



CROOKED

a narrative in collage

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Introduction

Structure & Inspiration

This project was born out of a fascination with nontraditional forms of storytelling. While reading works like *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) by Claudia Rankine, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1995) by Jamaica Kincaid, and *The Beauty of The Husband* (2001) by Anne Carson, I was struck by their lack of traditional narrative frameworks. Although very different writers with different structures and styles, all of their writing blends the line between genre as well as the distinction between poetry and prose; yet, somehow they are still able to convey a story to the reader. With traditional narrative structure stripped away I was left wondering how they were able to achieve this. What is necessary to tell a story? Does a story need to be complete, or even coherent? If a writer does not adhere to a traditional narrative structure, what other structures can be used?

When I first proposed this project, my goal was to explore these alternative and experimental narrative structures by writing a series of vignettes. I discovered that this quest for narrative liberation has strong roots in modern poetry. In *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (1983), M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall discuss the development of what they believe to be the central genre of modern poetics: the modern poetic sequence. It is defined as “a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole”(9). From Whitman, Dickinson, Pound and Yeats, writers onward have been developing and defining this genre throughout the twentieth century. Writers like Rankine, Kincaid, and Carson, though not exclusively poets have been developing and exploring these same principles of narrative liberation, through both prose and verse. I would argue that Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, which she defines

as an “American Lyric” and Carson’s novels in verse could be viewed through the framework of poetic sequence.

Rosenthal and Gall describe the development of the modern poetic sequence as the result of a need felt by writers, “for an encompassing poetry, one completely involved with what our lives really mean subjectively”(10). The modern sequence fills this psychological need by combining “disparate and often powerfully opposed tonalities and energies” into one work (3). Writing about my brother’s struggle with Manic Depressive Disorder or Bipolar, I was struck by the similarities between the genre of sequence poetry and the nature of the mental illness. Bipolar is the coming together of two volatile emotional extremes in one person, and the encompassing genre of the poetic sequence was the perfect form in which to capture that emotional battle.

During the process of writing, my advisor Major Jackson introduced me to the work of Chinese American poet Arthur Sze. While writing I had become caught up in the desire to provide a comprehensive narrative, and retreat to the comfort of a more traditional framework, which was in direct contrast to the goals of my project. To help me move forward Professor Jackson assigned Sze’s poetry and asked me to emulate his style. Like Rosenthal and Gall, Sze emphasized the vitality of sequence poetry. He describes it as,

mutable, capable of shifting voices as well as location, open to a variety of rhythms and structures. I have been drawn to the poetic sequence because it enables me to develop a complexity that intensifies as well as enlarges the scope and resonance of a poem. The word ‘complexity’ is etymologically derived from ‘braiding together’: I like to braid lyric, dramatic, and narrative elements and utilize them simultaneously.(206)

Sze’s poetry is indeed a complex mixing and interweaving of images and emotions, as well as time and space. While the series of images are often so

disparate that they appear to be random, they somehow unfold together simultaneously, to form a more complex and layered whole.

It was through Sze's use of the poetic sequence and the "braiding together" of styles, images, events, and times that I came to the idea of the poetic sequence as collage. Much like a collage, the poetic sequence has the ability to take individual pieces and by combining them, create a broader picture or narrative.

Rather than use a chronological structure, I wanted the poems to fit together as if they are all happening at the same time. The scenes at the hospital are interwoven with scenes from childhood, memories that are placed in the present rather than the past. The narrator is living it all at once, so that is how the reader experiences it. Removing the chronological framework that would traditionally be seen in a prose narrative and replacing it with multiple "space-times" can be difficult for the reader. As a reader I struggled with Carson's *The Beauty of The Husband*, which offered very little narrative framework to orient oneself in the story. Sze argues that, "when a poem does not rely on overt narrative as a structure, a reader may become initially disoriented because there is no easy connection or causation. These moments of disorientation, however, may be extremely helpful"(206). The initial moments of disorientation free the reader from the confines of the expected narrative, enabling them to see the broader story. As the author, it also frees me from the responsibility of providing a totally coherent story. This project is not guided by a plot; I offer no clear explanation for why the speaker is institutionalized, and I provide no obvious resolution at the end. Instead, the narrative travels in a circle, coming back to an image of the speaker kneeling on the ground.

