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# Baby,

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KIMBERLY SWENDSON

# BABY,

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POEMS BY KIMBERLY SWENDSON

Departmental Honors in English  
University of Colorado - Boulder  
5 April 2016

Thesis Advisor

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Defense Committee

*Priscilla Craven* | Italian Department

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The idea for this manuscript came from one word – baby – a loaded word. It suggests an infant and a lover, as it's a word used to infantilize women and to sexualize girls. The title is written as an ambiguous address, the opening of a letter to the narrator's younger self. It also introduces the intrusive male voice calling the narrator an infantilizing pet name.

I have been writing on, around, and through the topic of domestic and sexual abuse for over two years, largely without consciously working inside a structure. Entering this year with the idea of writing a manuscript, I wasn't starting from nothing. I engaged a process of working through piles of journals, poems, reflections, and notes scrawled on book margins or stashed in my phone. Through this process, I realized that I had been writing within a small set of themes for years. In a conceptual sense, my poems deal with the personal effects of sexual and domestic abuse as the manuscript's temporal narrative progresses. I also realized that my poems are about a figure that I have come to call "my girl." Sometimes I give her advice, sometimes I fail her, sometimes I simply observe her, and sometimes she becomes me. The manuscript I have created here is about the space in which my girl grew too fast into a sexual object and too far into relationships without realizing she wasn't happy or safe. I saw this earlier self as other than me to such an extent that I wondered how I could ever have been some of the "I's" or "she's" in these poems. And I wondered how all these different versions of myself would live in a house together, in that dreadfully domestic place that hides and contains.

The manuscript begins with two small introductory poems that establish a sparse frame for the poems and how they approach this topic. They address the reader directly, and explain why they exist and what work they do. These poems offer stories and proof of trauma in an attempt to provide a platform to discuss that trauma, which often denies explanation. From the intro, the poems organically fell into a temporal progression from childhood to adolescence to

adulthood. Separating the collection into sections was mostly for the sake of clarity, a decision that created a cohesive timeline for myself during the editing process and eventually for the reader. In the introductory poems, the narrative “I” speaks from a space outside of the temporal narrative that transpires as the child grows – a space where she is finally able to recollect her past selves and talk to them. The voice transitions away from that older speaker as the storyline progresses and the “girl” figure develops her own voice and the ability to speak for herself, which is why that girl figure blends from “she” pronouns to “I” pronouns. By the closing poems, the adult speaker is back in that initial space outside of the temporal narrative, watching her “girl” play in the backyard in the wake of everything that they both experienced in the house.

This thesis exists in another form, as a physical house in which the poems live and interact with each other. I made the decision to build the house because the poems demanded a literal domestic setting that mimicked the setting in which they took place. Each poem has a distinct ambience connected to a room in a house, such as a nursery, kitchen, attic, or even the front sidewalk. The idea for the house came late in the writing process, and as such, served more as an editing tool. In February, after months of haphazardly attempting to explain to my thesis advisor, Professor Carr of the English Department, how the poems link together as a project, I finally spat out that my poems live together in a house. So Professor Carr looked at me and said, “Then build the house.” The issues that were arising in the editing process were mostly linked to the question of how I would convey that house in a two-dimensional writing space, and by building the actual house, I was able to format the thesis in a manner that paralleled the physical presentation. The structure proved to be the most helpful editing tool, especially since I had so much raw material to prune into a refined manuscript. When I was deciding which poems were relevant to the project, I realized that the poems needed to demand a space in the house. If I was

struggling with a piece and I realized that it actually belonged in a park down the street, it was an automatic cut. Just as the poems are divided into sections of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, so too are they allocated to different rooms in this house. In each room, in each section of the house, the narrator meets versions of herself at infancy, nine and fourteen years old. There she is in the corner of her nursery; there she is playing in the garden she helped her grandmother plant; there she is violently becoming a woman.

