

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:       WHITE MOTHS

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This collection navigates the process of grief after the speaker's loss of both parents. The speaker struggles to connect with both the dead and the living through her physical intimacy and relationship with a troubled lover. These poems explore and exhume the speaker's buried memories, moving from moments of wry humor to meaningful and sometimes painful discovery. Ultimately, these poems attempt to reach beyond the self, to transform loss and loneliness from a human condition into a musical tool of art for human connection.

WHITE MOTHS

By

Kelsey Ann Kerr

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# Dedication

*For Robin Ruppel-Kerr and Tim Kerr*

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I

## A letter to my father on Mother's Day

This week, I hear only bagpipes,  
even in vacuum cleaners—  
Let me tell you, my above neighbors  
are always vacuuming.  
I tried to get away, to feign  
a little clarity of mind today, but  
a piper's tune followed me through  
the city recanting the march  
you played at the competition  
for the Highland Games.  
I tried the National Portrait Gallery,  
but the paintings were locked  
inside with my memories of the portraits  
I'd sketched in graphite,  
rubbed in acrylic, of you  
and Mom and me and Mac  
and everyone gone.  
And I walked past stores,  
but they were so hollow  
that I could hear the pipes  
in the hum of each wall.  
I came across many families, couples,  
and Mom sent me a violinist.  
I almost lost my composure,  
almost collapsed  
to the concrete  
to catch my breath.  
I couldn't fathom  
you both sending these gifts, these tricks  
of comfort, this deception of your  
old instruments. And when a woman  
kissed the violinist, I longed  
for nothing more than to be him,  
to feel even a patron's kiss on my cheek.



## Caged Piano

Why do people always write  
about a pianist's hands  
poised above the keys?

Pianists aren't that patient.  
Their hands, eager to press the keys,  
cage them in wait,

wanting to pull  
that hammer to the strings,  
feel their wood

pressing, pressing into  
what's strung,  
released.

My upright stares  
out a front window,  
wondering why I left him.

## Sleep-walkers

Now that I live alone,  
the only way to know that I've sleep-walked  
is if I blazed a trail.

This time I burned it from my bed to my closet,  
left the white vintage 1950's gown from homecoming  
folded neatly on the floor.

Home coming, it's a coming home,  
and maybe it wasn't me who put the gown there,  
but you, Mother.

When I touched it I felt something,  
a mother's hand on mine,  
as light as the organza of the dress,

as sheer. The fabric slipped  
through my fingers, turned to rustling leaves  
in the approaching fall, died

a stained yellow-brown, like Dad did  
four years ago  
a month from now.

And what I wouldn't give  
to be back on that camping trip  
on the way to Canada with both of you,

on my way to my fourth birthday,  
when you told me I could have whatever  
I wanted for dinner, and I chose

KFC in the hotel room, but Dad  
bought me a cake, anyway,  
white with pink frosting—

To be back in those woods,  
in our old orange tent, examining  
the shades and chlorophyll veins of each leaf,

playing with that daddy longlegs, palm  
to palm, until you made me set it down  
because it was sleeping.

## Perfusionist

I wear my love for foxgloves  
on my digits, nibble on each  
to slow the fibrillations.

I eat their purple freckled ends  
till nausea overtakes me  
with the halo I see each person in.

My father had purple freckles, too,  
and any time a heart at work exploded  
he'd come home with pink shoes.

## Pin Me, Baby

We sat on the red and gold upholstered couch  
    where you helped me finally accept that my parents are dead.  
Kübler-Ross's fifth stage, met in your safety-pin arms.  
    When I was four I feared that the safety pins pinning  
my red laminated nametag would pierce not only my shirt  
    but my heart, too. Your safety pin went through mine  
daily. *They're living in you*, your words, or something  
    like that set in; you touched my breast, pinned them over my heart.  
In college, I always wanted you to pin me. For a moment you thought—  
    but I was no sorority girl. You've iced my heart for years now,  
with one of those block whiskey cubes. Thank you  
    for that anesthetic. It prepped me to pierce your heart hidden in mine.  
Pin out through my left ventricle, right into the nametag you wear daily.  
    Two months ago it read, "Love." Last week, "Charm."  
But now it's smudged, written over in a language I can't read.  
    Still, I know it tells the world one of your new given names:  
"Dishonesty" or "Dick." I call on my father, the perfusionist,  
    to teach me how to stitch myself up. Still on the table,  
I stare at my phone, your name, and tell myself no.