Themes & Craft

Due to this project's concentration on mental illness and personal relationships, the work of the Confessional poets was vital. I read work by Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton whose poem "Wanting to Die" was the inspiration for my poems, "Explaining Death"(29), "Wanting"(30), and "Waiting"(31). The challenge with writing confessional poetry dealing with mental illness is to make it relevant in an age where therapy and mood altering medications are pervasive. To help with this challenge I read several contemporary confessional works, including *And Her Soul Out Of Nothing* (1997) by Olena Kalaytiak Davis, Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* (2007), which deals with the suicide of her adult son, and Nick Flynn's *Some Ether* (2000), which is both about his mother's suicide and father's mental illness. Each of these contemporary confessional writers deal with their subject matter with grace, and a lyrical originality that make the stories unique while at the same time relatable.

Rather than simply write about my own experiences with mental illness, I wanted to explore the effects of mental illness on relationships. Having a brother who suffers from Bipolar disorder afforded me the chance to look at mental illness from several different perspectives, both as someone who suffers from it and as someone who watches a loved one suffer from it. This use of differing perspectives offers multiple points of entry into the narrative, enabling the reader to relate at different levels.

When writing in the vein of Confessional poets, there is a certain level of self-indulgence. I poke fun at this and at myself as a writer for engaging in what has been criticized as navel gazing. In my surreal poem "Navel Gazing"(47), the speaker peels away the skin from her stomach to literally gaze at her intestines. While this poem is certainly in recognition of the critique against confessional poetry, it also addresses the compulsive, almost

obsessive desire for self-reflection that defines our modern age. Rosenthal and Gall describe an intensity and energy that compels, “poetry of psychological pressure” (353). Though it has been decades since the height of Confessional poetry, it is still popular, viable and relevant due to this continued energy of psychological pressure.

Jack Spicer’s “Psychoanalysis: An Elegy” served as the model for the series I included, “Psychiatrist’s Notes”. In Spicer’s poem, the voice of psychiatrist repeatedly asks, “What are you thinking?” I used Spicer’s question, answer format in my own series to highlight the contrast between the straightforward questions and the complex and layered answers of the poem’s speaker. While the questions are literal, based on questions that the psychiatrist actually asked me, the answers rely heavily on metaphors. This juxtaposition between question and answer served to highlight the inability of mental illness to be understood through the confines of literal language alone.

One of the benefits of using an experimental narrative structure was my ability to play with different styles of writing. A key element of collage is the mixing of mediums; thus, my sequence mixes several different styles. Some of the pieces are traditional poems, in that they use line breaks and employ a certain level of musicality. The series of poems titled “Fragments” are a combination between Arthur Sze’s disparate use of imagery and Nick Flynn’s use of incomplete fragments of narrative in “Seven Fragments (found inside my father)” (38). In these poems, which rely completely on imagery, I was really able to play with the language. Each word, metaphor, and simile was chosen with purpose to express the images.

I made the choice to write many pieces as prose poems; however, I didn’t want the prose poems to be paragraphs that could have been stripped from a short story. I read two collections of prose poetry, *Great American*

Prose Poems: From Poe to Present (2003) and *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice* (2010), which included essays on prose poetry as a genre. Many of the essays struggled with the same problem of defining the prose poem, navigating in the murky space between prose and verse. In one such essay Maurice Kilwein Guevare writes, “I had the experience of feeling that the narrative, sequential aspects were weed-like, choking out the lyrical and poetic”(80). I too found my so-called prose poems weighted down, reading more like paragraphs than poems. In these instances I made a conscious effort to return to the lyric. Without an obvious plot to guide the reader, the prose poems had to rely on imagery and figurative language to create a lasting, unique image. I attempted to use both metaphor and simile in my prose poems in order to show readers the story, rather than telling them through prose.

At the same time, I wanted to utilize elements of prose. In many ways the tone of the piece as a whole is one of melancholy, and emotional apathy. The speaker is trapped in the barren landscape of depression while at the same time being locked in the physically stripped down and sterile environment of a psychiatric ward. She has become detached emotionally, unable to recognize beauty. In “Enjambment”(44), I describe a Mary Oliver poem suffocating within the environment of the hospital; in the same way, I felt that straight verse would be weighted down by the tone I was trying to convey. Instead I frequently used stripped down, prosaic language in place of more lyrical language, as I did in the prose piece “Depressive”(19) where I chose to use short, declarative sentences, and repetition to convey a sense of complete detachment and despondence. Part of my use of prose was sonic. Rhythmically the stripped down prose has a heaviness, and monotonous sound. I explored this sonic quality to the extreme in “Journal, August 18”(28), which is the tedious, monotonous repetition of the phrase “This too shall pass.”

