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### LOST SEX AND OTHER POEMS

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Katherine Ringley. LOST SEX AND OTHER POEMS. (Under the direction of Dr. Brett Hursey) Department of English and Modern Languages, April 2009.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine, through a collection of poetry, loss and its effect on the speaker or characters of each poem. In "Lost Sex and Other Poems," I often write about death, the ending of relationships, and loss of the self. While addressing these subjects, I also focus on a turn from religion, or a sense of disillusionment with cultural norms, that often follows a substantial loss. As Elizabeth Bishop once wrote, "the art of losing isn't hard to master," and I have had to face and evaluate many different changes in my life. The deaths of several family members have had a tremendous effect on my writing. Like many of my speakers, I've had relationships fail, and sometimes question the traditional Christian ideals my parents taught me as a child. Many of my speakers also belong to the community of Southern women, with which I identify, still encouraged to uphold a mythical and oppressive ideals of what a lady should be. The title poem of my collection embodies the challenges a Southern woman faces, and presents the lady both as defiant and victimized. By the end of the poem, the restrictions placed on her are too overwhelming, and she seeks the only escape the poem allows. As a poet, I tried to take challenges like these and use them as inspiration to write toward truth. I hoped to create honest speakers instead of ones who hide behind words I personally want people to hear. I struggled originally, not wanting to write a collection like this - full of people dying and leaving, questioning God, and replacing the self with whatever society insists-but still hoping these poems might show beauty found in losing gracefully and in missing the things that are gone. There is still a sense of hopelessness in most of these poems, especially those dealing with death; the word "lost" often implies that a thing can also be "found," but many times this is not the case. The speakers cannot resolve the problems, and rarely ask why a death or loss has occurred. Instead, they acknowledge the issue and attempt to come to terms with it, sometimes in unhealthy ways and often with some degree of fear. Fear is also a prominent theme in this collection. Like my characters, I am afraid of losing my keys or ID one more time, or losing the people I love, and of losing faith - in myself, others, and God. But it is partly this fear that drove me to write and share these

poems — maybe if we can face loss; admit that it has, can,  
and will happen; we may all ultimately become less afraid.

LOST SEX AND OTHER POEMS

by

Katherine Ringley

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

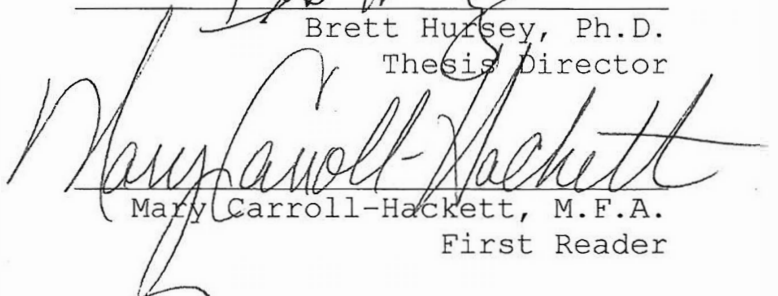
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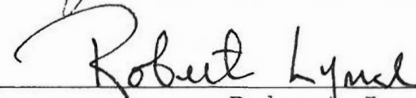
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4/13/09

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LOST SEX AND OTHER POEMS

BY

KATHERINE RINGLEY

Longwood University

April 2009

## Dedication

For my mom—

"And here is your lanyard"

## Acknowledgments

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## Introductory Poetry

- after *American Poetry* by Louis Simpson

Whatever it is, only the poet knows what it's *supposed* to  
be:

love, loss, sports, sex, beer, pot — and not an image  
in sight (or smell, or touch, or taste, or sound).

Like a bloody, threadbare dishrag, it contains the pebble  
of your knocked-out tooth.

You were four, he was seven and didn't even know your name.  
Now, make that matter to someone other than your  
mother.

Good Morning. My Name Is Miss Ringley.

Faces flushed, bucktoothed, they swarm and dart,  
 shove coats and bags in cubbies, grab  
 fistfuls of pencils, and finally notice  
 the strange circles and loops of my last name.  
 A *substitute!* Now they slip sly smiles,  
 trade names, need water, hafta pee.  
 (Coughs and sneezes spread diseases. Wash your hands.)

Four years of *hire* education, trying  
 to answer that question from graduation:  
*What do you plan to do with your life?* Nothing,  
 since I've learned it's what life plans to do with you.  
 School bell rings. Wedding bells ring.  
 Miss Ringley. Miss Ringley. Miss —  
 Substituting, I've tried on and decided against each grade,  
 as I *suppose* it must be with wedding dresses.  
 (For an educated guess, our new word is *hypothesis*.)

Most days, I want to fix their broken zippers,  
 fold milk cartons open as only *grown-ups* can,  
 tuck into my bag drawings of trains, rainbows, robots,  
 and houses with two windows, signed: You're  
 the best. Please come back tomorrow. Thank you  
 for the quarter at lunch. I love you. I love you.  
 But today it's going to snow. The children and I know  
 there's an eighty percent chance of going home.  
 (Water freezes at thirty-two degreeses.)

I cringe most at the fat-faced girls in glasses,  
 too loud, candid flirting with boys half their size.  
 I think they'd rather be brushing the hair  
 of an American Girl doll, but have to spend their time  
 deciding which maxipad feels least like a diaper.  
 The boys, like shy and shiny lizards, soon enough  
 will want to hold girls down and rip their hair out.  
 I want to wrench their arms back and, as they wince,  
 whisper, "Pay attention. I know what's going to happen  
 to you, what you're going to do. Listen to me."  
 (The arm meets the body at a point. The shoulder's a ball-  
 and-socket joint.)

Stop talking. Do your work. Eyes on me. Quiet, please.  
 Sit down. Sit down. *Sit down.*

I hear myself. Worse than becoming my mother, *I've become my fourth grade teacher*. The boys narrow their eyes. The fat-faced girls do not want to show me their bracelets or new shoes anymore, or tell me they like my necklace and then squeeze their hands together so as not to reach out for it. Suddenly I'm the same as any other grown-up. I want to tell them I'm sorry for losing my temper, as if it is something one can misplace, like a lunch box or a Spelling book. But what I actually want, most of all, is for the sun to nudge its way through the clouds and piss all over the persistent snow because I know they'd rather be anywhere, anywhere other than here with me.

