A Way Back

The sound of your feet on a gravel walk, the cracking of trees as the wind rolls through them, cars moving in the distance, hushing the roads to sleep. Your own wonderful heart beating deep within your chest,

the quiet tick of time saying now,

be right now.

May our way back to being human be just around the next bend, down the tangled path that is lined with scrub oak and moths, orange and feathered at the tail, flying low enough to be crushed by passing feet. They were here with the birds long before we were, watching the day turn into night, the light between the trees fading to blue then lavender, creeping silently between the black branches

one dark shadow at a time.

Another Time

Picture a boy walking down Esplanade Avenue in New Orleans on his way to meet the streetcar. Strapped to his back is a metal thermos of coffee. a sleeve of paper cups tucked under his arm. He is there as people head to work, their hair fixed with curls or grease, their hats carefully stuck to their heads. They pay him next to nothing for a cup though their nothingness adds up and it is what he brings home to his mother. She waits for him in the kitchen with the jockeys, who board in the back spare bedroom. Their tiny, wiry bodies huddled around the table for breakfast. Her son is her treasure, pulling his weight in work before school. He is old enough to keep a secret and watches as the men sneak the doped horses into the racetrack through the Mystery Street Entrance. Their eyes wide and glassy from the cocaine and morphine pumping in their blood, lucky if their hearts don't explode before the finish. Their faces are unlike the other racehorses' and they make him sad. He wishes he could set free every last one of them. That was old New Orleans, the way it used to be when our family lived on a street lined with French families, a place of true beauty in a country so green. Anything seemed possible but so much was tolerated. One account from 1892 has a man named Rankin being suspended for ordering an injection to a colt named India Rubber. After the race it was announced that the injection given was not the usual mixture, but one of water, and that it had seriously hurt instead of helped the poor horse. The racetrack is still here though the horses are better protected, and the streetcar no longer passes in front of the houses on Esplanade which stand before us like ghosts from another time.

Crown Of Thorns

Starfish waits on the bottom of the ocean. It is called the Crown of Thorns. Purple and black with spikes around its center like an urchin. It looks like your heartif your heart came from the sea. Heavy with salt and bits of coral, motionlessly digesting the life around it. Its name from the venomous thorn-like spines that cover its upper half. A flesh-eating sea star, radiantly beautiful against the pale surrounding sand. A carnivorous heart to devour any unanswered dream, any forgotten love. I dive in from the bow of the boat, the icy water knocking the wind from my lungs, wiping my face off, taking my hair in its teeth. My tongue swollen in my mouth with words I will never speak. I spit them out, I give them back to the starfish that cluster around the darkall speckled and yellowed in their centers. To be forgotten, to wait here on the bottom for time to pass, for seas to change course, constellations to shift. Leo the lion waiting with a closed jaw and heavy padded paws to walk across a violet sky. The moon in its belly beckoning me back up. I slide through myself into another skin, scaled and gilled and freckled with brown. A pigment of wanting, always, to find the love I know is mine. Such a love to pull me into its salty grasp.

Dreamer

The guts of a dreamer don't look the same as those of a thief or a hunter who kills in the early hours of morning. Dreamers are rare in this word that changes every soul.

Release me from the wants of parents.

Turn me back into pure color or line that flows from the soft tip of a brush, a table to be leaned on and used, a kite to be crushed high in a tree, a bicycle with tires tight with air.

Pieces fall off each time I push past the openings of my heart.

Tight passages of wind razor down its edges, smoothing the sharp points into roundness. Nothing left to snag or pierce, I am brought back to a child's soft realm of possibility. Grounded by a game or a simple afternoon dressed as a man in my grandfather's suit.

To be anything at all.

To be limitless, borderless, have a heart covered in air holes, open at the top like a flower.

My hand holds a paintbrush as easily as my eyes can see.

The things we are good at have to save us.

The things we regret must be let go.

The simple form of a figure gathering fruit is drawn out in black ink then wiped down with blue-reaching for a second figure, turning to face me, nude and powerful, she is who I want to be.
I do not draw myself, I draw the dream of myself every single time I draw a woman.