## Lost in the 갤러리아

I'm lost in a 갤러리아 trying to find  
a chiropractor or a podiatrist to mend my broken 발  
and let me play again. My spine protrudes, too,  
because he yanked it out with abandon,  
left me unable to make love, make out. Staring out  
and reading the words "Illness is a lonely place"  
in block letters from a projector, Jenny Holzer style,  
I think of my parents, the piles of bedside books on art  
and illness, as I pass store by store until finally  
I see more spelled language in my native tongue.  
"Children of alcoholic parents must always be wary"—  
I want to tell him, want to warn him, pour out  
the nightcaps of what's to come, but then he shoves my  
spine back through my mouth, each vertebra slips  
back in; I wince until he plants two roses  
in my cheeks. The spikes climb down, point  
my mouth, lip-lining it, forcing a smile.  
My eyes water my facial flora. It climbs  
into them, vining my whites with hemorrhages.  
I'll never see him, or anything but red, again.

## The year I knew you'd get breast cancer

You used to love to open your armoire,  
talk about how I'd inherit your jewelry.

I'd sit on your bed and admire.  
*Someday, it'll all be yours, Kels.*

I drape myself in it now, allowing  
it to drip from me. I still hate the amber,

but I'll wear it to keep warm.  
I'll trap myself in its resin—

the resin you wore on my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday  
with the blue silk shirt I wear today

when I sat in your lap on that outdoor chaise  
crying because I got older.

## After the Terminal Tower

Not much had kept me warmer  
than him blowing warm air into my hair  
while we waited for an Uber outside  
the Cleveland Indians stadium,  
admiring the Terminal Tower  
which was purple that night,  
my favorite color, and suddenly  
I was in Maine with my mother,  
my head buried in the breast  
of her white sweater, sheltering  
myself from the seawind,  
crab-walking along the Bar Harbor coast  
with the one I love, admire, most's  
arms wrapped around me.



*Feel Pretty 1*

Miles away in Ireland,  
I waited for an email with attachments,  
spent weeks writing digital letters, weeks convincing  
my mother we *both* needed her as my next subject.

Still, she hesitated  
to sit for the series, for a moment,  
for the photographs my father clicked,  
for the drawings I'd make  
of her in her bra and compression  
sleeve, her glasses sliding down her nose.

Back in my fishbowl studio, I drew her in charcoal,  
drew each line, each wrinkle, each  
exaggerated vein protruding  
from her port, each strand of hair,  
the few that came back after chemo  
when the rest refused to sprout  
out of the linen  
of her scalp.

I filled her lips in mauve,  
traced her eyes in gold,  
scraped maroon mascara  
against the stretched raw canvas,  
and pinched her cheeks in pink  
until they blushed. My fingertips  
grew more calloused, but still,  
I couldn't make my mother  
feel pretty, all I could do  
was preserve her.

*Feel Pretty 2*

I rushed downstairs to blush  
her cheeks before the critique,

which she might do, if she were on her way to work  
and still alive, like she was when I made the piece.

The canvas's glitter stuck in the whorls of my fingertips,  
tinged them pink for the rest of the day.

My mother never taught me  
how to apply make-up with a brush,

instead, when I was nine,  
I was given a RoseArt make-up set for my birthday.

My mother would let me wear its colors only on weekends;  
she was more than just an Abby Lee Dance Mom.

The Abby Lee Dance Studio opened up our street in a plaza's basement,  
where J&C Hobbies now sells its model airplanes to buy and fly.

We walked up the street, and up the red carpeted stairs  
inside, stared into the studio's rooms with hardwood floors,

scuffed black here and there from tap shoes. Some of those scuffs  
soon to be mine, my mother would watch from those same grey tiers

you see on the show today. When *Dance Moms* premiered,  
my mother loved to brag about how she refused

to sell orange drink at the first and last  
dance competition I ever participated in.

Abby announced over the auditorium's loudspeaker  
that my mom was excused from selling the orange drink;

and oh, the irony that this woman's mother  
and my own would die of the same disease.

I watched the episode with the pink ribbons whirling, and understood  
where some of Abby's anger came from—Kübler-Ross's Stage II.