To the Unfaithful, On Fire

we both will  
burn

all the larger  
cliché fires:  
for money        love  
success  
with hatred        desire  
greed

and also, more simply:  
the biscuits  
rice to the bottom  
of the pot  
leaves        letters  
black  
sacks of garbage

but you  
will burn

when the money  
goes missing  
love letters uncovered  
I'll curse the smokescreen  
I'll get the bellows  
whiskey        matches

I will burn

bridges  
the apron  
with the negligee  
sheets  
shit-stained briefs  
photos        winter coat  
wrestling trophy  
rolodex and  
ugly  
ass  
golf shoes

I will

dig a hole  
in the backyard  
large enough  
to fit a body  
and instead  
of climbing in  
I will fill it up and  
burn.

Home Video, Christmas 1992

Dad filming first, his thick Southern accent  
from behind the video camera,  
*Whadja get, Kath-er-ine?*

I tore open each gift from my list:  
    Easy Bake Oven  
    (later confiscated because  
I kept baking crayons),  
        plastic bugs  
    (later confiscated because  
I kept putting them in my parents' shower),  
        Cabbage Patch doll,  
probably the fifteenth I owned,  
    (later confiscated because  
I kept tattooing its face),  
        huge pack of markers  
    (later confiscated because  
of the Cabbage Patch doll incidents),  
        three-foot-tall teddy bear  
    (later confiscated because  
I kept riding it down the stairs),

and then, the only gift  
I kept that year,  
a calico dress and muslin bonnet  
Mom made, so I could be  
Laura Ingalls, in the Big Woods,  
poor out on the Prairie.

Dressed in my new outfit,  
I shoved Hershey Kisses  
into my mouth. *Where's your  
apple?* Dad asked. I stuck  
out a chocolate tongue  
when he began the story  
I already knew: *When I  
was a little girl*, he paused  
so we could yell, *Da-ad!*,  
and he began again, *When I  
was a little boy*, every Christmas  
*I woke up thinking Santa  
must have come and every Christmas  
all he brought me and your uncles*

*and aunts was one apple each, so  
to make Christmas last longer,  
we'd just shi-i-ine our apples.*  
I asked, *Dad, were you  
good?* in a squeaky drawl  
now lost. He answered,  
*Of course.* I scrunched up my face,  
*said, Then that's stupid,*  
*Santa brings presents when you're good.*

Mom filmed as I twirled around and  
around barefoot in the yard, dress clinging  
to my legs. I shouted, *A twister!*  
*A twister!* over her calling me  
to come inside, take my presents  
upstairs. I kept spinning and shouting  
until I fell, vomited in the short grass.  
The filming ended with frantic jerking,  
muffled thumps of searching for the lens cap.

That night, I ordered Dad  
to pile more blankets on me  
as he tucked me in, preparing myself  
for the cold, drafty night  
in the cabin in the Big Woods.  
He spread out three more quilts,  
quilts his grandmothers had sewn,  
and I asked, *Did you sleep under  
four blankets when you were a little boy?*  
At the doorway he said, *I had to share  
the bed with too many brothers  
and sisters to ever feel cold.*

I woke up in the night too warm,  
kicked the quilts to the floor  
where they stayed several days,  
until I walked into my room  
to find Dad folding them  
with the same care I'd seen  
him use to shine his work shoes.

*Get out of my room,* I said,  
and he did,  
taking with him the wrinkled quilts.

Settle

with her whispered yes all the men  
she could have married  
floated away as two hundred gold balloons

she dashed she lunged she plunged her hand  
through nothing air  
as gold balloons loomed in blue atmosphere

at night she thrashed at the thought  
of all those men  
she could have married she longed to lash

two hundred white ribbons to her bones  
and float away  
on the two hundred gold balloons

the wind swept away gold balloons  
with white ribbons  
ribbons she wished to grasp at night

gold balloons gelled into the black  
light plunged through  
their rubber skins too far from the wind

that carried her whispered yes and balloons  
with ribbons gelled  
into the black away from her whispered yes.



## Yesterday's Chicken

"Everything is in the past." - Vassily Maximov

Yesterday's chicken is ½ price,  
the sign tells me inside West Store,  
a broken building at the stoplight  
on 360 where I turned onto Old Church Road.  
The bathroom sink is streaked with rust  
the color of wet pennies, & the toilet bowl  
is a rainbow of swamp colors,  
but this never bothers me —  
country germs are cleaner than city germs.  
I buy a diet Coke, mostly to be polite,  
& the teenage girl in a Carhart jacket  
tells me \$1.50 when I can clearly see  
the register wants \$1.51.  
I've been away from home too long.

I started learning this road — Old Church —  
the day I turned 16, the timing  
of brake and gas, break hard, *hard*,  
the dance of driving home.  
Today I think about the war —  
not the one that's stranded so many  
of my high school friends in a desert  
without Copenhagen and Natural Light —  
the Civil one.  
I try to picture Thomas & Matt  
& Shane & Avery marching around  
these same turns, sepia-toned photographs  
of their blank Confederate faces.

In school, they never taught us  
about the Battle of Old Church,  
or anything interesting about the Civil War  
other than who won (& I think  
some of my teachers were still a little sore)  
& how many boys died.  
I hope I'm not driving through their souls  
now, as I push the clutch with my left foot,  
gas and break hard with my right, keeping time  
with this sinuous, rhythmless march home.

## Anaphylaxis

In the dream, my younger sister  
floats above the ground  
on a swing suspended by vines  
descending from clouds, or Heaven.  
She is three again, dimpled knees,  
yellow curls winding around  
her head like comets.

She swings between two mountains  
no larger than a home,  
wearing a skirt woven of cornsilk  
and white lilies –  
stamen and pistil and petals  
facing down, drawn toward the ground  
as if bowed in prayer.