Early on in the project Professor Jackson and I discussed using a type of epigraph at the beginning of each chapter. I went through several manifestations of this before settling on gardening tips. I had already written “My Mother’s Garden”(14), in which the speaker’s mother comes to the ER with a red rose, and the speaker recalls working in the garden several months earlier. The scene depicts the two women, kneeling side by side in the dirt, while the mother bestows her knowledge about plants onto her daughter. Gardening becomes both a metaphorical and literal grounding force, bringing the story back to the soil.

Gardening also becomes an important tool in dealing with the relationship between mother and child. In “Waiting”(31) I use the image of seeds to describe the speaker overdosing on pills, an act of ultimate betrayal to her mother, the gardener. While she can do everything right, her children both seem to be withering under the weight of mental illness; thus, the mother’s gardening tips on how to successfully plant, nurture, and grow a garden are put in contrast to the complexity of nurturing her own children.

At the beginning of this project I stated that, “my task as an author will be to experiment with my writing style while at the same time conveying a coherent story to my audience”. I have certainly had a good time experimenting with my writing, utilizing different styles, and delving into the genre of the prose poem, but it is yet to be seen if I have successfully left my audience with a story. My hope is that through each individual poem the reader is able to glimpse a moment in time, a fragment of the story, and that at the end of the sequence those fragments will come together as a whole.

for Catherine Rae

I

*Deadhead roses by cutting spent blooms
back to the first set of five leaves.
Cut at an angle just above the junction.*

My Mother's Garden

I think of the sinners in Dante's seventh circle, entombed in the bodies of trees, harpies ripping at their brittle limbs, shitting on their faces. Left without mouths, they have no voices begging to explain. Their sins against God, mine against my mother.

My tongue thick and black. The charcoal sinks into the gums, leaving my mouth dry and gritty like after a hot day of working in the dirt. Only months before we spent hours in the garden, kneeling beside one another. Bent close to the soil, she tells me the names and preferences of each plant. *The peonies are fickle and need light. Don't plant them too deep. But the Lady's Mantle can be left to itself. Trim the lilacs every season or they will lose shape.*

She walks in holding only a single red rose, wrapped loosely in clear plastic foil and tied with a cheap, curled ribbon. A gas station rose, the kind kept in buckets by the register, the fleshy petal tips curling brown. How strange for her, whose own garden is a tangled knot of speedwell, peonies, foxglove, beebalm, snapdragon, bugbane, evening primrose and the sunflowers she planted for me years ago. The only roses she keeps, a neglected bush by the stonewall, where I used to leave scribbled notes for summer spirits that lived in the small spaces there.

She places it on my bed, where my arms are folded over the crisp hospital white blanket. Folded arms to hide the neat little lines of raised flesh, taut and pink. I scrawled an epitaph along my arms, thighs, ribs. I wrote it deep into my flesh, never meaning for her to read it. Sacrilege to deface flesh she kissed, rubbed with calamine, Vaseline, even honey.

Psychiatrist's Notes (The Way)

How did you end up here?

I was walking home and I must have gotten lost somewhere between here and there. I remember the dirt road, trees bent in worship of the ground, leaves falling like droplets of fire.

How did you end up here?

I was supposed to be born with brown eyes but things don't always work out. I have these ones now, but I'm not sure they work right. I can't find my face in the mirror.

How did you end up here?

The librarian showed me the Plath manuscripts. Did you know she went to Smith too? And for a moment I thought I was Lady Lazarus, though not so good at art

or dying.

You haven't answered the question.

I would die for the epitaph.

Fragments

I sleep better when rain hurls
down fistfuls of gravel on a tin roof,
knowing that in some kitchen
she held her hair back and stooped
to light a Marlboro at a blue spark
of a gas stovetop. A dream
catcher snags missing memories

of watching the towers fall over
and over on TV, replacing them
with glass beads and pills. I
remember black water opening
for my body, punching through
like a needle into paper. A nine year old
bites through her tongue, dropping petals
of blood on a playground, and I think it was me,
but my memories are all huddled under a Manzanita
tree in California amongst the sweet exhale
of red dirt and the silver scrawl of banana slugs,
waiting for my brother to count to one hundred.