Every weekend-day, I'd don the orange lipstick,  
along with all of the other accouterments, glitter stick,

and now refuse to know better  
than to apply even blue eye-shadow with my fingers,

which is funny for an artist  
who's supposed to love brushes;

I've always loved the grit,  
trapped in my tips like a memory.

*Feel Pretty 3*

The closest I can get to hugging my mom now  
is hugging the canvas as I draw her portrait in charcoal,  
wrap my hands around its sides as I would her body,  
feel the cottony quality of the fabric over the stretcher bars, close

to that of a white sweater she would often wear. For hours,  
I stare at her, trying to remember her in motion, her bashful laugh  
as anyone would photograph her, the frustration that I needed  
references of her, so stripped down. . . . I remember the way she  
would tweeze the lone dark hair out of the mole on her face,

but this is not the way she would want to be remembered.  
Here, her hands are worn like a surgeon's in front of her. Perhaps,  
my dad posed her that way; perhaps, it was a preparation,  
or an offering to me and to anyone I'd let see her this way,  
even though it took her years before she'd let me see her  
almost bald, hair in clumps like a baby's, and only then to give her a trim.

## Photographic Reference

I stand back from the easel, that photograph, look  
at the two of us coming to life on the canvas, its surface  
as raw as my burnt sienna hands from scrubbing

the acrylic off three or four times as I ply  
the unforgiving medium, the paint  
and pencil underneath showing through.

Even the paintwater in my cup affects  
the tone; it's like my skin, always revealing  
the veins my parents gave me.

My aunt, the art historian, insisted  
on taking the photograph, insisted that the image of my father  
and me on his second-to-last deathbed would be invaluable.

My father couldn't admit it, but he was addicted  
to Vicodin; each morning it, his Crohn's and his arthritis,  
bedded him beneath the green sheets.

My mother and I walked around  
the neighborhood, complaining about his dysfunction.  
I tried to find the number 7 in the asphalt

of the streets—one of my old games—hoping  
for a lucky sign. . . .  
Instead, my father forgot direction, and he couldn't tell

a fish from a tree after he was put,  
temporarily, into a nursing home.  
Now, standing before this half-finished canvas,

staring at the hair my father half-gave me, the hair  
my aunt told me looked more real in the painting  
than in the photo, I wish it were true. I wish

that the painting *was* reality. Maybe then,  
I might still be able to pull him out of that trance,  
see his eyes recognize me in hospice once more.

My aunt told me that he was riding  
a motorcycle when he died, his body moving  
back and forth, curving with the road as he held on

to the handles. After his death, I tried to learn  
how to ride one, but when the bike broke down,  
I left it lying sideways on a parking lot's pavement.

II

## White Moths

Four urns set side-by-side  
on my granite kitchen counter—

One is my father's father, shining bright  
as his balding head that I used to perch on,  
his tufts of grey hair folding around  
the legs of my jeans.

My father's mother rests next to him,  
dust in crinkled aluminum foil.  
I wish I had baked more with her, learned  
how to keep the cookie jar atop the fridge full—  
Like the one time we baked together,  
I stack the cookie-dough snowmen, sticky,  
to keep a friend, animate them.

I reshape the dough, roll arms, legs,  
sculpt with a toothpick, sphere eyes  
between my fingers, prop the family up,  
mother, father, daughter—sprinkle  
Grandma's and Grandpa's ashes  
over the characters  
in consummation, then—  
I consume each, bite by sooty bite.

The third urn is a sparkling desert  
with a Navajo rug laid upon it,  
my mother, embalmed in her love  
for the Southwest, craving  
a walk in the arroyo to Tomasitas,  
where we ate before her cancer  
ate food's appeal—

The last urn—flying bluebirds in a silver sky—  
holds my father. He observes  
from the cool metal stool  
in the corner, watching  
my work without lifting  
a spatula or spoon in aid.



“Tim’s Rainbow Kitchen,” the chef’s cap  
I gave him for Father’s Day said in puffy paint—  
Really, I want a kitchen I can visit,  
where his recipes wallpaper the walls,  
parade across them under Mod Podge,  
I long to touch their wrinkles, feel their seal.