My baby sister swings in a valley  
and smells like sourdough bread  
my mother pulls from the oven,  
its amber top blossoming over  
the narrow loaf tin.  
I hear her softly recite the words  
we made her practice:  
bird, nurse, Blair.  
*Buhd, nuss, Blay-uh. Bird. Buhd.*

I step closer,  
but not to hover over her,  
no longer afraid  
someone will give her penicillin  
or peanuts or touch her with Latex.  
I simply watch and listen,  
hope she will know me  
in my own dream. She smiles  
and shakes her yellow curls at me.  
I wave and she swings higher. Higher.

I jerk awake, as if from falling,  
knowing we do not only wave hello.  
Rocking on unsteady feet, absorbing  
the chill of hardwood, I cross  
the floor, fumble with the doorknob,  
rush into the hall to fling

her door wide open, but catch  
myself in time, only ease it ajar.  
Bowed into herself under white blankets,  
she is breathing.  
I watch the rise and fall of her breathing,  
and begin to follow its rhythm with my own.

# Legends Never Shoot the Boot

- for Todd Miller

Not all falls  
mean dying, except  
dream falls; always ending  
with a jerk awake  
and very glad  
to be such.

Falls on the field  
mean bent knees,  
the Slow Clap.

Falls on the field  
should not mean a poem.

*Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
From fields where glory does not stay.*

You left a pile of crumbled crayons  
in the needled grass for a game,  
tattooed with skull and crossbones.

Jimmy, still in braces — his tender whisper  
when you died:

*Wherever you are,  
I hope they make you  
shoot the boot  
for once.*

Romanesque? Yes.  
Last week you were tapping  
the side of a blue and white labeled bottle.  
Romana. Some liqueur.

I thought then you could crush  
thick glass between  
thick palms.

The peat and loam of us.  
Hard bodies rot to mush.  
So much flesh to touch

to touch.

All I know now  
is I want to know  
who's in charge of the light.

Tell me who chooses  
whether it slices through  
or gets smothered.

Come on you stranger,  
you legend, you martyr  
and shine.

## Black or Blue

Each night, I lay against Mama  
while she read from the Children's Bible,  
the things lined up and named:  
It's bad to be naked, and you can't  
hide from God — the man who dresses  
angels in white every day. Angels  
are Christians, and  
*Christians* don't stay dead.  
In the beginning, the Word  
and the world and the woman, all  
one being, not divided into sea and sky,  
light and darkness.

I cried the whole way to church  
the day she dressed me in black tights.  
"They're navy," she said, jerking  
our hands loose at the Sunday School  
classroom. While a lady led the group  
of tiny sopranos in *one little two little  
three little angels*, I slipped off  
to the bathroom, rolled the thick tights  
from my legs, thought I knew  
the order of things.  
Legs free of black or blue,  
I followed the line of other children  
into the sanctuary where rows  
of grown-up's eyes blinked  
at us like lightning bugs. I lifted  
the hem of my skirt above my head  
to showcase the white ruffles on my panties,  
heard the congregation make a joyful noise.  
Leaving God's house for hers, Mama hissed,  
"I'm going to beat you black and blue."

I knew then that the Word was wrong.  
God never ordered Eve out  
of the Garden; she would have rather died  
than return to the place where she was *naked*  
and heard the animals hoot and roar.  
She was not singing on a cloud  
in a white dress —  
someone might look up and see.

## Why You Hate Grey Sweatpants

You're watching college girls twirl  
grape lollipops between their perfect lips,  
and imagining yourself doing the same  
feels a lot like looking at your 1987  
Senior Prom photo – a Polaroid,  
and forever testament that hot pink  
and hairspray are not your thing.  
He shaved every day that year, drew  
hearts on your hand when you weren't looking,  
bought you gold jewelry, though until then  
you'd only worn silver. You wore it  
anyway. He talked about moving to Denver  
for no reason. You were stupid like them.  
You stare at these *girls* in their boyfriends'  
grey sweatpants, waistbands rolled down  
to expose sharp hip bones and tattoos of –  
what else? – indistinct flowers, turquoise  
and purple butterflies.

Watching them now, you want to go  
to the gym, tone your arms for summer  
shirts, remind your abdominals that  
they're actually muscles, but know  
who you'd see – all of those men  
in grey sweatpants, none with wedding rings  
but who still looked at you like  
the waitress who got their drinks wrong.  
You wanted to cry, no, scoff at them  
for probably listening to JLo  
on their sweaty iPods, but couldn't  
remember how to pretend not to want something,  
rode the stationary bike in the corner  
just long enough not to look pathetic,  
then never returned, wasted \$45.99 that month.  
The next month you wasted money on  
green tea and grapefruit capsules,  
the next month it was Ding-Dongs  
and Sandra Bullock movies.

So now you're thinking about what you've become –  
a wide-ass like those women in the park, only  
they're perfumed with baby wipes  
and Crayola, while your morning spritz

of *Very Sexy* seems more and more  
like a raunchy joke told at the dinner table.  
You always try to count the wrinkles, grey  
hairs of those women who never smile your way,  
women wearing the grey sweatpants belonging  
to the men who didn't leave.

Now you think about all that remains  
for a woman like you, who could never  
*carpe diem*, get off her ass and speed  
date or browse eHarmony or stop thinking  
about that year he shaved every day –  
left over are the oily, obese men  
in the food court, clutching double cheeseburgers,  
bellies bulging over grey threadbare waistbands  
and drawstrings taught with strain.

It's the strain that gets you, after all –  
the energy it takes to hate them so much,  
for wearing what belongs to you.  
The sweatpants he forgot fifteen years ago,  
when he went to Denver for a reason  
who looked nothing like you. The pants following  
you all day, beating you home, neatly folding  
themselves at the foot of your bed. Naked,  
you hold them to your face, pretend  
they still smell like his Ivory-soaped skin  
and not your lilac body wash,  
while you try to breathe him back in.



## Father as Immortal Bird

### I.

Dad ate The Elvis Presley for breakfast—  
mashed banana and peanut butter plopped  
onto a greasy paper plate. "This is the kinda thing  
to give a man a heart attack," he'd always joke.  
I'd like to think of a heart fluttering feathered wings,  
but people say it's like a pack of pachyderms tap dancing.  
The day Dad finally flew off in an ambulance,  
they made me stay home, and I watched *Drop Dead Fred*,  
shoved dimes and quarters between boards  
of our hardwood floor, blamed it on an imaginary friend.

