instinct.

*What formal structures or other constrictive practices (if any) do you use in the creation of your work? Have certain teachers or instructive environments, or readings/writings of other creative people (poets or others) informed the way you work/write?*

Certainly. Looking back on the trajectory of the past few years, I was experimenting with various ways of living and creating and being in conversation with the world. After running an online course platform that relied on heavy (uncomfortable) self-promotion and a near constant engagement with the Internet, I became increasingly drawn to artists who dodge the public radar. I appreciated immersing myself in interesting texts without the extra noise of the author's social media profiles. The mystery I felt as a kid resurrected, when access to artists came solely through their work and any extra goods required long hours mining the scant Internet and books and magazine interviews for crumbs and clues. It brought back the excitement inherent in being a desperate fan.

It would be unfair not to mention that my husband, who has long refused the spotlight in any shape or form, didn't push me into questioning my ever-available presence. His nudging gave me permission to write more honestly, and about scarier things. Come to find out, when the audience (or perceived audience) isn't constantly in your mind, it's amazing what natural courage can arrive on the page. Now I'm getting nervous. They are about to be in the ocean! On their own! Without swimmies!

*Let's talk a little bit about the role of poetics and creative community in social activism, in particular in what I call "Civil Rights 2.0," which has remained immediately present all around us in the time leading up to this series' publication. I'd be curious to hear some thoughts on the challenges we face in speaking and publishing across lines of race, age, privilege, social/cultural background, and sexuality within the community, vs. the dangers of remaining and producing in isolated "silos."*

I appreciate this question, and see it as an integral ongoing conversation in my creative practice and friendships. I am heartened to see the face of publishing finally changing, which is deeply encouraging. However, I might also have a skewed idea of scale given the spaces I inhabit are beautifully diverse. The stories I seek and am surrounded by are typically outside the voice that's been upheld historically. But even in my integrated world, I recognize the profound challenges in crossing cultural lines. The difficulty often stems from lack of shared language, assumptive ignorance, the tremendous pain bodies that live within us and get activated and reactivated, and of course a violent history that carries in our present (and often in sneaky ways.)

How I've seen it manifest in our artistic sphere is a fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person: fear of being offended or hurt by another's ignorance, fear of offending, fear of inauthenticity in diversifying from various parties ("don't publish me just because I fit this identity/why can't we just judge the work out of context of our being?") My personal inclination in response to this fear can be a desire to prove, to provide evidence that I'm, you know, an okay person to interact with (which ultimately, of course backfires tremendously.) All of this is real and lived out in plenty of ways that can be harmful, growthful and sometimes both at once. Our amplifying call out culture puts everyone on pins and needles, which can be a danger to real progress. The Internet exacerbates the ability to rage on a platform where effectively engaged dialogue is scant. It makes it a scary world out here to even throw oneself in the arena of identity politics.

The way I keep approaching the conversation is with a charge to learn how to be in connection authentically, how to ask questions and to be patient with the answers — and then to keep engaging through difficulty, push back and mistake-making, rather than



shutting down forever or turning away indefinitely because I feel too tender. I am navigating towards a way to confront, but also I implicate myself with integrity and intention and ethics. Though I absolutely believe in the need for safe spaces centered in shared identity (where the intention is to draw in with love), I would never argue for the concept of silos (which seems to operate under the action of pushing out), it simply isn't how I exist in any facet of my life, least of all my creative one. But that's not to say I always get it right when working with people whose identities do not mirror my own. I don't. I've had some very tough, painful conversations over the years.

At the end of the day, I argue that part of my interest and pedagogy in this work is to complicate what we name as good and bad in human beings, and in turn, ourselves, our friends, our family and especially our enemies. Our systems rely on these polarized concepts and narratives to fuel inhumane practices and institutions. There is a bravery in opening yourself to the experiences and voice of others. I don't find many well-functioning models in our society that encourage us to see ourselves deeply, compassionately in the "other." But I have faith and hope that art might carve out a way to show the rest of the world how to do it right.