Manic

One morning my brother takes his dog, gets into his car, points west and takes off for Montana. He doesn't stop to sleep. Only to fill his car and piss in gas station bathrooms while his dog lifts his leg on the crumbling sides of buildings and shits on glass pebbled pavement. He eats Fritos and drinks Coke, throwing the bottles in the back, detritus of gas station meals past. He pisses in bottles. He smokes a lot of weed and drinks a lot of beer, pouring it into empty coffee mugs, as if making it less garish. My mother calls me at school to tell me he is gone. She calls it 'manic.'

Manic. Maniac. Maniacal. He is driving, windows down. The car throbs with wind, a wild pulse. Unwashed hair grapples frantically at his throat.

The Beat Generation class reads *On The Road*. It is a week of Dean worship: *He was free Man. People aren't like that anymore. Beat. He knew what it was all about. Not giving a shit. Being on the road.* I give a presentation on the glorification of mental illness and drug addiction portrayed through the character of Dean. *Neal Cassady died alone*, I say. *Forty-one and near dead in a desert by the side of a train track. Isn't that sad?* I ask them. *But he died on the road. He was the road*, they say with longing.

The beat. The beaten down. Beat-up. Fucked-up. Fucked.

He drives 2000 miles in less than thirty hours, black tipped fingers burn a beat on the steering wheel. He licks the paper, rolls a crooked joint while knees steer.

Jumping, ticking, burning, bumping. My mother calls it 'manic.'

She is buying a ticket to fly out west, to find him, bring him home. She calls all his friends that she can remember, hoping to find him curled up on a stained basement sofa in a drunken slouch.

In high school he crashed his car on a dirt road by our house. He stumbled the last miles home, blood dripping from his face, a trail of red crumbs. Find your way back.

Isn't it sad? I ask them, to die alone by the side of a track. Imagine his white t-shirt glowing in the desert night, the flesh beneath the thin fabric going cold and still, some hungry animal approaching to stick a curious nose in the crooks of his body. His body still and silent, finally. *And don't tell me he died for the road, I warn them. Don't tell me he died for art. He was all beat and no art.*

Depressive

He beats out a rhythm. Fist against wall. The white plaster gives way, comes off in chunks to expose the wooden skeleton beneath. His knuckles bloody and raw leave smudged red kisses. Fist against wall. The steady tempo keeps me up at night. What he will do when there is no wall left?

Fist against wall. It is a pulse. It tells us he is alive. My mother sends me with made-up errands. *Go check if your brother wants lunch. Could you ask your brother if he has seen my good scissors? Maybe you should see if your brother would like to play a game of cards or chess.* I stand at the bottom of the stairs and call his name. All I need is a pulse.

He weeps at night. Howls. My mother is at his door, already knowing the way she knew when we were young and woke in the night sick, hair clinging to fevered foreheads like worried fingers. She would sit with us on the cool tile floor, wipe our mouths with damp washcloths. I want her to smother his sobs with a cloth. They keep me up at night.

His face is sharp and thin. It has lost its summer freckles. But his movements are soft and sloppy. He moves with the muffled ease of inebriation. *Go check if your brother wants dinner.* I climb the stairs, pushing the door open into the stale tinkle of beer cans and liquor bottles. Check for the rise of his chest. A pulse. It keeps me up at night.

Abilify (Aripiprazole).

Side effects may include significant weight gain.

His angles and sharp edges are smoothed over, ground down to complacent curves and layered with doughy pink flesh. His wrists look swollen with fat like those of a baby. Cherry red scars lace over the engorged, taut skin. The more bloated pulp clinging to his bones the less he is. He grows in reverse.

Lithium.

Side effects may include feeling restless or confused.

The ticking bouncing energy he once reveled in now burns and itches. He runs fingernails and razors up his legs and arms to calm them.

Clozapine.

Side effects include sedation. Do not consume alcohol.

Tranquil. Tranquility. He is a Tabula Rasa, peeling the labels from pill bottles.

He doesn't leave the house, sitting for days on the couch. He eats, he shits, he sleeps. He takes his pills. Repeat. He TiVo's reality shows on pawnshops, extreme couponing, and hoarding. I watch with him once, as a morbidly obese woman argues with the sweat stained man behind the counter over the value of a civil war pistol. *What is the plot?* I ask him.

I think of our childhood dog, who in the senility of old age would sit for hours, head swaying back and forth as if hearing a rhythm of his own.

Seroquel (Quetiapine).