### II.

I'm chain smoking outside The Bar and Grille,  
when I should be washing sour sticky beer from mugs  
or dicing celery for chicken salad. A cardinal lands,  
stares at me with black eyes. I know it's Dad, back,  
disappointed in my addiction. I sprinkle a pack  
of crushed crackers to make it up to him.  
At the employee meeting that night:  
DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS  
in black block letters on white poster board.

## Those Things We Keep

"Confusion is a word we have invented for an order  
which is not understood." - Henry Miller

I dreamed I was myself -  
twenty-something & real,  
not a dream self with someone else's  
eyes or hairy feet or teeth  
falling out into a bowl of tomato soup.  
Walking downstairs, I felt  
each nick in the banister,  
& found another me, seven years old,  
sitting on our blue couch, crying.  
The sound in the dream  
was a white room. I sat down  
and held me; I didn't stop crying.

*tonight is tuesday I feel Beter  
about yesterday But I wish I didn't  
do it. I don't hate myself eney  
more But I still wish I didn't  
do it But eney way yesterday  
was fun. PS I cant wate  
till fathers day I Made  
dad something very speshel  
PPS.-It is a Paper cardnil.*

For years, I thought I wanted  
to be a Kindergarten teacher, even  
pictured my figure in plaid jumpers,  
each with an apple or box of crayons  
embroidered on the front, but couldn't  
handle the way they looked at me  
when I lost my temper - the same look  
any child has when love goes away.  
She gets off the school bus,  
swinging her lunch box before  
finding something or someone's left  
without telling her why, talks  
to a doll & the ceiling named God  
& they talk back in simple,  
declarative sentences.

*to day is saturday  
I went to a picknic at  
Mr. Joes. We*

played tag and follow the leader and  
 hide behind the tree and Hide-in-seek  
 We (Me Michelle and dad)  
 walked Back home at night  
 Because Blair was sick and Mom  
 had to bring Blair home.  
 I caught a little minnow But I  
 Put it Back. I don't  
 remember the last time I had  
 as much fun as I did today

Katherine, Mom called in a tone  
 I remembered from the summer before,  
 cleaning out the attic, when she found  
 the white dress - all smocking & lace -  
 I insisted on wearing every day  
 to nursery school. Sitting on the corner  
 of her bed, holding wrinkled pages  
 ripped from their wire coil, she read,  
 Today is Wednesday and Mom bought me  
 a journal which I am writing in just now.  
 I looked at her reflection  
 in the dresser mirror. Mom,  
 please don't read that  
 out loud, I said, remembering  
 how I had tried to write  
 with anything: the First Grader's  
 fat pencil dulling - no sharpener  
 in the whole house big enough  
 but a butter knife, Mom's blue eyeliner,  
 the ink I tried to make by boiling  
 every flower in our front yard,  
 permanent markers, crayons that melted  
 into the blacktop during summer months.  
 So before she finished saying,  
 Oh, but this is so cute, I jerked  
 the papers away, eyes fixed on them  
 but saw instead the song I'd written  
 when Dad died. I'd torn it up, ran it  
 under the faucet, found the stiff shreds  
 of it in Mom's sock drawer years later.  
 I shuffled the pages into a stack  
 of school work, pictured Mom still sitting  
 on the corner of her bed.

today is Monday and alana Babysat and you

know something I hate Michelle  
 know why well today Michelle got mad at Alana  
 and broke her tea set I  
 Made her. AND  
 I AM  
 MAD  
 She Made Me waste all the  
 clay I have. Dad said My  
 wach was water resestent. I got  
 In the bathtub and..... It  
 broke. he Makes  
 ME MAD  
 But its working now.

I spent a year in college trying  
 to fall in love with a Psychology major.  
 He diagnosed me one afternoon  
 when I asked, said, You just want  
 people to like you. I'd read  
 horoscopes in teen magazines  
 that said the same thing.  
 In the next months, he rarely  
 got out of bed, seemed to go through  
 his days afraid of being awake.  
 We all had fucked up childhoods,  
 I told him one night when we were high  
 & naked & close to falling asleep.  
 When The Beatles, taking a chance for irony,  
 sang to Jude from my stereo  
 for the second time that night, I asked,  
 What song do you think you've heard  
 the most times in your life?  
 You're stoned, he said. I guess Happy Birthday.

Dad is sick and he tried to  
 read us a story But his trote  
 herts My head herts. I had  
 some pills that tast Like  
 dirt

Yesterday, I started exercising again,  
 pulled each arm across my chest  
 & back, but when I folded over,  
 I couldn't reach my toes. I picture  
 memory as a muscle, colored rich  
 brown & brick red in textbook illustrations  
 of the body. The summer before he

died, Dad took a week-long business trip.  
When I got home from school, Mom said,  
*Daddy's sent you a postcard all the way*  
*from Texas.* He'd only written  
*Early to bed, early to rise*  
*makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.*  
*Love, Dad.* I was 10. I threw it away.  
Some days I have to practice remembering  
how my dad blew his nose like rehearsing scales,  
sang the wrong words to songs, held  
a Styrofoam coffee cup in his teeth  
to lay his briefcase in the passenger seat, and  
shined his work shoes like they were his only pair.

## Backseat Jesus

"It is my belief, you cannot deal with the most serious things in the world unless you understand the most amusing." - Winston Churchill

Twice I've been caught driving  
in the kind of storms you die in,  
hand shaking toward the hazard button,  
grinding my molars to dust.  
Both times I started singing  
fragmented hymns remembered  
from childhood - still stumbling  
on words as if just learning to read.

*May the Lord go with you.  
Let him take your hand.  
Keep his love within you  
Until we meet again.*

The day I buckled up Jesus  
we were driving to Richmond,  
shopping for Easter dresses,  
and my older sister kept slapping me.  
*Hands on your knees*, Mom said.  
Michelle obeyed, started kicking me instead  
until Dad touched the brakes—  
we literally *straightened up*  
back when my parents still stopped  
on the side of I-95  
to take a piss or beat a child.  
(*Attitude adjustment:*  
our family euphemism.)