## about the author

Caitis Meissner's previous book, *The Letter All Your Friends Have Written You*, was co-written with Tishon Woolcock (2012, Well&Often.) Her work has been awarded first place prizes from the Pan-African Literary Forum's OneWorld Fellowship, the Jan-Ai Scholarship Fund and City College's The Jerome Lowell DeJur Prize in Poetry. Caitis's poems are published in numerous journals and anthologies including *Drunken Boat*, *The Literary Review*, *Split This Rock Poem of the Week*, *Adroit*, *Public Pool*, *The Feminist Wire* and *The Offing*. In 2010 her album, *the wolf & me*, was released to accolades on platforms such as Okayplayer. "Fresh, honest and loving," Erykah Badu called Caitis' blend of poetry and music, naming her "a delicate heart like mine."

For over 15 years, Caitis has facilitated innovative arts programs and co-created across a wide spectrum of organizations and communities, with a special focus on spaces of incarceration, women and youth. She currently serves as Writer-in-Residence at Bronx Academy of Letters where she is piloting a creative writing exchange between free and incarcerated young people, and is part-time faculty at CUNY and The New School University. She is an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at The City College of New York.

# WHY PRINT / DOCUMENT?

*The Operating System uses the language “print document” to differentiate from the book-object as part of our mission to distinguish the act of documentation-in-book-FORM from the act of publishing as a backwards facing replication of the book’s agentive \*role\* as it may have appeared the last several centuries of its history. Ultimately, I approach the book as TECHNOLOGY: one of a variety of printed documents (in this case bound) that humans have invented and in turn used to archive and disseminate ideas, beliefs, stories, and other evidence of production.*

*Ownership and use of printing presses and access to (or restriction of) printed materials has long been a site of struggle, related in many ways to revolutionary activity and the fight for civil rights and free speech all over the world. While (in many countries) the contemporary quotidian landscape has indeed drastically shifted in its access to platforms for sharing information and in the widespread ability to “publish” digitally, even with extremely limited resources, the importance of publication on physical media has not diminished. In fact, this may be the most critical time in recent history for activist groups, artists, and others to insist upon learning, establishing, and encouraging personal and community documentation practices. Hear me out.*

*With The OS’s print endeavors I wanted to open up a conversation about this: the ultimately radical, transgressive act of creating PRINT /DOCUMENTATION in the digital age. It’s a question of the archive, and of history: who gets to tell the story, and what evidence of our life, our behaviors, our experiences are we leaving behind? We can know little to nothing about the future into which we’re leaving an unprecedentedly digital document trail — but we can be assured that publications, government agencies, museums, schools, and other institutional powers that be will continue to leave BOTH a digital and print version of their production for the official record. Will we?*

*As a (rogue) anthropologist and long time academic, I can easy pull up many accounts about how lives, behaviors, experiences — how THE STORY of a time or place — was pieced together using the deep study of correspondence, notebooks, and other physical documents which are no longer the norm in many lives and practices. As we move our creative behaviors towards digital note taking, and even audio and video, what can we predict about future technology that is in any way assuring that our stories will be accurately told – or told at all?*

*As a creative practitioner, the stories, journals, and working notes of other creative practitioners have been enormously important to me. And yet so many creative people of this era no longer put together physical documents of their work – no longer have physical archives of their writing or notebooks, typed from the first draft to the last, on computers. Even visual artists often no longer have non-digital slides and portfolios. How will we leave these things for the record?*

*How will we say WE WERE HERE, WE EXISTED, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY?*

- Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, Founder/Managing Editor,  
THE OPERATING SYSTEM, Brooklyn NY 2016

# THE OPERATING SYSTEM IS A QUESTION, NOT AN ANSWER.

*THIS is not a fixed entity.*

*The OS is an ongoing experiment in resilient creative practice which necessarily morphs as its conditions and collaborators change. It is not a magazine, a website, or a press, but rather an ongoing dialogue ABOUT the act of publishing on and offline: it is an exercise in the use and design of both of these things and their role in our shifting cultural landscape, explored THROUGH these things.*

*I see publication as documentation: an act of resistance, an essential community process, and a challenge to the official story / archive, and I founded the OS to exemplify my belief that people everywhere can train themselves to use self or community documentation as the lifeblood of a resilient, independent, successful creative practice.*