I pop the seal of one final urn, hold  
the makings of our relationship’s photo scrapple,  
fill a line of pots and pans, with what remains,  
collage a photomontage to bring to a boil and burn.

\*

Me pulling you by the collar  
in my new sweet summer cotton  
J. Crew blazer—snap—a kiss,  
—snap—foreheads pressed together—  
The most memorable shots  
that I refuse to take out  
of my lockbox, or burn in elegy  
of us, of what I keep calling the rendezvous—

The ditty I wrote in my diary the same  
summer in tercets, *Breaking and Entering*:

The Matryoshka dolls on my dress told me  
to sneak into Shorney  
with the boy who was horny

Shorney, my freshman year dorm,  
where I first felt his face  
nestle into place

at my shoulder in the months  
I’d slept with him behind  
me, and the first time

I felt a hard cock, too. Now,  
all that wasn’t new,  
but then he blew

me for the first time since,  
propped me up on that pine desk,

knelt on his knees and all the rest.

I sketched a portrait of those last two shots  
in graphite, cut out the caption,  
“Two peas in a pod,”  
green, pink heart, with emoticon o’s,  
spent hours, whittling away  
with my x-acto knife and the pencils,  
clutched them in my teeth,  
measured our features in life-lines,  
felt the blood trickle down a budding wrinkle  
when I got the utensils mixed up,  
blood that maybe could have attracted the you  
in the second set of portraits.

\*

You wore a royal blue shark  
hat in that photobooth,  
the teeth white beneath comedic eyes,  
just above your hairline.

I grabbed a teal masquerade mask,  
your turn-on color.  
You wore the same mask  
with the girl in the teal dress,  
sequins glittering together,  
the girl you’d grill dinner for,  
surf-and-turf, what a mess.

Oblivion, your home in a drawer,  
where you shoved the matching strips  
after my teal striptease...

It’s the name of my dad’s video game I gave you,  
and I hope you live with it, embody it.  
May your character reside in it, may it pervade  
your fear of bringing attention to anything.

And I hope you live with it, embody it,  
never say a word about my dad’s death,  
your fear of bringing attention to anything,

by emails, embraces, boilings of my blood.

Never say a word about my dad's death,  
and don't you dare travel to Pittsburgh  
by emails, embraces, boilings of my blood  
in the sun, buying me ice cream—instead of you.

And don't you dare travel to Pittsburgh,  
my friends will come instead,  
in the sun, buying me ice cream—instead of you.  
And—

My friends will come instead.  
But the fact that we had a rendezvous in June,  
and—  
the weekend you gave up dinner with the law school dean—

But the fact that we had a rendezvous in June,  
falling into oblivion, fucking on desks  
the weekend you gave up dinner with the law school dean,  
asking me to striptease teal lingerie for you.

Falling into oblivion, fucking on desks,  
mapping out your back in kisses,  
asking me to striptease teal lingerie for you  
to find ourselves as we come together.

My strips hung  
on my fridge, side by side,  
under the Barbara Kruger magnet,  
BELIEF + DOUBT = SANITY. And—

Everything hinges on *And*—  
for me  
          and we  
*st—and apart.*

\*

I think of the photo album  
your mama let me keep  
from those weeks I spent  
with her down in Forest City,

sitting in the Florida Room  
writing poetry, sleeping  
in her childhood walnut four-post,  
cleaning out your dying grandfather's home,  
holding a garage sale, of golden glass goblets,  
plates and white linens, dusted records—  
the ones I kept, still spinning.

But the photo album held  
the most meaning, me thinking  
that I'd place new memories of our own in it,  
our children, when they were born,  
now wondering if any of the loose photos  
I have will fit. Few do, most were taken  
too late—by cameras that take photos  
in 4 x 6, not the 3 ½ x 5 required,  
or even 6 x 8. Still, I went through the box  
my maternal grandfather sent me,  
in which envelope upon envelope lay sheet  
upon sheet of photo paper. Naïve, I thought I'd find  
enough in the right size to fill it up, instead,  
I found pictures of myself as a naked child.  
I didn't know any naked pictures of me existed

except for the ones that I sent you, to whet your appetite  
while you resided in China, and the others since...  
all of which you claimed you deleted  
that spring when we figured  
we'd broken each other enough.