Far Far into the soul of a tree, far into an animal's heart. To be born and never tamed, never forced to do anything but survive. What does a human heart look like that has never been made into anything but itself? Has such a heart ever existed? A heart sheltered from the woes of society, the plague of pleasing the masses, a lifetime of schooling to be made less wild. Secrets spot every heart, leaving star-like scars when they are spoken. Words, too many words, covering the silence that holds all truths. Take lesson from the bee deep within the flower. Hold the quiet to you like a nectar, feeding you, from deep within, say nothing, buzz with life, hum it softly. Far into your being, into the heart that wants you to let it go back to the wild, back to its true beating. Far

Having Babies

She calls up to their rooms in her mind. She waits but no one calls back, no feet peek out as they round the stairs, no legs moving under full skirts, yellow shorts cropped at the knee. How long can she stand, her head bowed to listen, the banister dulled from all the hands that gripped it? Her bones slide in and out of joint as she sways, unbalanced, her blue eyes blinking at the quiet. She is the only one left. Her mother passing long ago, remnants of her stashed in dark corners of the house- dollar bills floating from the pages of a book, a stack of treasured stamps left brittle in her desk. She sleeps in the bed her husband died in. His hand outstretched, palm up, left where she had cradled it the night before. "Having babies was like playing dolls," she tells me, "held them as much as I could." For a while it was just my mother and her brother. Eventually my uncle came with red hair and eyes that cautioned you to handle him with care. Three rooms of toys, tennis rackets, shotguns, love letters ripped up and then taped back together. They took long road trips cross country, amazed by the interstate system and the new shining cars whistling with hope.

In Her Hair

The cool carried outside in her hair. Split open by her walking, the last of the house let go as the air of the morning is taken in. She wonders what else is trapped in her hair, hiding for years without her knowing.

The fingers of lovers she no longer sees, a kiss on its crown from a grandfather who is gone, the smell of a campfire in the mountains of North Carolina where she canoed as a girl, the feel of the first time she cut her hair like a boy for the summer, high in the barber's chair, the smell of the bristle brush as it passed her nose on its way to her neck, excitement running through her legs. All the places she ever went searching for herself. So long with all she needs, thick with all she has to give. Hold her hair close and smell it, and you may know her gypsy heart as well as you ever will.

Jubilee

One August night the whole house woke to voices down on the water, laughter flowing in pairs of twos and threes. House after house emptied on to the beach as bells rang out along the stretch of coast, an easterly wind strong as the incoming tide. I stood in the heat of the room in my underwear, the last of sleep falling off me, bones in my back sticking out like wings as my older sister rounded the corner already in her suit, the rest of the big kids in tow carrying nets and buckets, smiling as if they'd stolen something they didn't know how to give back. A fever came the way love would later, a wanting as warm and smooth as clay. Running after them to something my seven year old heart took as a waking dream, a phenomenon Mobile Bay may claim as magical and rare in a world where myth and legend seem wrecked and gone. A jubilee of flounder and crab, hundreds swarming my feet in the pale light of the moon, slithering up the bank, crawling from the water. So many that even a girl wide-eyed and still a creature herself could reach down and pull up armfuls. Only as a woman would I find it sad and ask what had happened when the fish had let us touch them, scoop them motionless from the water. People walked home, igloos spilling with flounder, their flat bodies neatly stacked, their eyes asking why, going quietly as if the men who took them were the ones who'd been stunned, having gathered up all that the heavens would never have allowed them to possess in the light of day.

Modern Man

We were always barefoot as kids, always covered in band-aids and bruises and about a hundred mosquito bites, but we never whined and you couldn't get us inside at the end of the day because we lived to ride our bikes or swim for hours or play kickball in the vacant lot at the end of the street. I can name each kid in each house and there isn't one house without someone I remember. It was a magical place to grow up. Since the very beginning when the moon and stars guided us, living close, we rose just after the sun, slept with the windows open, the heavens pouring in and the moths and mosquitos bumping against the screens. A natural rhythm guided us like a bell sounding clear in our heads and our souls. There is distance now in the mechanical, adult sense of time and life. I move through most of it like an alien, a creature who knows it is not her way. I clear a path for my children that is lined with green grass and blue skies. the freedom of being loose in the yard with no one to watch them, a nonsensical song of happiness from my son, a trip to the beach for my daughter, her dolls lined up in front of her as she cautions them about man o' wars and the sun that can burn you. They are only three, and I watch them in wonder. Their sweet faces looking back at me with eyes so bright. How to keep them whole? When giant steps separate nature from so much of mankind. Technology happening so fast that we stand to lose what it is to be alive, to evolve, to feel the pulse of our own humanity beating up from the earth.

Who are you, Modern Man, and where on earth are you taking us?

