Strawberries, Milkweed, Stone

Research Thesis

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Blistered in light,

I send letters to prairie grass asking if my feet have been missed. To coneflowers, are my hands now unwelcome? Sun-scorched corn, will you cut me with your leaves if I return? Skin regrown in shadows always aches for home, even for the home that pierces.

Embrace me with my original melodies: gravel beating rust, rain drumming midnight trains, cracked ashes and elms. Ohio, I’m still your aching daughter.

Trace me like crayons over hymnal pages—stained red glass, a pulpit and pews, dust. Find me in the cedar grove by the field of horses where I once played mother. Kiss me with wild bergamot inside my cypress home.

What will nourish my children? Strawberries, milkweed, stone.
to Orrville, Ohio (with love)

The high school rival flaps in effigy from a noose on downtown’s time and temperature clock. Across the street, The Faithful Little Cupcake sells treats gussied with silver made by Christian women. Here we breed both cruel and sweet: Bobby Knight and Smucker’s jam. On Apple Blossom Lane, my best friend lost her virginity to a boy who now plants soybeans and corn and doesn’t think of her. This town knows how to give an education.

Gary said my ass looked real good as we scraped dumpling crumbs from metal trays third shift. No one had told me before. That summer, a razor surfaced from a packaged pumpkin roll, nestled in cake and cream. We got a few days off. The year before, I learned calc in an asbestos-filled room.

Mr. Knight wrote a check for us: one hundred thousand for new bleachers in the gym. I tell myself I am not my town, but still crave yellow paint chips in my palms—aware of rust, even as a child, climbing my playground’s rocket ship to space.
In big prairie

do you remember the pulsing fuzzy
aphids, the “snow-covered”
beech branches—gusting air to watch
the seesaw sway of tail-ends

wiggling
or standing in the triangle of light (that hits
the center of your parents’ kitchen floor
at 5:42 in July) where we returned
to the business
of disco?

I admit it. I rummaged through your childhood
collection of arrowheads, animal-skulls and quartz.
That afternoon you returned
to your teenage-era punk-rock Christian love songs
while bats snaked and swooped, sketching wrinkles
in the pond
we dipped into after we settled on that rectangular
rock where you held my mulberry-stained feet
and remarked about my little toe.
Finding a Gazelle

In first grade, freckled Adam Butzer and I were the only two wriggling like plump earth worms on a hook, never ascending even half an inch up the chin-up bar. Then high school: sweaty from my excessive lack of hand-eye coordination, mid-volley praying the ball away, and Shanklin’s whistle—severe like her pageboy cut—stopping the game for me. *Williams, why aren’t you trying?* she roared. *My arthritic grandmother moves faster than you!*

By my early twenties, after my shift at the donut shop, I tried to make peace with exercise. Exercise promised a perky ass and a flat stomach. It promised a cool-down cocktail of endorphins. It delivered three months wheezing and panic that I’d forever be unfit. It delivered two inhalers and a diagnosis of exercise-induced asthma.

Today I saw a jogger in patterned pink leggings through April air, and I understood my failure wasn’t my inability to climb the rope past the third notch as peers watched my purple high-tops clunk like awkward hooves. No, my failure was something less visible: paralyzing self-doubt, first learned in first grade. But as the runner began to struggle, I also realized (with a bit of satisfaction) that invisible forces like gusts of spring wind will slow even the most graceful gazelles.
Drought Years

This year I’ve killed two succulents, English ivy, and a tufted cactus reminiscent of an old man with wispy hair. My brother says I’m more destructive than the Sahara— but he forgets laundry, forgets meals just like I do. *Forget your feelings,* my brother advised the summer I discovered panic attacks. *They aren’t reality.* Believing him seemed to reduce us to family echoes, seemed inescapable. Grandpa smiles only when working in his garden, pulling weeds between clusters of poppies and nubs of asparagus. In my family, we tend only what is concrete. When Grandma was a teenager, her father’s barn burnt down. *He was never the same after that,* she said, quieting when Grandpa pattered into our kitchen, feet thudding linoleum in faded socks. In drumbeats and silences, I keep finding my mother alone in her study, surrounded by piles of books, clicking keys to prune pages and pages of words she won’t let me read. A fern hangs in her bright windowsill, withered but not yet dead.
Love Stricken in Anger Management

Dreaming, I killed twelve carolers in a mall atrium by stabbing each soft stomach with a switchblade. In Anger Management I dreamed of Dean’s arms coated with switchgrass, smashing his brand new weed whacker with the hokey finesse of a professional wrestler. Lawn equipment can’t withstand Dean’s diving double axe handle. In a classroom of hot pink bird paintings seemingly curated by moms who Pinterest, Nicholas confessed his yelling sprees. Michael admitted, *I punch holes in walls.*

*I’m court mandated,* Charlie said with a smirk. I fell for each story, replayed them, replaced their fists with mine. When I was small, I gathered chokeberries and mint to make stew for imaginary companions in cracked terracotta pots. Mom was inside, manic, molested—a family member. Outside I found blood red centers of Queen Anne’s Lace. I shook the birdhouse to greet the inevitable finch. Hornets lived inside my home. In the black cloud in my backyard, I learned to stop screaming when no one comes to help.
Bright and Dangerous

I birthed a stillborn in the dream. In the morning, I named her Blaise, meaning *lisp* or *stutter*. You’re not a sad person, my lover said to get me out of bed, just like he said, rivers can’t be motionless. But the Olentangy is stagnant. At the pebbled edge, flies circle a deer. A tattered body is bloated.