I wince when I think of them now, how  
not far from then I sent you some—  
the only ones I'd sent you, the only person  
I've sent seductive pictures to,  
as no more than a person *in friendship,*  
*in love, or whatever we are—*

I stood on the rim of my bathtub, clicked  
away each frame in view, a full view  
of the mole only you've seen...

I could have slipped, could have  
recreated that scene from *Psycho*,  
pooled coagulated blood in the bathtub,  
splattered  
the curtain and walls.  
But instead—

I let the navy bra straps fall off  
my shoulders,  
squeezed my breasts, mimed  
an orgasm—your little  
Raggedy Ann doll.

\*

I left my mother's crepe pan  
in Daejeon, South Korea  
in the white cabinet,  
next to her red Le Creuset kettle,  
steaming across from the shoe closet,  
with the news  
of our engagement  
she never knew about.

You were naked  
and you knelt  
before the bed. You had just  
puked in the toilet three times  
after emptying the green  
glass bottle of soju  
in seconds. I had  
brushed your hair back,  
let your beads of sweat  
lick the palm of my hand.

It was the last  
time I made  
you literally chase me.  
Your black plastic glasses fell  
off your face and  
tumbled through the brush, down  
the hillside almost  
into the river.

You told me after  
about the happy ending  
you'd had in China—  
*a friend had asked for one, you didn't know  
how to refuse!* Then, it didn't matter,  
whatever had happened, we were in love,  
engaged, and my mother  
was going to die in a week.

I can still feel the weight of it  
on my wrist, that cast-iron pan,  
as I lift it to the burner,  
its caress as I use my fingertips  
in attempt to glean what scales  
are left of her fingerprints.

I grazed the fine cracks, the fissures, lightly  
as I would graze the blonde hairs on your back,  
not tapping the cracks of your eczema-ridden skin  
I'd often rub hydrocortisone in, to soothe, smooth.

You'll never feel that touch again,  
better than any orgasm, you'd said,  
or my scratch, clawing for your passion, attention,  
just like I'll never again feel you intertwine  
your arm with mine, crossing its moles  
and freckles as your own—

I spread the flat pancake, mix  
the cheese sauce, savory,  
and the cream cinnamon pecan, sweet,  
both toppings' tastes linger on my tongue,  
the only sustenance I need—  
let's pour it all over everything.

\*

I lost the email my dad sent it in,  
the black bean soup recipe, before  
the diabetic shock on his birthday,  
the same day I got the edible body paint  
in the mail, the sugar and syrup  
to lick off, as we fell into a different kind of coma.

What I recall: the diced tomatoes,  
onions, dried beans, green Tabasco sauce  
I would shake drips of, into my bowl of soup,  
the roofied punch cup you rescued me from,  
noting that I was acting funny—

I stirred it all together in a pot,  
let it simmer in my mind  
once I was sober and you were pissed  
I babbled like a baby, my father's daughter,

clicked my heels across the concrete  
and stared into that look on your face, tried  
to erase my mistakes.

\*

What I should have done: asked my dad  
to pick his little girl up from school,  
one extra time, gone home for his 60th, because  
everyone knows what family is: blood  
is thicker than wine.

My parents met at Montefiore Hospital in Pittsburgh,  
doing research on baboons,  
putting balloons  
in their brains—or something like that.

My dad used to tell me how fierce  
the males were, how they'd bar  
their teeth against the cage, under  
blue streaks, enraged, probably  
upset that they were forced to be celibate.

I hide my teeth beneath  
red lipsticked lips  
and refuse to bare them,  
to smile again, or part  
either of my mouths,  
sweetheart, faking  
the heart as tart  
as a wormed apple—

The beauty or horror in all this: we both  
still love and want each other. There wouldn't  
be a need for me to thrust myself upon you,  
to bare my ass in hope—

Look, admire my curvature, my body  
a resemblance of the Renaissance emulated,  
red hair like Venus or Ariel.  
Do you want to dive into the whirlpool, the eyes carved  
from my paternal grandmother's sockets?

Never kiss closed-eyed, you told me.  
Reason: must have been because,

as we discover too well as children,  
you never know what will go  
bump in the night.

\*

All of the white moths, your favorite,  
vanished, until a baby found me  
with renewed urgency. In the past  
they flitted around me, spread their wings  
as they landed on my forearm in Pittsburgh,  
back when I still had my parents  
to watch vigil over me.