As soon as Dad accelerated,  
I snatched the loose long belt  
from the middle seat. Michelle angled  
her legs away, pressed them against  
the door. Instead of cracking it  
against her thighs, I fastened the metal  
buckle and pulled the belt tight.  
*You can't get me anymore*, pointing  
to the empty seat between us, *that's Jesus*.  
That Prince of Peace I knew from paintings  
sat glowing, face tilted toward the sky.  
Jesus might have healed, he might have saved,  
but Michelle kicked me hard, right in the head.  
Mom adjusted both our attitudes,

taking us home without new dresses.

That Easter Sunday, Mom whispered to no one,  
*Looks like some people only come to church*  
*on holidays.* The pews bowing with weight,  
kids shifting in metal folding chairs  
brought out by ushers. When the piano began,  
I held the hymnal close, unable  
to stretch my arms far in the too-tight dress,  
but singing along with the other  
Christmas-and-Easter Christians, celebrating  
the resurrection of our blonde-haired,  
blue-eyed savior.

The Singles-Awareness Poem

On Valentine's Day,  
I number the women walking around  
trying to scratch the center of their backs.

The air is cold, my skin is dry  
where you once smoothed lotion  
on the one place I can't reach.

I wonder if you're drinking  
today out of a paper cup,  
and counting all the men doing the same,

no one there with hands  
small enough to reach a soapy sponge  
to the bottoms of your tall glasses.

Every one of us might as well  
go through this day with a stump  
at the shoulder, a bound-up wrist,

whichever part was severed by the leaving,  
each waving the bloody bandages in surrender.



Memorial Day

- for Ashley

At the beach, we crush cans of Icehouse in a ring  
around the driftwood fire I imagine

might make glass beads from sand. In our pockets, once  
chips of bottles, ground down chunks of amber and green.

My best friend is in the desert and I'm at the beach.  
She's holding a gun and I'm holding a beer. So I want

to know why sand underwater flows silky, but above  
is heavy in hand. What makes a difference in sand?

Our *moment of silence* for the soldiers means bowed heads  
and folded hands but no "amen." I think

Iraq needs more wildflowers. I don't even know  
if my best friend is dead in the desert. I think

the gun they gave her was too heavy  
and it dried to white powder in the sun.

I lay my guitar in the fire,  
flames blossom against the lacquer.

I don't even know if it's in honor or memory,  
but I want something to burn.

## Rope

"Like carpenters they want to know which tools.  
They never ask why build." - Anne Sexton

He wouldn't touch the knot of it  
slumped over in his parents' garage,  
afraid the weather-brittled rope  
would shake to dust once moved  
from where it lay for years -  
beneath an old popcorn machine,  
next to a pet carrier still smelling like fur.

His friend would be too eager, he knew,  
to lend a rope, to assist some innocent chore,  
like hauling a lawnmower or hoisting up  
a deer for skinning. He figured  
dialing seven numbers would be easy, too,  
like ordering a pizza,

so he bought it himself -  
death such solitary work -  
from the hardware store,  
the slick aroma of metal and oil.  
He ran his hand over spools  
as if stroking the muscled necks  
of white horses, before choosing  
the thickest one, almost tasting  
the sweet nylon, wrapping it over palm,  
under elbow, over palm, under elbow,  
placing the tidy coil in the passenger seat,  
whistling in his truck the whole way.  
He left his truck in the backyard  
of an abandoned house two miles away,  
grabbed his rope, took off his boots,  
and wound his way out into the woods.

After Convincing a Stranger to Buy Me Three Tequila Shots

I started thinking about you,  
Mama, wondering if you sat  
under the rotary dial telephone  
in your family's kitchen  
for an hour one Thanksgiving,  
talking to a new boyfriend,  
and if you later told  
your mother you met him  
at a football game, but actually  
woke up next to him after  
a party – nothing left to do  
but fall in love.

I wondered how many times  
you took a pregnancy test  
before you married Dad, if  
you hid pot in each  
toe of your PF Flyers and if  
hickies were *burn marks*  
from ironing your hair  
in the sewing room  
hung with your mother's patterns  
for knee-length skirts  
and gauze blouses.  
I imagined you drinking  
enough pony bottles  
of Rolling Rock for someone  
to say, *You should have seen  
yourself last night.*

But if I knew,  
I'd never be able to dream  
myself the you of your stories  
again. I couldn't walk  
out of a service station  
my mother: Levi jeans slim  
against Frye boots,  
one hand crushing a dollar bill  
into my hip pocket,  
the other twined around  
the glass necks of two Coke bottles,  
strong teeth, honest laughter,  
balancing the Winston between my lips,

and smiling at a man in the cab  
of an old Ford truck the color  
of your eyes - our eyes,  
just daring him to try and love us.

## Lost Sex

"What is certain is that today it is very difficult for women to accept at the same time their status as autonomous individuals and their womanly destiny; this is the source of the blundering and restlessness which sometimes cause them to be considered a 'lost sex'." - Simone de Beavoir

A lady sips sweet tea with lemon.

A lady does not slurp beer.

A lady does not gulp cheap beer from a dented can.

A lady does not kill twelve cans of Natural Light, and when she does not burp, it does not sting her nose like horseradish.

A lady chews with her mouth closed.

A lady does not chew tobacco.

A lady does not dip Skoal.

A lady does not dip Skoal, even if it is cherry flavored.

A lady does not dip cherry Skoal in the shower and does not watch her clotted brown spit circle around the drain.

A lady wears white dresses.

A lady does not wear cowboy boots.

A lady does not wear cowboy boots scarred on the soles from grinding out the Marlboros she does not hold in her teeth and does not suck mercilessly in front of men.

A lady does not wear cowboy boots and a denim mini skirt.

A lady does not wear a denim mini skirt almost exposing her ass not covered by the black thong that a lady does not wear.

A lady says *yes sir* and *yes ma'am*.

A lady does not curse.

A lady does not string together curse words to make worse words.

A lady does not call a gentleman a shithead fucktard.

A lady does not refer to another lady as a cum-guzzling gutterslut.

A lady remains chaste.

A lady does not chase gentlemen.