Side effects may include excessive weight gain.

Strip back the fleshy layers to find the bones – sharp white.

The skeleton of his disease still holding together the meat.

There are two of you:
flesh and the madness seeping
out from the inside.

Home

The post and beam skeleton is laid bare on the inside like the great underbelly of a ship, cluttered with the vestiges of our childhoods, the wheel-less bicycles going nowhere, the old coats hiding movie stubs and crushed pennies in pockets, the slouched and crumpled looking pots of art classes past. Our lives stacked in corners like books, pages crinkled with water, dog-eared with the promise of a return, a mess of well lived in. I return to this place, slipping it on like a pair of old jeans, soft, thin, about to tear at the knees.

I was too young to remember when the addition was built. Too young to remember my brother taking one step too far, falling from an unfinished staircase. Too young to remember standing in a doorway, flecks of sawdust suspended, lingering in the square of light, as if they could hang there all day.

Scientific America

My mother reads in one of her magazines that early childhood head traumas can be linked to mental illness later in life. She tells me this casually, but I can hear the pleading in her voice. The searching. I imagine the magazine, folded open to the article, sitting on the disarray of her desk, or perhaps pinned to the wall. She reads it like a book of creation, like the Native American folk tales she read us before bed. Crow brings the day, unraveling a ball of sunlight, Coyote walks along on a hot day, asks for rain, and is given a river. She looks at it from time to time when she needs. And she does need.

Psychiatrist's Notes (Family History)

Your grandparents?

My grandmother beat breast cancer before dying of stomach cancer in a hospital bed in Los Altos. My own mother couldn't get out of bed until the strings of her children's voices pulled her up like a marionette. And she cooked us breakfast, spelling out our names in pancakes, chocolate chips for staring eyes.

And your father?

He drinks a glass of wine, or several, every night because it is good for the heart.

Your brother?

He sits in my brain, a peach pit. As a direct relative there is a 50/50 percent chance I will be pulled
under.

II

Sow sunflower seeds directly. They do not transplant well. The rule of thumb is to place the seed just below the depth of three like seeds.

The Lies I Tell

*If you are an honest girl,
as I take you to be
you'll neither laugh
nor smile
as I tickle you on the knee.*

I found the letters you hid in the downstairs cabinet. The ones he wrote you when you were young and maybe even in love or something close enough. I read them all. A man of ash if you had just told him to burn. How is it that it is you now pleading? Him tossing matches in the air?

You asked me if I had finished weeding the garden. I didn't pull them up by the roots, didn't dig my fingers down into the dirt, wiggle them out by their veins. I just pulled the tops off, knowing that in a week, you would be bent double, heavy toward the earth.

Fingers at my throat, my brother pinned me against the wall, squeezing until his face went dark, blurred round the edges as if it were a picture taken when we were kids and he stood, gap-toothed smiling, silhouetted by the sun.

Standing, swaying in a doorway I looked at you and told you I was Fine. Never been better. Right as rain. Really, I swear.

Journal, August 18

This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass.
This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass.
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This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass.
This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass.
This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall turn
to stones in my mouth. This too shall roll against my teeth.

Fragments

Our father, the pilot who spent half
his life in clouds, taught us the names:
cumulus like cauliflower, stratus like sheets
of blank paper, suspended. And on earth

the dog got mange and we wore
our bathing suits in the tub, holding
him down while he wriggled, white
eyed. But what painting did she hang
in the hallway? By morning the cherry blossoms

were snow and I was waiting
for a sidewalk to crash into
my face, hoping to swallow enough blood
to keep me warm. And when the key

broke off in the lock the men
had to remove the whole door
at the hinges, leaving a mouth in the wall,
yawning or screaming.

Explaining Death

Finally coaxed out of the stall, the horse emerges, a skeleton draped in folds of loose skin. Head hanging in the dirt, each labored breath blooms round his nostrils in a cloud of dust. I wonder if his legs will simply crumble beneath the weight of a lifeless body, like a beer can crushed beneath a boot. Or will the knees bend, dropping him into a final bow? A prayer perhaps, of the lost parishioner, who found his way back to his knees?

In reality it is a sudden shudder, the huge animal falling to his side to die amongst the dirt and shit of the paddock.

Wanting

You are drawing a bath in the other room,
touching your fingertips to the water
just for a moment,

and I am dreaming of drowning.