Back before I found the black panties,  
not mine, packed in “my” things  
from your apartment in Korea,  
the moths would follow me  
around the neighborhood,  
Mama Moth, my iPod clutched in hand,  
Modest Mouse singing *well, it would've been,  
could've been worse than you would ever know*  
and, sun-drunk, I imagined  
my body crashing into yours.

When it started to rain  
I raised my palms to the sky,  
shook my red hair as the drops  
dampened it to black.

I came home to find  
a dead moth on our doorstep.



III

## A Mother's Gift to Her Only Child

I don't remember what we were fighting about,  
but I remember the room going silent

around the noise that came from your throat,  
as you yanked up your t-shirt and revealed

your left breast, dangling low, its teat  
a burnt umber eye steadily accusing me,

and that stretched, scarred skin  
of the missing one, tight as a canvas.

I couldn't look directly at you,  
so I gazed at your back in the full-length mirror,

lined in oak, the violets that bloomed  
on the back of your shirt, the Mother's Day plates

still taped to your towel rack from when I was three,  
but not at that eye, your eyes, down at my own shirt.

As I fell asleep on your bed your voice slowed  
to a stop like rubber cement. You opened

the top drawer of your nightstand, pulled out  
an oblong object wrapped in cheesecloth,

and placed it in my hands, coagulated blood  
gluing it shut. I set it on your dresser, unsealed it,

and with one hand on each end, unrolled it  
until your other breast lopped out. I dropped

the cheesecloth to the floor, and pressed  
your half-intact chest to mine.

## Mother Mirror

I crawl into bed, stare into the walnut dresser mirror  
that stood all through my childhood opposite your bed.

In your last apartment there were no mirrors. Hospital  
bed-ridden, you couldn't see your own beauty,

but even with bones brittle and almost unburied, skin  
turning sallow, you still managed the broadest smile.

The last time I saw you there, or anywhere, untucked,  
unashen, I looked into your eyes coated in death's

cataracts, touched your arm hardened. It was the first time  
I didn't want to *be* you, didn't want my hair crazy

curl permed, or to wear a matching pink silk blouse,  
or your lavender pajamas that you were wearing then

that Dad bought you years before—those flowering  
pajamas that fluttered, bled like rags as you charred.

## Realization Upon Listening to My Aunt's Eulogy for My Mother

I should have eulogized my mother  
in mountains, the summit of Shasta,  
carved into unexpected rubble,  
snowless, let my boots scuff the words at  
the peak, as my crampons clanged, clinging  
to the back of my red pack, sounding  
congratulatory noise. I spoke  
with my mother on climbing day, begged  
for her persistence when I puffed my  
inhaler, for the third time, climbing  
up Misery Hill. Misery Hill,  
actually one of the easiest  
parts of the climb, you find, already  
altitude sick, the rest step locked in  
your carabiner, *pole pole*.  
I was feeling her breath in the bell-  
ows behind me, oxygenating  
my lungs, pushing me. *Pole pole*,  
she repeated, again and again,  
as I repeated the longest wow,  
summiting, slowly, with her tenor.

28,251

*the number of feet from sea level to K2's summit*

My mother won't, didn't, live to see me at 28  
but she raised me, you, from the earth,  
your mathematics to mine to hers, to her R2,

and you're the only place where she'll speak to me now,  
cup her winded hand against my face.  
So I'll climb you, second dangerous daughter,

from the Pakistani side, sherpas, my mother, and a map as guides,  
but first I'll finish my last promise to her,  
to climb every mountain she wanted to but didn't live to summit,

to climb every one she did so she can see the view, unencumbered, again.  
New on my list are two of Ecuador's spirited triplets, Cayambe and Cotopaxi,  
whom she introduced me to from her deathbed

just before her last wish to see the Galapagos turtles,  
before her trip and fractured hip, before she flew through my heart,  
goodbye, K2, goodbye—I'll wait to greet you.