Originally, several of the pieces in this collection switched between Italian and English, which is what prompted my asking Priscilla Craven from the Italian department to sit on my committee. During the editing process, Professor Carr made note of the bilingual poems and questioned me on the artistic intent of the Italian. She told me that if I didn't have a better reason than, "I don't know, it just came out," then I should take the Italian out. The process of entirely eradicating all trace of Italian from the poems felt clunky and inauthentic, so I chose to justify my sense of bilingualism in a mode particular to my experience. The Italian lines became an exercise in translation. I began studying Italian only in the past few years, and as such, the language has an influence on my identity in a manner different from a native speaker. My exposure to the language has been structural and academic, but it still has an organic presence in my mind. I study it daily, so it's always knocking around my head. When I write in a stream of consciousness, the words are usually bilingual because my thoughts are. Likewise, the lyric of my line structure falls naturally into the cadence of a romance language. When writing in English, my training in a romantic syntactical style bucks the guttural, clunky style of my native tongue. With these exercises in translation, I broke out of a syntactical rut and developed my personal style.

In a thematic sense, one of the books that most influenced the development of this thesis was Vladimir Nabokov's infamously unnerving novel, *Lolita*. I admired the manner in which he took such a taboo storyline about the love affair between a grown man and a child and created such a beautiful novel with enticing, choral language. Not only did this novel highlight the same themes of sexualizing young girls and sexual trauma from a parental figure, it also taught me how to write about these unspeakable acts of violation. It was the first and strongest reference point I continually returned to when I struggled to allow myself to write about brutal trauma with soft language. I read *Lolita* alongside Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, which helped solidify the thesis's driving image of a house haunted by a baby girl. Because I was interested in developing an attractive lyricism in my poems, I also drew inspiration from Carole Maso's *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* as an extreme example of how to push language beyond logic. Both *Slow Lightning* by Eduardo C. Corral and *domina Un/blued* by Ruth Ellen Kocher provided examples of code-switching between English and a romance language, which was a helpful reference when creating poems that reflected my own relationship with such a language. Because my project developed beyond a straightforward poetry manuscript, I utilized several art projects to help me visualize the house and determine how I wanted to transfer the atmosphere of the poems onto a physical structure. Finally, I wanted to include several musical inspirations in the bibliography. I referenced some works for their similarity in subject matter, such as Melanie Martinez's album *Cry Baby*, which is the optimal amalgamation of babies, sex, and gore. Other works are listed because of their influence in the sense that these songs play in certain rooms where the poems live. These influential works were an essential tool in molding these raw poems into a manuscript with a purpose, and they helped guide me through the writing process, editing, and presentation.

Throughout the thesis-writing process, I grew as a person and as a writer. It would have been impossible to remain stagnant, though. Writing poetry that put me in a deeply vulnerable place was painful in itself, but knowing that these poems now exist in a public arena is exponentially more exhilarating and terrifying. But this was work that needed to be done and stories that demanded to be told, for myself and other survivors of abuse. In the prospectus that I turned in to the English and Honors department over six months ago, I stated that one purpose of my thesis was to open a dialogue about the themes of sexual and domestic abuse on a creative platform. Now that the manuscript is complete and ready to exist in the world, I look forward to seeing how it does that prospectus justice.

#### Influential Books:

*Beloved: A Novel* by Toni Morrison (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007)

- For a lesson in building a house haunted by a dead baby girl
- For a lesson in the repercussions of repression

*Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe (Creative Education, 2001)

- For a lesson in progressing through a physical space (rooms) as a mode of narrative

*Turneresque* by Elizabeth Willis (Burning Deck Press, 2003)

- “Glassy Death of Gibson Williams”
- For a lesson in creating tiny prose poems that have a cinematic world inside them, because everything is better when you think it’s not real

*The Volta Book of Poets* (Sidebrow Books, 2015)

- For a survey in contemporary poetics
- For what I’m sure is an indeterminable source of inspiration and guidance

*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010)

- For a lesson in making people uncomfortable
- For a lesson in talking about the things we don’t talk about
- For a lesson in sacrificing the narrative for the lyric



- For a lesson in sleeping with inappropriate people and calling it “love”

*Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* by Vladimir Nabokov (Vintage International Books, 1989)

- For when he called *Lolita* “a painful birth, a difficult baby” (pg 65)

*Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* by Carole Maso (City Lights Books, 1996)