A lady does not throw herself at gentlemen after killing  
twelve cans of Natural Light.

A lady does not whisper to a gentleman that she is wearing  
a black thong under her denim mini skirt.

A lady does not rake her teeth across a gentleman's earlobe  
when she whispers and she does not call him a shithead  
when he laughs at her, which a gentleman does not do  
to a lady.

A lady keeps things tidy.

A lady does not make a mess.

A lady does not press a razor blade into her wrist and does  
not watch the red clotted water circling the drain.

A lady does not wrap the thick arm of a brown rope around  
and around itself into the shape of a coiled snake or  
a clay pot.

A lady does not chase a confetti of pills with cheap beer  
and does not vomit into her hair.

A lady does not blow her pink brains out all over her nice,  
white dress.

## Quakers in the Garden

"You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

I got to sleep in, those weekends  
at my grandfather's, ate  
the cold biscuit left for me  
on the counter, then found Poppa  
watering or picking or pruning  
out in the garden, a faded ball cap  
on his shiny head, suspenders  
stretched against his belly.

"Ack!" he always said, tossing me the tomato  
or strawberry I usually smashed  
all over my shirt trying to catch.  
We shocked our mouths with radishes,  
still veined with dirt after a dip  
in the halved plastic jug of water.  
Roses and raspberries threaded their thorns  
through a chainlink fence -  
he picked me one of each.

Once, I asked him why he did not  
drag me to church like my parents did.  
"I'm Quaker," he said. I pictured  
his grinning face beneath that black hat  
on the oatmeal box, and left it alone,  
thinking it must have meant  
we were closer to God in the garden -  
hymns of wind through the sharp wool  
of okra stalks, peace in the snap-pull  
snap-pull of stringing White Half-runners,  
beans filling a paper grocery bag  
with the sound of rain.

When I could finally drive myself to Poppa's,  
I'd tried to untangle Freneau,  
Emerson, Thoreau - my religion  
becoming less like a math equation,  
oily yellow symbols on a green-painted slate.  
Poppa's suspenders slack, he  
listened to Andy Griffith CDs.  
I kept glancing at the door or out

the windows, seeing gourds darkened,  
vines bleached, turnip  
tops parted down the middles.  
"Rituals," he said, like declining  
a second helping.

So when my family poured Poppa's  
ashes into the James River that winter,  
I stayed in the garden, searched  
for the tolling of tomatoes,  
the sunflower's bowed heads,  
clasped hands of corn stalks,  
the trembling raspberry bramble.



## Lesson for Your Twelfth Birthday

Women are more beautiful with make-up. Always remember that. Hold the mascara like this — it's called a wand because it's magic.

Use your ring finger to put concealer on those dark circles under your eyes (the ring finger is best, it applies the least pressure.)

Flatten your lips across your teeth for lipstick (never red) and always blot on a tissue; be careful of shirt collars.

Women are more beautiful with make-up — always get the promotion or the proposal first. Or free drinks. (You'll need these things.)

Use liner to make your eyes look softer and wider, eyeshadow should shimmer, not *glitter*, and never use blue. The 80s made that mistake for you.

Bat your eyes — don't *blink* — like you just woke up from a dream. Practice smiling while sweeping blush onto your cheeks.

The softness of the brush on your skin, remember. A man will touch your face like that one day and then you won't need all this stuff.

## The Murderous Lobster Man

Saved every damn dollar for a new coat  
of paint on the trailer.

Saved a gallon of vodka in a suitcase  
for when the cows got mouthy.

Saved a thousand mutants by blowing  
my load on the bed beside her.

Saved the lucky bullet for the bastard  
who thought he'd marry my daughter.

Saved my ass in court by crying  
the Seashore Sideshow Blues.

And I would've put the fucking gun  
in my mouth myself if they'd asked me to.

\*Grady Stiles, Jr., reportedly an abusive alcoholic, suffered from a genetic condition, ectrodactyly, also known as "Lobster Claw Syndrome." He murdered his daughter's fiancé on the night before the young couple's wedding. Stiles was later murdered by a hit-man hired by his wife.

## Hyperbole at the Beach

"Give hyperbole reign, but see that its discourse does not run ineptly hither and yon. Let reason keep it in check, and its moderate use be a source of pleasure, that neither mind nor ear may shrink from excess."  
 - Geoffrey of Vinsauf

you are the sun  
 (even though  
 someone  
 is always the sun -  
 i know  
 i know) but  
 you are the sun

and i am the moon (i know)  
 pretending your light is my own  
 the dark and quiet second thought  
 i am the moon

(and then you are the waves) pulling you  
 as close to me as possible letting go as long  
 as i can stand it you are the waves

(and so now i am the beach) you rocking against me you  
 the fluidity of dance me the itch in the toes the grit  
 in the ear you shaping then smoothing me by your closeness

(your absence) me never truly changing you except  
 with occasional offerings: bushel basket contact lens  
 AA battery i am the beach and now you are the etchings  
 made by lovers driftwood turned calligraphy brush seashell  
 turned potter's tool you are the markings in the sand

(hello?) you are the lines in the sand  
 and i (hello?)

## What We Did

We were eighteen and needed beer money  
to pay whoever we could find  
to buy us beer. Every time a newspaper  
smacked a driveway, we earned ten cents.  
There were two thousand. The newspaper

gave delivery jobs to teenagers,  
but handicapped adult men and women  
got paid to load the papers into boxes,  
loaded the boxes into Matt's white Jeep Cherokee.

Every time we ran out of boxes  
Matt stated we needed to *go get more*  
*from the retards*. He always bought me  
a Coke and I always handed it back empty

for him to use as a spit bottle. He drove  
slow — I never figured out how  
to lead a driveway, and sometimes a paper  
would skid into a ditch and he'd have to stop —

cars barreled past us, laying on the horn.  
*Go the fuck around you bastards*,  
Matt laughed while he yelled,  
the black thumb of tobacco peeking out.