*What should a person do when something dies in them?* I ask a daylily that burns behind the carcass. *Should I pluck you? Should I preserve you before you die on your own? Should I press you, dead and vibrant, between album pages?*

The Delaware tribe named this river *stone for your knife stream*, and every day I walk along the bank until my neck and back hurt from bending, collecting sandstone, quartzite, granite, and shale. What I really want is a knife for the lilies, bright and dangerous, stammering in wind.
Ignoring the War

He met a sweet Mennonite girl in 1945. She taught English in Japan, and he, an Allied officer, married her to ignore the war. Sometimes mistakes are passed generationally: his granddaughter kisses a man, hoping affection is enough to avoid sadness—that stone barrier where she holds a rifle, where silence keeps her safe.
Sundrenched

She asked me to scoop away the ants on her table. I did and did. Swept undetectable ants off hospital trays until I couldn’t. Brooks was with me when Grandma pulled off her clothes and needed me. Diaper sagging off a naked body. Warm skin warped. Brooks had his hand in mine, resting his thumb on my knuckle. I put all my faith in solipsism the day I caught him cheating. I’ve been sleeping it off since. Floral juice glasses, morning clanking, small cereal boxes. Grandma and her books erasing. She can’t recognize my name. Sheets block sunlight from my face. Later, I see Brooks, his disgust. I hate my body, too, the way it collects pain. Grandma dreamed before she died. A small girl running in green and white and blue with friends. Repeating rows. Corn and always sky and those three white dresses, blinding anyone who looked. I’ve buried memories under goldenrod in list-form. I pray my hidden paper has disintegrated by now. Weed is running low in the cabinet over Brooks’ sink. He hates the yellow cigarette box resting in my purse. No, thank you. I’m not hungry. I’ll harm you, too. My friend dreamed that doll-like hands lined my arms and back. I’m all knuckles, a prophetic fact. Brooks, don’t touch my neck. I’m a corpse when you do that. Rotten bananas in morning light. When Grandma died she looked small and frightened. Why are you smiling, Brooks? The sundrenched tulips are numb with snow. Six years old and unmitigated terror forced courage as I looked in two mirrors at my line of reflections. How can a person repeat without end?
Brown’s Lake Bog

Last night you slid your fingers into me, saying you liked my limp body, how I pretended to be asleep. I wasn’t pretending, but you didn’t believe me. Maybe morning light is too soft to argue in. Maybe I don’t try hard enough to be heard. Up late for an exam, looking for notecards, I burst into my mother’s study to find my father watching a woman on screen. He jumped, jerking his hand to kill the power. I walked out and went to bed. Grinding my teeth, I search for articles about Brown’s Lake Bog—our place near home to find sundews and pitcher plants filled with insects, where we once confused poison sumac for holly, where we scratched our skin raw. Ever since you cheated, something in me is desperate for news of a body, hundreds of years old, surfacing from our glacial spot, perfect in oxygen deficient water. Let’s go back. I’ll heal your wounds with sphagnum moss. I’ll dig up the surface—enough to mend our fathers and ourselves. I’ll press and press acidic peat into our sores until you see how very alive I am.
Eclipse

Children chirp to stars
And stripes, palms on hearts,
As their teacher surveys
The class. One refuses—remains
On her carpet square, fraying
The coarse edge, loosening threads
Beneath her pinky.

After lunch, moonmade night
Overtakes day: a shadow falls
In rippled lines across the schoolyard,
Birds quiet, the temperature drops,
And the large, agitated maples
Untie their leaves.

The obstinate girl
Feels she must open
The classroom window.
When her teacher
Isn’t looking, she pushes
On hinged glass and feels
The changed air—feels
Evidence that terror lives
Both inside and outside
The body. In the corner,
Girls become mothers
By the miniature kitchen.
Someone shushes another,
Then turns to coo her
Daughter back to sleep.