Waiting

Like enchanted seeds, I hold them in my palm, expecting them to sprout any second now. The story tells me I should climb into the furrowed brow of clouds. But I want to follow down to where the roots rip through the earth like frantic fingertips.

I sit on the curb in front of the quad waiting for the ambulance, my t-shirt a dark bib of vomit. The roots look for any crack in the pavement.

Psychiatrist's Notes (The Numbers)

How many did you take?

Two hands can hold so much.

How many did you take?

The farmer says, *the only things that will grow in this soil are rocks*, so my father pays us 25 cents for each rock we pick up. We fill our hands, holding our t-shirts out to make baskets. My brother finds a pale, round fist of a stone, wraps it in an old rag, taps it with a hammer until we hear the crack. Inside there are broken fingers of crystal
and we make fifty bucks

How many?

I would have made sixty-two dollars and fifty cents.

How many?

Enough to fall apart
and come back again.

*In Response to the Psychiatrist Asking
Why I Didn't Leave a Note*

I wrote about Sartre's lazy eye and the existential crisis I found in the restroom at Port Authority. I wrote about a dog, a jumbled mess of bones and matted fur, stretched out in a scrap of sunlight and about the milkweed exploding white, sticking to my fingers and pant legs. I wrote a postcard that I never intended to send and I wrote *Failure* across my ribcage, expecting to find bone beneath the skin. I wrote about watching the Perseids meteor shower from the kitchen window, scrubbing slick oil from a pan. About the Banana slugs dissolving into a pink sludge, my brother standing over them, tossing fistfuls of salt into the air. I wrote the assigned essay on Hemingway, carefully stapling the pages, arranging them in a neat stack on the desk.

And it isn't that she didn't love me

enough. My childhood was busy with being loved. Her affection stuck to my skin, remnants of kisses. And isn't it so like a child, to ask everything – why sunflowers faces follow the day, why fireflies toss sparks into the summer night, why a dog lies heaving, dying under a kitchen table -- but never thinks to ask why they are given quite so much?

Guess who loves you? She asks.

You?

She pauses, looking up toward the ceiling as if thinking over a very difficult question.

Hmmm. Maybe. I haven't quite decided yet.

And I play along because we both know it is a game.

It left the skin a little too soft. Perhaps, the shade of kisses, the stain of whispered affections, left the skin too easily torn, ripped. Cut open.

I find a page torn from an old notebook.

I am so loved that I can't even sleep at night.

It is in my handwriting.

Psychiatrist's Notes (Motivation)

Do you want to get better?

I want to return to the winter beach, where we made a castle of bone bleached driftwood, huddled beneath the patchwork roof, breathing into our cupped hands, raw with salt and cold.

Do you want to get better?

I want to lie in bed with a bearded man, conjugating French verbs, taking a drag from the joint, returning it to his lips. I want to forget my name and give myself a new one, picking it from the pages of *The New Yorker*.

Do you want to get better?

I want to scrub the filth from my body, like the grease from an iron skillet. I want to shed my skin, an exoskeleton, the transparent imprint of my life. I want to throw it off, toss it on the floor like dirty laundry.

You have to want it.

III

Water lilies are happiest in quiet water, sending roots into the mud at the bottom of the pond or pool. Planted deep or shallow they will produce stems to suit the depth.

This Weather

I am trying to find beauty in the heap of man, whose life has deposited him on the strip of grass by the 1-89 off ramp. I remember a dead cat rotting by the bus stop and how I thought for a moment the white grip of jawbone was porcelain. My mother makes me roll down the window at the stop-light and he scuttles forward, gripping the door like a lover at a windowsill, the grey strings of his hat as unraveled as the mind underneath. And my mother believes she sees her son. Leaning across me she hands him a ten and I watch their fingers touch, come apart again. *Thanks. Looks like it's going to be rain tonight.* And it does rain. And I don't bother to shut the window, waking the next morning to find white curtains wrinkled and stained.

When

A thirteen year old girl sitting in a movie theater next to a boy. Not just any boy but James McCausland, the boy with the best smile, best hair, best lean. He puts his hand up her skirt and when his eager fingers fumble at the elastic edge she doesn't stop him. Doesn't know when to say when.