- For a lesson in lyricism and abstraction above language

*Slow Lightening* by Eduardo C. Corral (Yale University Press, 2012)

- For a lesson in the relationship between romance language and romantic lyricism

*I Wrote This For You* by pleasefindthis, Jon Ellis (Central Avenue Publishing, 2011)

- For a lesson in creating a soft, honest place to discuss vulnerability
- For a lesson in controlling the second-person address throughout an entire book
- For a lesson in pairing emotion with the correct loaded images

*domina Un/blued* by Ruth Ellen Kocher (Tupelo Press, 2013)

- For a lesson in translation, Italian

*The Sonnets* by Ted Berrigan (Penguin Books, 2000)

- For a lesson in writing sonnets, tearing them apart, then recreating something better (like “Fourteen”)
- For a lesson in building a house and filling it with people, then wandering through the rooms and watching them all interact

*The Book of Frank* by CAConrad (Wave Books, 2010)

- For a lesson in creating surreal child portraits that unsettle people
- For a lesson in saying something and not saying it again but then saying, “I’m going to tell you again.”

*Meditations in an Emergency* by Frank O’Hara (Grove Press, 1967)

- For a lesson in telling stories that hurt

*Citizen Of* by Christian Hawkey (Wave Books, 2007)

- For an imitation of his style as reflected in “Honey, Honey - E”

### Multimedia Influences (for aid in visualizing and filling the house with noise)

*American Dollhouse* (art exhibit)

- For a lesson in interior decorating (i.e. wallpaper, television)
- The exhibit strives to showcase the “private lives of the family that inhabits” the dollhouse, which helped me create a house that talks about itself
- Ryan Schude is a participant in the event, whose photography series “Tableaux Vivants” depicts artificially posed people in artificially happy and organically destructive rooms

*Doll House Series* by Suzanna Scott: a “figurative assemblage work featuring antique medical illustrations”

- For a lesson in getting literal, especially when it comes to women’s bodies as houses and visa versa

*Cry Baby* (album, 2015) by Melanie Martinez

- “Sippy Cup”
  - For its perfect amalgamation of sex, blood, children, and corpses in cradles
- “Dollhouse”
  - “One day they'll see what goes down in the kitchen.” (for everything that goes down in the kitchen)

*Syro* (album, 2014) by Aphex Twin

- “aisatsana [102]”
  - For a soft place to walk out the back door and into the garden

*HEIR* (album, 2014) by Balmorhea

- “HEIR I”
  - For the static that knocks around the adolescent hallway, how it mourns the girl

*Finally We Are No One* (album, 2002) by Múm

- “We Have a Map of the Piano”
  - For the little feet running through the childhood home
  - For something incessant, that denies rest

*In a Safe Place* (album, 2004) by The Album Leaf

- “Twentytwofourteen”
  - For “Caro Soggiorno”

*Secret* (album, 2015) by Angel Snow

- “Secret”
  - For “The Lies My Mother Told Me”

### Critical Works

*Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, and Moments of Desire* by Carole Maso (Counterpoint Press, 2000)

- For a lesson in using every available space, even essays on literary criticism, to talk about your sex life

# Intro

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[xiii]

(front door)

They say, "Give us proof," so I give them my body (this house).

They say, "Give us stories," so I give them my body (this house).

[xiv]

(back door)

This is what happened.

I'm going to tell you again.

This is what happened.

# Childhood

---

[For the Woman I Am Becoming In My Sleep]  
(child bedroom, sometimes on the stairs leading up)

My girl is the cadence of rosary beads  
dressed all in white,  
crawling in and out of being.  
In my closet, the gospel  
of her silence  
sleeps.

I have loved her roughed skin,  
the way she follows me barefoot  
around the house  
turning the lights on and off.  
The sound of tides folding themselves  
in the dark.

She can't even dress herself.  
I leave her alone for days,  
a tiny heaving creature  
caught in my sheets.  
Her hips are prone to paralysis  
from here down.  
She's wallpapered my room in epilogues,  
watching me with charcoal  
glasses.

When she dreams, she finds  
a temple floating  
in the middle of a lake.  
A god with no hands  
in a room filled with dry-brushed relics.