Come to me with glass bottles hanging from the yolk across your back. Mix a thick paste for wings to make me a bird or gills to breathe underwater, down where the blues turn to purples and are filled with weeds that only grow in the dark and eggs that hide deep within the shells. Sea slime to coat me anew, supple in my moving and loving, waxy as the boat that slides against the waves, its wood sound and hard beneath the feet that pound its planks, sea that beats its bottom. To be a fish or jellies filled with phosphorescence to guide the sailors home. Gutted by the sun, I am nothing but this thin body that seems so small, but then my heart is alive and my soul clings to it like the sails of a ship to carry it home. Their white cloth a soft grey in the moonlight. To be the whale swimming beside me, massive and beautiful and unhunted. Its small eye watching as I watch its back stretch out as wide as a patch of earth that could never be owned, its own country, its own universe of dreams that dive below and rise again with gusts of life and stars that fall onto its great back, sliding free into the night's black sea.

Night

The path back home was not marked so we studied the trees and looked for signs of damage. One of the tallest was stripped down by beetles and stood like a blond nub against the sky. Somewhere in those trees you kissed me in the dark blue light. Your hand on my bare stomach your eyelashes against my cheek. You smiled at me with perfectly straight teeth and bit me softly on my shoulder. My young life opened then onto the rest of the wide world.

So much swallowed up to watch you years later, your back leaning over the bow of a boat twisting a rope around a cleat, the moons of your fingernails bright against your tanned hands, the golden hairs along your jawline, a wisp of hair falling from behind your ear. You were never mine to hold or to keep. I only dreamed that kiss though you promise me it was real. So much added to that moment because I needed it to be so. To believe that it tied us to one another. tethered like the boats that cling and bang against one another in the harbor, floating and free despite their anchors, their masters.

A fire on the beach, the house in sight, its windows lit up like a jack o lantern. To throw all of this love that will never be known into the pit so that it may go in peace.

I have tried to burn you from my heart but you would not go.

Nugget

My greatest gift I found lying on the side of the road. Barely a body left to show for what you once had been. When I got you in the car I thought the worst of it was behind us. The rest was up to you. I knew that. Would you ever trust me? I surrender, you told me, baring your stomach. Skeleton still visible beneath your red hair, burnt black in patches with abuse. To see that someone had tortured an animal as someone had tortured you made me enraged to be human. Every vet who saw you called you a miracle dog, said they didn't understand why you were still alive. This dog's spirit hasn't been broken, said one. Leave him, come back in two weeks. If he's still alive. I need time, alone, to try to save him. Your body tried to quit again and again, but you kept on. Fear in my heart now that one day, your great heart will stop beating. Remember that promise you made late one night? That time I asked you to live forever and somewhere in your eyes you said Yes.

for my Uncle David

Pheasant Hunt

The smell of your own small body as you waited that morning in the wooden crate to be released the sides dark with dew and lined with scratches from those who had waited before you as the sun rose between the trees still silver in the light openings between the leaves ashy with moon powder only seen by birds or the small animals safely tucked within their knots the bend of a low limb catching your eye a place you know you could fit yourself to roost in sheltered trees at night having flown home to be returned to all of the beauty you so closely watch as it passes before your eyes

as they have released you now and you tremble with a bolt of life within you electric against the still air that takes you in as if to hold you in its arms and you feel for a moment that you are spared until the shots fire and you feel them before you understand knowing that you fall now into the wet grass that smells of youth and of love the dog's breath warm above you your shining eyes searching the sun-filled sky for one final glance

as your whole soul leaps from you and begs to softly say goodbye to all of that beauty around you.

Poppie

May it rain on you deep within the earth, the sun find its way to your bones, the stars in your hair lighting a man so loved.
Our king, swaddled in history and fatherhood, drunk up by a woman only half herself without his eyes to carry her.

Woolen memories of their love, too young to know the meaning. Faraway man long gone into the heavens, his soft head dusted white with hair.

Strings of blue eyes all the way back to the lives he saved during the war, the letters written in the dark rain asking her to want him.

They bathed in the sea, hung their socks over the back of the boat from long black lines tied to their youth.

It nearly killed him to come home with only half a stomach, his mustache dripping with selflessness. Medals in his pocket that he would never open.

My dear grandfather, forget you not.

Someone once said they regretted there were no more silent films that spoke to everybody.