While we were delivering the papers  
to *the goddamn Swamp People*  
near the Chickahominy River,  
I saw the turtle plodding across

the pavement ahead. Its fleshy tail  
with prehistoric spikes, a mountain range  
rising from the center of its back,  
smoother stones surrounding it, knobby head,

algae-slick and yellow-eyed. Its name was  
*Macrochelys temminckii*, Alligator Snapping Turtle  
with its smelted jaw. Its name was  
*big fucking monster* as Matt accelerated

and crushed it. Quiet in the Jeep, Matt turned  
to drive back, see what he'd done. The turtle

lumbered into the woods, shell cracked  
on one side, revealing tongue pink,

a sunset on a river delta. Later that year,  
pulling up trot lines in the Chickahominy,  
I hoisted to the surface a dead Alligator Snapper,  
its soft body blooming out of the shell.

Too heavy for me to lift out of the water,  
I rolled him over to see the cross-shaped  
underbelly, traced it with my finger  
as I might an oily line of newsprint

or the scar on a sleeping lover's back,  
then snapped the line between my teeth,  
giving him back to the river.

To the Financial Advisor in the Camel Hair Coat: Why I Did  
Not Accept a Second Date

Growing up, I knew too many kids  
who swallowed quarters.

Lauren coughed and puked her 25¢  
in the pencil and paper aisle of the drug store.

Katie missed my fifth birthday party waiting  
for hers to reappear the other way.

And Nick's mother had to reach her finger  
like a hook into his throat to wheedle out his.

*Never put money in your mouth!*  
My mother warned me. *It's dirty.*

## Stockings

On our way to his sister's October wedding  
in the Appalachians, John asks, *Where are  
your stockings?* I see my lumpy knees,  
turned splotchy purple, and think, of course,  
I have forgotten women must wear stockings.

*As strong as steel, as fine as a spider's web* -  
DuPont lied at the 1939 New York World's Fair.  
All women know it's the other way around -  
a lower body boa constrictor  
that runs with even a sharp look.

Stockings. Such a lovely word, compared to *pantyhose* -  
as ugly as the ring they leave around the waist -  
or *tights*, a more accurate definition.  
We stop at a grocery store for *stockings*  
even though I protest and take my time

deciding on which flesh-toned ball of nylon  
to buy. I try to convince him of the problem  
with anything that comes in sizes A, B, or Q  
(Q for Queen for God's sake) but I *need to wear stockings*.  
Back in the passenger seat, I bunch

each stocking leg into a little puddle  
like my mother taught me when I was three.  
He drives over a hill and I hike up my skirt  
to cram my butt into the stockings, thinking  
god dammit, this is how it has to be, after all.

## The Only Thing That Remains

is the yellow quilt spread out on a construction site's black dirt horizon, house-sized square of earth missing. Someone removed the middle of the birthday cake, limp dollop of yellow quilt icing smoothed thick and flat.

No men. No hardhats. No nails or boards or bulldozers or backhoes. No miter saw or table saw or Sawzall.

This abandoned yellow quilt. A crowd, a host of golden daffodils. Hunter's Moon low on the horizon. Lucky tile to stamp with saddle shoes on the way to lunch in second grade. Wet pat of butter on a slice of pumpernickel. Reflection from a flower under a chin.

Chink out of a pine trunk. Lemon in a wooden bowl. Mustard stain on a nun's habit. *Faith as small as a mustard seed.* Yellow Bible on a black bed. Cork coaster on a black Bible. *A yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet.* Puddle of piss on the Berber carpet.

Patch of rust on a cast-iron pan. *Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree.* The circle of pollen in the middle of a daisy after plucking the petals one by one. Oh. He loves me not.



# What Emily Said

On our way to her father's funeral,  
 my cousin read out loud the yellow-lit sign at the  
 GettyMart:  
     Now Hiring Cashier  
     Lasagna

*Persons under the shock of genuine affliction are not  
 only upset mentally but are all unbalanced  
 physically. No matter how calm and controlled they seem-  
 ingly may be, no one can under such circumstances  
 be normal.*

My cousin told me: After the service,  
     we're going to Celebrate.  
 "Why are we going to celebrate?"  
 Celebrate was the name of the restaurant.

The food was not fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green  
 beans.  
 The food was a salmon covered in jelly with an  
 olive for an eye.

My cousin walked by carrying  
 a slice of cheese between her fingers  
 like an evening bag.

She wore thigh-highs  
 and confided that she couldn't pee  
 because her crotch thought she still had pants on.

My uncle wasn't buried, but put into a wall.  
 My cousin called it a human filing cabinet.

She wants her ashes  
 shot out of a cannon  
 while "Love Shack" plays in the background.

*When we all get to Heaven,  
 what a day of rejoicing that will be,  
 folks lining up outside just to get down.  
 Then I shall bow, in humble adoration, and there proclaim:  
 Funky little shack.  
 Funky little shack.*

## Plus One

In school, I learned the exactness of math,  
but already knew that one plus one could divide  
and divide again. At home, a mirror in each corner  
of our blue room, but one was wrong.  
*I don't see my face at all.*

I learned the exactness of symmetry, how pleasing  
it was to cut hearts or squares with identical  
halves. With mirrors, teachers tried to convince me  
how peculiar the human face would look  
with perfect symmetry, but all I imagined  
was a defective star, an oval with one bloated side.

I will not need to find myself, I'll always  
have been myself. I will never had to wear  
certain shoes, pierce my lip, dye my hair fuchsia  
so people wouldn't confuse me for them. Me and them.

The assignment *Who Am I?*, I'll misread as *Who I Am*,  
lose points for not attempting to explore my identity.  
In each picture hanging on our blue walls,  
I'll be the one holding the camera  
or standing off to the side.

\*In 2008, a woman gave birth to quadruplets, three of the  
four boys were identical. Hospital officials said there are  
fewer than 100 cases of "identical triplets plus one" in  
the United States.

I Want a Man

I want a man  
I can  
roll my eyes at  
like

yes sir  
to a cop  
like

lace on  
a first date  
like

a child's  
crossed arms  
and no, no, no.

When he makes  
others tilt  
back their heads  
and laugh,

I'm going  
to roll  
my eyes.