*The name “THE OPERATING SYSTEM” is meant to speak to an understanding of the self as a constantly evolving organism, which just like any other system needs to learn to adapt if it is to survive. Just like your computer, you need to be “updating your software” frequently, as your patterns and habits no longer serve you.*

*Our intentions above all are empowerment and unsilencing, encouraging creators of all ages and colors and genders and backgrounds and disciplines to reclaim the rights to cultural storytelling, and in so doing to the historical record of our times and lives.*

*Bob Holman once told me I was “scene agnostic” and I took this as the highest compliment: indeed, I seek work and seek to make and promote work that will endure and transcend tastes and trends, making important and asserting value rather than being told was has and has not.*

*The OS has evolved in quite a short time from an idea to a growing force for change and possibility: in a span of 5 years, from 2013-2017, we will have published more than 40 volumes from a hugely diverse group of contributors, and solicited and curated thousands of pieces online, collaborating with artists, composers, choreographers, scientists, futurists, and so many more. Online, you’ll also find partnerships with cultural organizations modelling the value of archival process documentation.*

*Beginning in 2016, our new series :: “Glossarium: Unsilenced Texts and Modern Translations”, will bring on Ariel Resnikoff, Stephen Ross, and Mona Kareem as contributing editors, and have as its first volume a dual language translation of Palestinian poet and artist Ashraf Fayadh’s “Instructions Within,” translated by Mona Kareem, which will be published later this year, with all proceeds going to support Fayadh’s ongoing case and imprisonment in Saudi Arabia.*

*There is ample room here for you to expand and grow your practice ...and your possibility. Join us.*

## TITLES IN THE PRINT: DOCUMENT COLLECTION

- Death is a Festival - Anis Shivani [2018]
- In Corpore Sano : Creative Practice and the Challenged Body [Anthology, 2017]  
Lynne DeSilva-Johnson and Jay Besemer, co-editors  
Nothing Is Wasted - Shabnam Piryaee [2017]
- To Have Been There Then / Estar Allí Entonces - Gregory Randall (trans. Margaret Randall) [2017]  
The Color She Gave Gravity - Stephanie Heit [2017]
- The Science of Things Familiar - Johnny Damm [Graphic/Poetry Hybrid, 2017]  
You Look Something - Jessica Tyner Mehta [2017]  
One More Revolution - Andrea Mazzariello [2017]
- Flower World Variations, Expanded Edition/Reissue - Jerome Rothenberg and Harold Cohen [2017]  
Animal Instinct - Nada Faris [2017]
- Return Trip / Viaje Al Regreso ; Spanish-English Dual Language Edition - Israel Dominguez,  
(trans. Margaret Randall) [2017]
- Instructions Within - Ashraf Fayadh [2016]  
Arabic-English dual language edition; Mona Kareem, translator  
Let it Die Hungry [2016] - Caitis Meissner
- A GUN SHOW [2016] - So Percussion in Collaboration with Ain Gordon and Emily Johnson  
agon [2016] - Judith Goldman
- Everybody's Automat [2016] - Mark Gurarie
- How to Survive the Coming Collapse of Civilization [2016] - Sparrow
- CHAPBOOK SERIES 2016: OF SOUND MIND  
*\*featuring the quilt drawings of Daphne Taylor*
- Improper Maps - Alex Crowley; While Listening - Alaina Ferris;  
Chords - Peter Longofono; Any Seam or Needlework - Stanford Cheung
- TEN FOUR - Poems, Translations, Variations [2015] - Jerome Rothenberg, Ariel Resnikoff, Mikhil Likht  
MARILYN [2015] - Amanda Ngoho Reavey  
CHAPBOOK SERIES 2015: OF SYSTEMS OF  
*\*featuring original cover art by Emma Steinkraus*
- Cyclorama - Davy Knittle; The Sensitive Boy Slumber Party Manifesto - Joseph Cuillier;  
Neptune Court - Anton Yakovlev; Schema - Anurak Saelow  
SAY/MIRROR [2015; 2nd edition 2016] - JP HOWARD
- Moons Of Jupiter/Tales From The Schminke Tub [plays, 2014] - Steve Danziger  
CHAPBOOK SERIES 2014: BY HAND
- Pull, A Ballad - Maryam Parhizkar; Executive Producer Chris Carter - Peter Milne Grenier;  
Spooky Action at a Distance - Gregory Crosby; Can You See that Sound - Jeff Musillo
- CHAPBOOK SERIES 2013: WOODBLOCK  
*\*featuring original prints from Kevin William Reed*
- Strange Coherence - Bill Considine;; The Sword of Things - Tony Hoffman;  
Talk About Man Proof - Lancelot Runge / John Kropa;  
An Admission as a Warning Against the Value of Our Conclusions - Alexis Quinlan