I think it was Serge Gainsbourg.
They say he constantly wondered if he was loved even though they loved him more than we loved Kennedy. Every artist asks this question.
He or she hammers it out line by line until some image is recognizable as a face or a note, a backbone of self-worth.
A friend asked me if I knew the most comforting word in the English language.
I guessed peace or soul, even tranquility.
Nope, they said, it's the sound of your own name.

Except for those with tragic souls or those whose families fall apart before their eyes-nothing as hard as that early age of helplessness and need as a child trapped in a world run by someone else's pain.

To each young person in the making I send out words of love.

Hang on sweet thing

before you even know it

your whole life will be your own.

Brown Eyes

You are the Cypress tree we watch day and night, and you are now black against a blue sky that pushes into lavenders and pinks. Purple martins shoot across your highest space, shapeshifting in their acrobatics to be more than a single bird in flight. This bird-filled sky peers through me until the lines of my face disappear, and it is every face that I have ever worn in every lifetime I have ever lived. To find a way to be in endless harmony. To keep coming back for more in all of these breakable lives. To be my own keeper, my own master always reaching for the same sacred sky. To be boundaryless. To be known by my own heart, loved tirelessly by my own soul. To love all else that lives and breathes and exists. To see it all as one. To know no limit to kindness. To be a part of all of the love all of the time.

To be the pink sky filled by a harvest moon.

To be the green of the tree that crowds that same sky.

To be the frog that sings in the tree or the mockingbird who sleeps within it.

To be the air that wraps itself around my throat as the wind rushes over me.

To be the cool beneath my bare feet in the wet night grass.

To be the tiny hand that reaches up for mine.

The brown eyes that call me mama.

Shoot It Like A Rubber Band

Crack it open like an oyster. Let it ooze out the way it should, scoop it up, then shuffle it in a deck of cards too stiff to handle. Make it call you by your name, learn the features of your face as well as any friend. Offer promises you might never keep. Become its blood brother, a cut along its edge touched to your small cut, sealed together, pressed with need. Bend it backward then forward, then shoot it like a rubber band- a green one from the grocery. Let it sing off key, tell a white lie, say that it has real talent. Don't wait around for it to skip a beat, take it down fast and hard, bury it in days of wonder, nights of fever. Feed it fruit and chocolate and slow sips of tea until it knows not the order of its day, its rhythm shot straight to hell, its left from right gone terribly wrong. Do all of this to your own heart and you will know what it has been to love you.

Great blue hand of the sky rolls fire through its fingers, splitting it again and again, stretching longer and longer until it is spun as far as it can be-

broken down into shining fragments we call night. Until then it fights hard to stay in the center of the sky, loving to be watched and felt so far away.

Sun on the backs of each living thing, sun down to the tissues that are hidden and sweet with life- kidney, stomach, heart guiding the way.

Warm them up good, melt them down pure, clean with light straight from the sun's mouth.

They come out as smoothed back as a wing

folded under with function and flight, perfect and precise, made of bones so weightless they belong to the sky. Tucked under bird's wing are so many of man's wishes. How long has he envied such flight- his feet and legs so heavy with earth?

Too Young

The women pile under the pier for cheese and crackers, a bottle of wine sweating on the railing's edge as the last of the skiers races along the water. The sun sends golden bars across the sky, forgiving any age, any pain, and they are still girls, laughing, though they are mothers and wives, what they wanted hung in a closet years ago with every other foolish thought. Their time is not their own, even the women who talk big and find a way to read the big books and see the big sights. Except when everyone is on the water, no one asking to be watched or held, no one needing kisses or his hair to be brushed, his face wiped clean, a tending so endless it either lifts or crushes the spirit within them. The boat glides in and energies shift, they unfold themselves like horses standing to greet us at the end of the dock, the pier long and thin behind them. We need their praise. their congratulations, we the children and the men who have been off playing so that we may come home and be told that we are wonderful, champions, too good to be true. I wonder if they know of the power they possess, that we would follow them into a burning sea or walk barefoot over glass, just to never lose them, to always find them there in the shade, smiling, all teeth and tanned arms, waving, too young to ever die.