Is it the same girl, now slumped next to a boy on a worn out sofa? She peels the soggy label from a beer bottle while he moves closer to her, long gangly limbs devouring the space between. He smells hoppy and sweaty, his legs propped up on the coffee table amongst the littered remains of Bud-Light, a hole in his sock, a big toe luridly protruding. The tacky warmth of his breath touches her face as he discusses some movie she hasn't seen or even wants to see. His fingers move to the back of her neck, tracing invisible words, her skin prickling. She knows there is dirt under his fingernails, black crescents of filth. He turns his body to face her. *Want to go to the bedroom?* The question hits her, another touch of his breath. *Blonde on Blonde* finished, the needle drags over the black surface, emitting a static moan from the speakers, reaching up her spine. She knows it is bad for the record.

Sure.

According to the Intake Nurse

You can't always listen to the things you tell yourself,

she advises me, rummaging for a vein in my already puckered arm, her eyebrows penciled on gashes of black.

I am too tired to explain that it is perpetually 5 o'clock on a humid summer night and all that is left is the staccato thump of June Bugs hurling their hard emerald bodies against the idea of light, noseums seeping through the sieve of a screen door, flitting invisible about my head, whispering nothing but vowels, leaving behind constellations of red freckles on my flesh.

Ward B

God Save Us Al. A previous patient has carved the words into the cheap wooden headboard, not really a headboard at all, just a piece of wood drilled to the wall, the bed not really a bed, thick straps dangling from the plastic frame. The letters are sharp, desperate lines. Had the carver not noticed his mistake? Or perhaps lacked the will to scratch in that last letter? Maybe a plea from a man named Al?

God Save Us,

Sincerely Al.

Mis Hijas

We are content to waste away, decay between these white walls. *Dying is the only thing I am good at*, Ramiro tells me, his thick accent making the proclamation sound wise and old. He calls all the girls on the ward *mis hijas*, pulling it out slowly, his tongue exploring the crevices of the syllables, of us.

Hijassss. A hiss, a wink when the nurses aren't looking to let us in on the jest. *I'm real good at dying*. The yellowing of his eyes and dark skin testify, a hint at the corrosion beneath. I speculate on the function of his long, pointed pinky nail, cracked and discolored. I wonder if he has real daughters or granddaughters.

I'm real good at dying. It is that our decay is being witnessed that makes the pieces falling off tragic. Turn away and our deaths would be gracefully inevitable like the leaves falling from a tree.

Fall starts like fire,
one branch catches alight first,
burns red against green.

Jackson Ryder Jones

I think it is the name of a rock star, not a schizophrenic who paces the hallways in a bathrobe and the shuffled silence of slippers. His matted hair hangs in clumps down to his shoulders. The nurses on the ward all know him and laugh obligingly as he teases and flirts with them. He is a regular, a man leaning his life against the bar at 3 o'clock on a Tuesday.

Worked for NASA, he tells me, programming algorithms. But that was before when he was well. *I just can't seem to stay well*, he explains. His bathrobe perpetually falls open, revealing a yawning expanse of white blue skin and I worry that he will flash me. The middle aged woman down the hall hissed *Slut* at me like she knew something, and threw open her robe, exposing breasts like shriveled pears. But Jackson Ryder Jones does not flash me, just the blue skin stretched over a jagged dash of clavicle. A nurse takes a razor, saws chunks from his hair, makes him shower, peeling the reek of insanity and homelessness from his skin.

I just can't stay well. But what is a pretty young thing like you doing here?

I tell him that I don't know.

Well you got to stay away. You are too young to be Crooked. Promise me something? Promise you wont fall in love with me.

Okay.

I am too Crooked for a nice girl like you.

I tell him that God Saves Us All.

Amen sister.

*The Map of My Palm is a Road
Straight Into the Ocean*

The prophet of Ward B takes
my hand, turns it over in his own
hunches close, searching for
something and for a moment
I think he may kiss the upturned palm,
touch his cracked, bleeding lips
to my skin
 but he straightens
having found what was written there,
that I am a Water Child
born on the brink of drowning, *Don't you see?*
That's how you got those dark baby blues.

Enjambment

They make us take turns reading lines from a Mary Oliver poem. The assistant counselor lets me use the child safety scissors to cut copies out for each patient while she tells me what poetry means to her and about the man she is meeting when this shift ends. It is a long, thin poem. A coffin on the page.

I am mad they have brought these words into this place, where they will suffocate beneath fluorescent lights. Hearing it read aloud, stuttered, stumbled over in broken whispers, there is no rhythm left, only words plunked down one after another like scoops of mashed potatoes on a cafeteria tray. Each line is a promise, but the line ends and we wait at the edge breathless, waiting for the metaphor that will save our lives, believing perhaps this is the one that will tell us how.