## Lines for My Mother's Coffee

The clink against the coffee cup wafted up from downstairs, delicious to my ears.  
Each morning, I heard it three times before I got up, sounding an alarm bell  
before she clicked her red shoes into my room—the perfect pair I'm still  
trying to fit into—and whispered a tickle up my spine, pulled back the sheets,  
and sent a stream of chilled air up my pajama pant legs. Still, each morning,  
I walk to the fridge and open its door, looking for French Vanilla Coffee Mate.  
Strange, how her coffee always tasted bitter to me, but now I drink mine black,  
especially on days when I feel like I'm out to defeat the world, or maybe  
it's out to defeat me. It's like the older I get, the more I can take.  
No more spoonfuls of sugar to help the coffee go down in coffee milk,  
the same variety of coffee my mother and her sisters drank as children,  
begging, as I did, out at any local breakfast spot, just for a spoonful,  
some days, two. The worst thing isn't waking up alone. Every morning,  
I set a timer on my coffee pot to her old smell.

## The time I went from 100% cheetah to 7% cheetah

I crawled around on my Sahara tile floor  
slowly becoming human again,  
slowly walking the line of cheetah to woman,  
still craving the meat of a boar.

Standing, shoulders still swaying, “More,”  
to the kitchen I made my campaign.  
I crawled around on my Sahara tile floor,  
slowly becoming human again.

My voice rasped, “Hello” as I was lured  
by the smell of bacon, the quiche Lorraine.  
I licked egg from your hand until it was sore,  
my love for your salt something I couldn’t contain.  
I crawled around on my Sahara tile floor,  
slowly becoming human again.

## The time I went from 100% cheetah to 23% cheetah

I chew on my claws, they become blunted.  
I try to outrace a Mini; it taunts me, it taunts me;  
such a small beast should not easily beat me.  
I chew on my claws, they become blunted.

The tips protrude from my finger beds,  
daily bleeding reds, reds, vining reds;  
red vines, now, I want to be fed.  
I chew on my claws, they become blunted.

These cravings for dessert, so strange;  
usually, I'd want a little more mange.  
I miss the buffet of my desert range.  
I chew on my claws, they become blunted.

My ex-boyfriend sends me a post of wood;  
I sharpen for him, for him, if I could.  
I chew on my claws, they become blunted.



## The time I went from 100% cheetah to 52% cheetah

In Gurgaon at Christmastime, my master takes me to Ambie Mall.  
I stare at the evergreen, decorated in red and gold ornaments,  
and purr, so excited to see this furry tree to climb.  
On my way over, kids carrying critters in my wake, I try not to maul  
those they hold in their hands—quick wind-stopping gash. I meant  
to walk by peaceably. Visiting friends in this transplanted land, I'm

old and new, should know the language from my ancestors' fall, the Hindi  
that gave me my name. All the same, tongue as awkward as a toddler's limbs,  
fuzz in my mouth, strangers don't know how or if to speak to one sent  
back to help forge a colony that thrived years ago. Still, a woman places a bindi  
on my forehead. *More human*—she chirps. Understanding still looks grim.

## The walking stick

My father's father used to whittle walking sticks.  
He'd dig faces out of the oak, chip by chip,  
some screaming, some squinting blind,  
as he spit out stale tobacco breath  
into the grass next to the porch.  
In the summer, mosquito drifters would venture  
in from the swamplands to meet his cowboys.  
In the winter, his spittle would burn brown in the snow.

When he grew older, his bones stiff, tobacco quit,  
he bore me a staff with a snake winding green,  
and a king, uncloaked, unstained, who watched from the top.  
It fit all I'd ever wanted—  
one friend for loyalty, to protect me when things went south,  
the other to see me naked, then desert me when it all splintered.

## The morning after you were arrested in Korea

The police had taken you into custody.  
They were trying to charge you with attempted  
murder. I lived 3 hours away.

I threw my i-pone and watched it bounce  
across the asphalt. I was as drunk on 소주 as an  
아조씨 asleep on a bench at the bullet train station,

and ended up making out with a Korean.  
외국인! It was my first time out since we'd  
broken up. (Was that the fourth or fifth time?)

9 a.m. and I was still wasted, still  
couldn't get ahold of you or our friend  
who had texted me around 4–

I had a friend sleeping on my floor. Swearing,  
I snuck out in my P.J.s to the convenience store,  
the nice little GS25 down the road.

I bought myself some 라면, a cup o' noodles,  
and brooded next to my dead phone on  
the linoleum. Finally, with bribery,

money to the man who'd threatened to slash  
your throat, whose friends surrounded you, and all  
you could do was grab a beer mug and—smash!