She tries  
to keep herself  
away from how he says our name.  
In my sleep,

the only word I know is *please*.  
And he is always coming.

[x]

(front sidewalk)

Put your ear against the sidewalk & listen  
to the human commotion of  
fits & hearts:

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

[Lies My Mother Told Me]  
(living room)

Trees talk to each other at night.

All fish are named either Lorna or Jack.

Before your eyeballs fall out from watching too much TV, they get very loose.

Tiny bears live in drainpipes.

If you are very quiet, you can hear the clouds rub against the sky.

Everyone knows at least one secret language.

We are all held together by invisible threads.

Books get lonely too.

I will always be there.

The lock will keep him out.

Daddy loves you.



[In a Precious Tangle of Teeth]  
(baby room)

Water baby curls inward  
while  
her imperial quickness  
between cotton sheets  
turns the consistency of  
undergrowth.

In the quicksand beneath the doorjamb  
I curve into a ball and pretend to not see.  
He is why  
he is why I leave  
her to fight for me.  
This baby in a little baby hat  
has splendor  
in her hands.

[This Is The Writing Wall]  
(baby room)

Since when did the unspoken

(soft paper clouds  
and liberation in their  
swaying

fall)

roll rancid down my throat,  
stink while I hold her breath

and harden into a wall I crash against.  
A wall with skin and bones and lips  
mouthing, “run.”  
It looks a lot like someone I have loved.

This is when the mind holds nothing  
but a fleck of ash from the  
arsonist’s puffing  
the salt crusted along a coral wound  
and the threaded  
stains on the nursery walls.

This is when we suppress  
what happens here.

[Grave (I)]  
(living room)

Your daughter's purpose  
is to raise the skin on your arms,  
purple pinched mountains  
with vein valleys,  
as you watch her spin  
away in the gravel, like worn tires do,  
kicking up debris only because  
it's such a pretty word  
for such a dusty thing.  
Her laugh forces you to see  
glitter  
in the cloud of it  
and her  
turning to a pink pinprick  
miles off.

Your daughter's purpose  
is to be sure  
you don't sleep too soundly.  
She'll keep you  
on the edge of the bed, grabbing handfuls  
of printed sheets,  
the ones still stained. That time  
when she was three  
scraped knees from the parking lot  
(gravel again, ground deep into yellow  
kiss-bruises).  
That time when she was fourteen,  
her sudden period  
that fell clumsily  
on the day of new sheets.

Your daughter's purpose  
is to land

on her feet, almost every time  
and take the fall like a fairy  
tale giant, bumbling,  
stuttering drunk when she doesn't.  
Curl yourself  
into the afghan of pulled  
picked  
bargain-store thread  
that's so thin it does no good,  
so small it covers nothing  
but your soft middle.  
Call out to an echo of a house  
for someone  
to turn up the heat,  
settle in for the Winter  
that is here for you.  
Count the tiles on the ceiling.  
Imagine all the times  
you  
told her to swallow.

[Who Would Want You Now]  
(baby room, stuck in a corner)

She wants to put a small crime  
in your no body  
to replace  
the swallows that the light left.  
Particles of burning hydrangeas slip past  
and leave  
that familiar bitter  
snap on your tongue  
while the blond and black go at it.  
There there  
the tiny writhing creature  
is tar.



[the attic]  
(attic)

Nausea  
coils the old straw snake.

Your eyesight will adjust time.

My stomach settles  
the whispers  
begin again.

Don't neglect your senses  
child.

A sapling of grime  
was here in the dark

hush-  
the door is unlocked.

# Adolescence

---



mur·mur·ing           (adolescent hallway)  
/'mɜrmɜriŋg/

The walls are hums, disembodied  
voices send staccato vibrations through my pillows.  
Desperation permeates these walls with the  
indistinguishable mummery of four a.m.  
I pull the sheets up to my ears and  
bury my head in the softness  
in no quiet way.

Four morning conversations fill my bowels  
with echoes.

          “Last Friday we were supposed to make love.”  
The consonants find their way  
unmangled by the concrete  
and slip hush into my ears.  
It is the last sentence I hear her say.