IV

Tall bearded iris should be cut back after blooming in order to conserve strength for the next year's blossoms.

Mythology Tells Us

When Venus's son Cupid was stung by a bee he accidentally shot arrows into a rose garden. It was the arrows that caused the roses to grow thorns.

When the bees build a nest in his mind, piece together a complex of cells, a droning hurricane, it is easy to forget that it was an accident. He takes one last swig, throws the bottle down in splinters of glass, closes his eyes and shoots. And I no longer believe it was.

Venus stepped upon a rose and was pricked by the thorn. It was the mother's blood that lent the color. And isn't that the way it always is?

Navel Gazing

For good behavior, I am allowed to check out for two hours. My mother picks me up and we drive to the Holiday Inn down the road where she orders Chinese and I take my first shower in days.

Crouched at the bottom of the tub I find that a seam is opening near my bellybutton. At first I think it is lint and try to pick it out, but it snags the skin. Pinching with my fingernails I peel it back, flesh giving way like orange peels. It is opening a hole in my abdomen and I can see the red glint of intestines, but I continue to pick at the skin round the edges, calm as if prying at a hangnail or perhaps plucking the petals from a daisy, asking over and over, *You love me? You love me not?*

And in the next room I know that there is a Bible in the drawer, that my mother's shoes are discarded on the thin carpet, and reclined in the bed she is flipping through channels waiting for the takeout.

Fragments

Her skirt blossoms round her like a black
peony and I almost went to bed without
thinking of the calico cat, dead on the strip of grass
by the bus stop, white bone ripping through
the gape of a mouth. She seals an envelope,

transforming a note into a letter
to be read; but what did Sartre say
about freedom? Was it the horses huddled in a field, gray
clouds of breath hanging between them like

whispers? I truly believed it was the aurora
draped across the LA hills, like the grand
curtains of Versailles and hospital rooms; inside
a June bug beats itself against a lampshade.

July 13

My brother and I were born on the same day in July, three years between us, as wide and barren as no-man's land. By now both of us have stumbled out of summer and I wonder if we are really twins. He was just in a rush to get out, get going, get moving. And the urge walks him forward, foot after foot on the crooked line.

When we blow out the candles on our cake I make my wish for him
or perhaps it is for me after all. We are both in the quicksand

and did you know the quieter you are the slower it takes you? He thrashes,
howls, the sand boiling, dragging him down. My arms extended, head laid
back, I embrace the sky as if floating in the Pacific.

Transcendence

She climbs the stairs to shake us out of sleep. *Come*, she says, and we follow the white apostrophe of her nightgown down the hallway. The Nightblooming Cereus opens only one night a year, so shy it doesn't wish to be seen.

It is pollinated by bats, she tells us, *sticking their black noses in to lick the nectar*. But there are no bats inside our living room, so I assume it is magic, or darkness that draws it open, to hang, as heavy and white as a dinner plate. We take turns, standing in our bare feet, pressing our faces into the open palm of petals.

Do you remember being carried to bed, never fully waking? You are in someone's arms, floating, transcendent, pollen on your eyelashes, your nose.

About Her

My childhood is wrapped in a single black braid, endlessly hanging at her back. Summer days are paint-spattered hands. I've forgotten how to write about anything but her.

Even my father seen through her eyes -- the small dash of a boy, leaning against the brick wall out behind the middle school. I imagine he was one of those boys that knew how to lean, living life at an arrogant slant. Rolling a cigarette, lifting it to childish lips, he smiled at her before taking the drag.

My brother is her son. Her paper hands eagerly gather, hold his bitter disease. And I, the cracked, calloused heels she rubs with honey nightly.

Psychiatrist's Notes (Flight)

And what have you drawn?

A bird.

And why did you draw that?

The Black-Capped Chickadee stashes seeds and other food, coming back months later. It can remember thousands of different hiding spots.

Peering into the small spaces, the gaps life left behind, I look for any hidden pieces. Perhaps a note left in the margins of a book, a scar written on flesh, a nursery rhyme she repeated before bedtime like a blessing, the letter I placed in an old perfume bottle and buried out back by the stonewall, an S.O.S not meant to be found.

And what do you think that symbolizes?

On my hands and knees I push the trowel into the earth, the frozen winter ground resisting the slice of the blade.

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