Waterbirds

My grandfather walks through the fields with a friend, an open smile on his face. 1928, a time of innocence. He's on his way back from the river they would go to, barely eleven years old, all the freedom in the world. He talked about it years later as one of the most marvelous things he had seen in his life, a memory he went back to surrounded by death in the Marshall Islands, his surgical gloves elbow deep in blood. He and another boy come upon a hillock of birds sleeping piled one on top of the other in the snow, too many to count. They have delved themselves in to avoid freezing to death. Their eyes shine like diamonds. The two boys squat down low to watch the birds shaking themselves awake. It is the coldest morning he can remember of the time with his family in Monroe, Louisiana. "Brother, supper is just past six o'clock, don't forget to come." As if a boy could forget to be hungry. He sleeps under the trees any night that he wishes. His parents caught off guard by his birth so late in life. Some people are just born men, even as boys, they are men. His wife will call him at the age of thirty worried her heart has gone bad and she is dying, the beating low in her chest like a trapped bird. "Sit down and drink a cup of water. Just have to settle you down." It works on her to this day at ninety-three, my grandfather as buried in her as the waterbirds that did not die.

Barely Young

Life was cheap back then, but money was scarce. Always seems to work out that way. Good steaks

were about a dollar and a half. Some life.

That was before he went into the service.

He and another intern would give blood

to get money to take their girls out to dinner

at the Blue Room in the Roosevelt Hotel.

They'd go see the big orchestras to dance and eat,

it was a nightclub, a fun place, everybody was down there. Apparently he had plenty of blood to spare, though it's not as though they went every week.

The intern from Georgia who would go with him

was a skinny little thing and he used to feel sorry for him having to give so much blood. It was after

they had graduated from medical school,

before any of them went off to war.

They were in their twenties, barely young.

An intern in those days earned \$35 a month,

Chief Intern \$60. Three of them had tried to run the hospital but then finally, having known it was coming, they left for the war.

It was pretty bare at the hospitals

with so many young doctors signing up.

Some were rejected for minor ailments.

A few were lucky enough to be sent home.

They took the ones they wanted.

Life was very uncertain in those days.

"And do you know where I was when the United States was pushed into the war? I was lying on my bed listening to the New York Philharmonic when they interrupted the orchestra to announce

that Pearl Harbor had been bombed."

It was a Sunday afternoon, she tells me, and she was waiting for my grandfather to come see her.

It was the day before his 24th birthday and the sky was a perfect blue.

Three men came to take you away this morning, pulled you out by your trunk, needles scattered behind you, a ring of them around the spot you stood only moments before.

They took you to the edge of the street and left you lying in the gutter. Each one of your arms folded tightly by your sides

just as they had been when they carried you in and we huddled around you smelling you from deep within.

A thing of beauty brought in from the wild.

The sap from your trunk intoxicating and endlessly alive.

We strung lights around you and decorated you with such care.

Sat around you before bedtime drinking sleepy-time tea with honey and milk. Gazing up at your lighted beauty, we gave you all of our wishes whispered to you day and night.

You took them in and made us feel they were sure to come true.

Your green motherly love seemed to have no end.

You are lying now in the street as a woman walks by on her phone stepping around you, unaware of what you were to us

blind to your beauty, deaf to our wishes that still hang from each bough. I walk out to you and sit beside you and tell you that I am sorry.

For being human, for using your life for only a few weeks of joy.

I promise you that you will be our last tree.

Clippings of you on the counter and I can still smell your sweet smell. By now you should be in the back of someone's truck

on your way to repair the coastline of Louisiana,

battered and broken and thankful to have you.

It wasn't for nothing but it's too much to ask

for a tree to stop being a tree in the ground

for only a handful of human moments.

It was not my right to take your life and I promise you

it will never happen again.

Psychic Readings

Nothing is more seductive than a voice that knows itself inside and out, peeling away formality and space so distinct between two people who've just met. That's how you got me when I swore I couldn't be gotten- I just didn't see you coming. Now I wish that we had made it last longer than it did when I was a young punk in love with a wise man. Decades ago made longer by your vanishing when you walked away and I knew from your back that it was all over, that I wouldn't see you again until the next lifetime. That lady in Mississippi was right, back when there was a coast to go to-colder than it ever got, no day for beach or water, driving past casinos and seafood shacks we saw the sign **Psychic Readings** sending peals of laughter through the car. Wreck of a house full of kids with runny noses, kitchen in the back heated by an open oven. She took my hand and held tight, so tight I worried until I saw you in the next room smiling at her daughter. He's not the one, you won't marry this one. But I want to. Doesn't matter, he's not the one. Then who is? Haven't met him yet, he'll come in late, show you the world. This guy shows me the world. He's not the one-Then what is he? I love him. what else you wanna know? Honey, he's a past life thing, he's something you not ever gonna understand or stop.