## Jackie Exposed

Slouched in the back row of the Slow Classes,  
Jackie chewed the acid foam flesh of orange peels.  
At the lunch table, she had heard it  
in a magnified whisper, made a mental note,  
tried the new diet for three weeks.  
Then, too casually, Jackie walked up to the ringleader  
to clarify, "I'm a size zero anyway,  
but that diet doesn't work." Jackie's new friend  
offered a *sit with us* smile. A few minutes passed  
before she cooed "A size zero?" as if asking  
a child to describe a finger-painting,  
then hissed, "You know, that means you're nothing."

Jackie went by Svetlana while she slipped off  
her clothes at The Gentlemen's Club — hors d'oeuvres  
and exotic women — for big damp dollar bills.  
The Remy Martin Extra-soaked money pasted itself  
to the slight curves of her outer thighs, inner thighs.  
And later, they dried a sticky crust to her skin  
as she watched the chef divide avocados  
with a butcher knife — the black skin holding in  
the outer dark green blending to sea-foam,  
parting around the large brown pit.  
"I think those wockamolies look like my eyes."  
Jackie tilted her head, stared lovingly  
into the twin pits of the wockamolie halves.

Her auburn hair grazed gentlemen's glasses.  
They cleared their throats in short gusts,  
smoothed lapels, and eased back in their seats  
after seeing her black bottomed feet —  
darker splotches of deep pockets where she'd tried  
to slice out Plantar warts with the sharp tip  
of a nail file, explaining to an incredulous manager:  
"I couldn't get all the seeds out." He winced,  
handed her a bottle of detergent, dish rag.

Listen: If this were fiction, she'd need more —  
Jackie reading War and Peace between shifts.  
Jackie playing violin in the stillness after closing.  
But this is not a story. This is Jackie.  
And oh, Jackie, what to do? All that's left  
Are men who want to taste the brine of you

And spit out the nothing seeds of your avocado eyes.

Early one morning, while double-checking fire exits, a tuxedoed bouncer found her, Jackie called Svetlana slouched in the passenger seat of her Honda.

He approached knowing: too late to be early, too early to be late, and expected blood and brain, or vomit misted over a dangling needle.

He inched closer to find her plucking the fine arch of her eyebrows in the visor's wallet-sized mirror.

"You can see so much better in the sun."

She held up tweezers pinching a short, fine hair. "See?"

## Mothers and Daughters

Becky. You have my mother's name.  
I have the front page, full color picture  
of your mother's one running shoe  
tossed from her body on impact just  
days before your birthday this year.

I reach into the photograph  
to snatch up her shoe, disgusted  
some editor could make me sentimental,  
angry someone had not already lifted it up,  
away from the cameras, and given it to you.

After the service, you said,  
*My birthday's cancelled this year.*  
I called anyway, stuttered a message  
on your voicemail that I hope sounded  
something and nothing like *Happy Birthday*.

See, what I meant to say  
is: put this shoe on, when you can stand it,  
tie it tightly and press your toes into its sole.  
Walk the forever out of your mother's one shoe,  
with the name she picked out and gave to you.

# Naming the Rain

My dead father  
starts singing  
me to sleep:  
*Raindrops keep fallin'*  
*on my head,*  
Fred.

I can't get him  
to sing anything else.

He keeps calling me Fred  
while singing about rain.  
No verses. No refrain.  
Funny how *rain*  
sounds so close  
to *pain*.

My father  
had some names —  
Earl,  
either noble  
or from a mobile home.  
David —  
a name that fights  
giants  
and sounds like  
dimes in your pocket.

The years he was David  
disappeared  
when I learned to speak —  
We change a thing  
the minute we name it  
for ourselves.

That song,  
your song.  
Sure, Dad, I'll sing  
along,

*but that doesn't mean*  
*my eyes will soon*  
*be turnin' red.*  
*Cryin's not for me.*

And in the morning  
I might think  
it was so nice  
to hear your voice.



Say You Are a Woman

and measure your days by your hands —  
imagine your fist as a nectarine,  
eat a cupped palm of Cheerios  
and a thumb-sized piece of cheese.

Say it and always count:  
the Points, for the thumb-sized cheese;  
calories in a pound, steps in a mile;  
the times you retch before vomiting.

Say you are a woman and so  
will everyone else, all whispering  
some adage of how your work is never done,  
your clothing numbered and labeled,  
where you fit.

Say, "I am a woman,"  
and have your worth weighed  
while you live and hate even the weight  
of your bones when you're dead.

## Our Last Summer

In a New York City elevator, I look up  
and think I see an electric crawfish –  
part of the coiled light fixture coming loose.  
Eyes fixed on the frayed wire antenna,  
fat bulb body, I remember  
why you are not here with me,  
descending to the grey streets of Manhattan.  
How you will stay Goodwill sneakers  
and faded gym shorts.  
I had hated that about you.  
How I finally left to become Versace purse  
and cashmere scarf.  
You hated that about me.

Last summer, we spent a day at the New River  
catching crawfish. You had to teach me how  
to snatch them by their middles  
before they could scoot away,  
then you walked down the shore  
to steeper rocks. The crawfish  
brought their clawed arms up toward my shadow  
before I jerked them out of shallow water.  
They looked as if they worshipped me.

In two hours, I caught twelve.  
I showed you the blue crescent  
stamped into the meat between my thumb and finger  
where one pinched me. You *smiled*,  
said I might learn how to survive in the world  
someday. I looked down at my hand,  
scratched away a flake of skin,  
and wondered whose world you meant.

The crawfish tangled together like twigs  
at the bottom of a five-gallon bucket.  
You dumped the wriggling knot into boiling water.  
I watched their red bodies rise and fall.  
You snapped one's shell and showed me  
how to eat it. I licked the liquid  
that curved along your palm before  
telling you how I'd been planning – leaving.  
You kicked the full pot over into the yard.

I remember the pile of shells by the Sweetspire bush  
when I came outside with my suitcase.  
You'd eaten the crawfish off the ground,  
you not wasting anything. I felt  
the grit of dirt in my teeth.

Here I catch cabs and never touch  
something living in shallow water. Here,  
in this city, I'm standing in an elevator,  
wanting to crack the shell of an electric crawfish,  
suck the shining meat from its tail,  
let its luminous juice trace the bones of my wrist,  
and wanting to tell you that maybe I can learn  
how to survive in your world, instead.