He was scarred, but you both were alive.  
And you were released, but not before  
he'd gotten prison room service, McDonald's

brought from his friends, but nothing  
for you, the one who'd done the damage.  
Oh well, I guess Old MacDonald had a farm and you

had freedom, me, a trip to 흥대 for  
the Little Sheep, and one last moon  
together before bone-cold weather before—

You flew home the next day, away  
from the kisses and assurances, away  
from them, away—

Right before Thanksgiving, too.  
I didn't forgive you, not until after a blackout  
fuck to ruin your Christmas, that fight

with your dad. You crashed through the stained  
glass in the front door, hurt and scared as I'd been  
that night. My plane to the States took flight.

I dare you.

The funny thing about porcelain  
is it's one of the strongest clays.

That's why they slip it in plaster molds  
to make plates and bowls, vases, trinkets and faces—

Each undercut has to be sanded out just so, no defects  
in the pieces, except for the ribbing excess,

to be sluffed off and rubbed down with your left thumb,  
all of the wrinkles and cracks smoothed.

That way the porcelain won't fissure in either kiln,  
won't slouch and melt into a bisque.

When each face is painted rosy, finally freckled and fired,  
the only accident that can occur is a chip—

unintentionally, anyway... Toss me down  
a stairwell, or stomp my high cheeks in,

chew me up like any other tuber from the ground,  
listen to my plastic eyes clack against your teeth.

## If I was your sparrow

“...some authorities maintain that ‘coition is normally solicited by the female’.”

“The lascivious Devil might assume the form of a sparrow.”

—From Beryl Rowland’s *Birds with Human Souls*

You must have been my sparrow, you fucking handsome devil,  
for whom I painted my lingerie teal with your toxic oil paint,  
tongue lolling in the mineral spirits, getting me drunk  
on that oil and chemical combination, its stench pervading the room.  
That must have been why your teal eyes shined  
as my oils rubbed off on everything in your bird brothel,  
off on your nymphomaniac birds, not unlike me, who solicited  
your action. While I gave you my bird whenever you liked,  
  
now I’ll leave you lonely till you pluck each feather out.  
I’ll use you as the aphrodisiac for my next lover,  
and the next, and the next, and even the next  
until I find what really satisfies me other than you,  
until I find the one sparrow who Venus will claim,  
until you are nothing to me, not even a forgotten name.

## Myth in Reverse

The silhouette of a bird  
    sits in the middle of the street,  
swaying with the sun, until  
    a sedan, like an evil magician,  
runs over her. Now she's Brolga,  
    the dancing girl. Her wings ease up  
from the pavement, a two-triangled  
    sundial, telling the time until  
the young girl will return  
    to dance again for her parents  
to the pan flutes. She sways  
    with each beat until she spins and spins  
into the cotton threads of their shirts,  
    burns them into her parents' skins  
with purple flames.  
    They'll never be separated again.

## Constellation Prize

*inspired by the Micmac tale of Mooin and the Seven Hunters*

Robins are born to be hunters,  
providers, with blood on their breasts  
and blood in the maples from their kill  
of the big bear in the sky.

Autumn thins the robins  
like cancer patients  
before their arrows pierce  
the bountiful constellation.

My mama Robin died  
before her arrow could pierce  
Mooin, before she could cure  
the meat with her chickadee.

I'll wander the northern sky  
forever hungry, her skin pale in memory,  
the final drops flung from her breast  
greasing the surface of my cooking pot.



*n*

Writing the *n* with my left hand  
was doing it the hard way, the same  
way I've always done everything.

I wanted to know  
the way you drew your uncial *n*,  
the end, so perfect, so finite,

flicked from your nib, forked into  
a pile of *n*'s  
across the silvered lines.

A calligrapher's walk is learning  
uncial, and you always must  
start with that letter, *n*, again,

and again, until you find perfection,  
so, ink and nib, I mimicked yours until  
my left wrist grew red, angry even,

trying to find the angle that I could never.  
You gave me only one night's lesson,  
and, until now, I have never held a nib again.

The latch clicks open on the green  
tackle box, I pull out the black ink, finger  
the gold leaf that you left. Mother,

a ghost can't grasp anyone's hand  
and guide it, smoothly,  
*n* after *n* after *n*—