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We enter the girl’s brain through her ear canal. (Don’t worry; the girl often uses cotton swabs because the slight pressure on the base of her eardrum makes her feel a rare and almost eerie calm—the calm she will feel again during adolescence only
while singing “Come Thou Fount” at church; a calm she will revisit during the good parts of multiple abusive relationships, and again, later, when she smokes out her apartment’s small bathroom window and watches a cardinal sitting on a snowy branch. Years after, she will question if she should ever have kids while her overworked and slightly obese husband snores beside her. She is worried that she will always love isolation and the calm void it provides more than being present with her children.) From the ear canal, we’ll first encounter the girl’s temporal lobe, an impressive and rapidly firing realm, developed primarily because of her need for attention. In childhood, the girl’s favorite book was Cinderella. When knocked on the knee with the light pink book, her mother would cease tapping her typewriter. Atop her mother’s lap, the girl would listen to the evil stepmother’s voice: bitter and deceptive, like the baker’s chocolate her brother once gave to her. Shame, of course, we find smack dab in the middle of the girl’s brain, in her almond-shaped amygdalae. And if we travel near her optic nerve and enter her eye, we can see her staring at a girl we will learn she stares at often: Mary Leigh Paraskos, the one she hates and admires, the one who stole her eraser and won’t share her crayons, even though she has a sixty-four pack and the girl’s eight are all broken. Mary Leigh has one dark freckle above her lip, just like the girl’s.

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In Kindergarten the girl is obsessed
With the man in flannel

Who sleeps by the schoolyard fence
Everyday at recess. She sits across from him,

Stares through metal,
Sometimes misses jump rope.

She wonders what he feels
Beneath dark sky, if he is

Large or small
Under the unreachable

Starlight.
**Bastion**

I walk tar-chipped roads past rotting logs and thick, chokecherry groves to the field by Miller’s Pond.

Within the green and blue echoing world of cornstalks and sky, I’m lost. Lost, but certain that corn will end—sure of stirring switchgrass, wild bergamot, milkweed and prairie dock next to stone stairs that lead to tarnished steel.

My childhood train-bridge stands, and once again I’m small, looking skyward towards graffiti and rust.

I want the view to be the same: brick homes missing shingles, sun-scorched corn, tracks edged in brush, paint-peeled factories and windswept oaks.

Last time, I climbed this bridge to say goodbye. But now, planting my feet on crumbled steel, I need both black and white—both tar and Queen Anne’s Lace, timeworn brick and cloudless sky, the rust beside new blooms.
How to Recycle

Start basic, get chummy with the blue bin: toss JIF jars, cartons of expired Greek yogurt, Time Warner Cable offers, and bottom-shelf bottles of Malbec. Soon you’ll convert V-necks into macramé hanging planters and piles of 5K-tees into mini-headbands with nautical knots for friends’ baby showers. Alone at night, you’ll Netflix and latch hook rugs from strips of ill-fitting dresses. By February, your closet will be pristine, and your homespun mat will greet snowy boots. When your litter-scoop breaks, eat three bowls of Cheerios and cut a shovel from the empty milk jug. Bottle caps can be candles for your Buddhist friend’s morning meditations. The busted ukulele you neglected to learn can be tacked on an elm for robins, cardinals, and small yellow finches. Exchange morning sadness for more—for bluebells placed on strangers’ windshields or Dad’s bright laughter on the phone. Let in back-road wind past unfamiliar cornfields to some podunk town with surprisingly good coffee and strawberry french toast. Find the giant sycamore by the roadside, shedding at daybreak to grow even more.
walk with me

Soon we’ll walk by rows of cedars, white
with frost next to the ice-skimmed pond. I’ll reach
for your hand as cold junipers droop
with heavy snow. A lone cardinal will sit
on a birch, against the pale blue sky.
It will be morning, when shadows are long but snow
is bright against your hazel eyes, and as
we inhale frozen air, our breath-filled clouds
will dissipate then

form again.
In June, we’ll become botanists,
sketching wild blue phlox, johnsongrass,
geraniums, and garlic mustard within
our notebook pages. We’ll clutter our walls
with water-colored illustrations, notes
scribbled about colors pigments can’t
quite capture. We’ll record the smallest parts—
trichomes, cold taproots, filaments,
yellow anthers full of pollen grains.
Even the broken petals will be drawn.
September 2016

My grandmother roamed the psych ward
in a white skirt, white hat, white shoes,
checking patients. Even when promoted
to head surgical nurse, she never said a word
about finding her superior, a doctor, photographing
stripped schizophrenic women. All of fifth grade
my mother secretly feared she was pregnant.
After her son turned three and I turned one—
at age thirty—she remembered her uncle
molesting her when she was five, neighborhood boys
touching her throughout childhood:
understood, finally, why she was afraid.
The afternoon I discovered her school pictures
tucked in the bottom drawer with Christmas
tablecloths, I found years of an unsmiling girl
so much like me. At the local pizza shop,
a stranger in the booth behind me spun around
to ask if tonight I’d be putting out for my man.
This is where I’d like to stop, before I remember
being silent when a customer wanted a quickie
in my workplace bathroom, before I remember
stiffening behind the counter when instructed
to take just one little twirl to show off my little dress,
before I remember that my body isn’t safe,
even in public. I got up, sat beside the stranger, asked,
Why do you think you can talk to me that way?
kept asking, searching his face, demanding an answer.
On my walk home, I finally didn’t tug at my skirt
when catcalled. My teachers said, You can be anything
you want when you grow up. If I have a daughter,
I pray she won’t realize in grade school, like I did,
that all her presidents are men. But if she does,
I’ll go hoarse praising her voice: stubborn,
piercing, beautiful—she’ll fucking sing.