# DOC U MENT

/däkyəmənt/

First meant “instruction” or “evidence,” whether written or not.

*noun* - a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record  
*verb* - record (something) in written, photographic, or other form  
*synonyms* - paper - deed - record - writing - act - instrument

[Middle English, *precept*, from Old French, from Latin *documentum*, example, proof, from *docere*, to teach; see *dek-* in Indo-European roots.]

## Who is responsible for the manufacture of value?

Based on what supercilious ontology have we landed in a space where we vie against other creative people in vain pursuit of the fleeting credibilities of the scarcity economy, rather than freely collaborating and sharing openly with each other in ecstatic celebration of MAKING?

While we understand and acknowledge the economic pressures and fear-mongering that threatens to dominate and crush the creative impulse, we also believe that now more than ever we have the tools to relinquish agency via cooperative means, fueled by the fires of the Open Source Movement.

Looking out across the invisible vistas of that rhizomatic parallel country  
we can begin to see our community beyond constraints,  
in the place where intention meets resilient, proactive, collaborative organization.

Here is a document born of that belief, sown purely of imagination and will.  
When we document we assert. We print to make real, to reify our being there.

When we do so with mindful intention to address our process,  
to open our work to others, to create beauty in words in space, to respect and acknowledge the strength of the page we now hold physical, a thing in our hand...  
we remind ourselves that, like Dorothy: *we had the power all along, my dears.*

## THE PRINT! DOCUMENT SERIES

*is a project of*  
the trouble with bartleby

*in collaboration with*  
the operating system





*"Cait's Meissner's Let it Die Hungry is a stunningly potent archive of surviving. In poems, drawings, notes, and workbook-style experiments, Meissner generously shares her tools of becoming while simultaneously reinventing what a book of poems might be. In each of these modes it is clear: Meissner believes in the powers of seeing, testifying, and saying what is most difficult. Running through the blood of this book I hear Audre Lorde's charge: 'Your silence will not protect you.' From lyric narratives to achingly lucid prose, this book is ardor-medicine against oblivion. These poems [spill] past the heart's armor."*

— Aracelis Girmay, author of *The Black Maria*

*"Cait's Meissner writes in the tradition of Levertov and Forché. A clear-eyed witness with an intense lyric sensibility, her poems illuminate the shadows of self and society that lie outside the margins of acceptable discourse. There is no point at which she endeavors to comfort or assuage. Which is to say, Meissner is that rare poet who can simultaneously and sincerely give a damn... while also giving zero fucks."*

— John Murillo, author of *Up Jump the Boogie*

*"In this collection dedicated to the women poets of Afghanistan that concludes with a poem for the women poets at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Cait's Meissner writes with great urgency of lives and landscapes scarred by conflict and pain. But even as her rangy, associative poems take us into terrain of turmoil, her compassion for her subjects offers the possibility of reconciliation through the very recognition that poems provide."*

— David Groff, author of *Clay*

*"Cait's Meissner's Let It Die Hungry deals with the difficulty of the body, the 'human robe' (as she aptly calls it) that hinders and endangers the soul beneath. It's an intense book—at times violent and vulnerable—a dangerous but brave place for readers, filled with dreams, fantasy, nightmare, all mixed-in with stark reality. These poems are human and wise, and in the writing prompts, the reader is helped along in the struggle to better understand oneself. This is a wildly exciting debut book."*

— Bianca Stone, author of *Someone Else's Wedding Vows*

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