I do not hear the door close  
but dream that the walls grow tall and  
cancerous through the house.  
They cover windows and seal off corridors  
until the whole house is solid.

          “We were supposed to make love.”  
The door may have slammed but I did not  
hear it and I am gone  
running through rough tunnels.

[There Are Only Fragments Left]  
(adolescent hallway)

Fingers splinter  
around their memory  
in carpal tunnel focus.

Unfurling,  
these ruptured digits  
would let the dust  
of us  
go.

The air turns cement  
and set lungs stretch under  
the weight. Throat  
coils jump off breath like  
suicide.  
And someone smiles,  
sitting on your chest  
and stealing all  
the beauty into their  
dark matter. Because  
nothing matters  
now nothing  
except remembering how  
to breathe.

[Fourteen]

(adolescent hallway)

Erupting inside our overcoats,  
we plead  
for the panoramic death of  
tools  
that dangerous and perpetually  
come late to parties.  
For voices unhurt  
by our totalitarian adventures.

That little wild bouquet in your heart  
is a volatile lover.  
He is cold and dispensable.  
You think that he is what you  
want.  
But you want to wear no clothes and bleed  
profusely  
next to the beautiful white dress.

[Self-Portrait with a Fake Plant]  
(adolescent hallway)

I am not very aware of where I end.  
My limbs try to get away.  
Somewhere between the sky and my  
flailing elbows cover a hundred small  
Happiness. I am too busy  
floundering.  
I am a gangly thing. I feel strangled on my elbows

so I shrink them.  
A thousand ballet lessons fail  
my spiny feet.

I am not very aware of what I am  
until I land  
and feel the fullness of  
my loud and fumbling  
ubiquity.

[It's July]

(adolescent hallway, bathroom)

and I am sitting in my bathtub,  
mermadic, mercurial, water coming  
cold,  
fully clothed. The paper  
in my hand crumbles in the drain,  
the cut on my lip is fresh,  
dropping carnations in the water.

*I am*

*I is*

*I crept through solid white.*

I bare my teeth at the  
reflections and filling stark pews  
in the bathwater.

I want to crawl inside the faucet.

*I was*

*I will*

*Take back my ashen sheets.*

I am never there when my mother breaks  
down the bathroom door.

*Touching all my limbs.*

Open fire hydrants spray across  
my face in July  
and children, real children,  
dance.

The dark floral wallpaper of the church laughs while your childhood priest reads Lamentations 3:22 instead of  
the fingerprints you left on me.

*But now*

*Yes now*

*I wash you stolid gone.*

[xii]

(adolescent hallway)

The truth finds us in our sleeping  
clothes.

I dream in lavender

today's secrets I cannot keep.

She is dead.

I am coming.

# Adulthood

---

[Hiraeth]

(intro to adulthood, on a door)

So let me instead remember lineage  
and the call for a rare lover's scent  
to fail  
to fall in love  
miss our mothers  
all while dancing and it could be  
enough to feed  
everyone.  
I will only feed you.  
I will teach you  
the language I've studied in dark  
crowded parties,  
trying to show a soft neck  
my justice. Underneath all that easy skin.

So give me a rounded shoulder,  
matted hair, anonymity in a uniform  
body.

Of course we've learned how to sing while falling. How to build a home in one song and watch it burn in the next.



[If]

(on a door)

We built this place on a conditional.

White things white things I see tar wings and  
water baby.

What if the baby was on fire?

No, no, the baby has to live.

To be the unimaginable.

[vii]

(attic if lover, basement if father)

I hid the idea of you

in a glass box.

Whenever I lift the lid,

the smoke smells like Pompeii.

[The Eucharist]  
(wallpaper of adult bedroom)

Please God,  
be kind to me.  
This skin is tainted.

This youth is youth dirtied  
by cracking bones.  
Please God,  
I am too young.  
She is so small.

[Anecdote]

(behind the staircase)

It's 5:38 and she is not alone  
in a complex crying with Spanish babies.

In the small crook  
behind the staircase  
she hides her mother.

And if your own children begged      "*benevolence,*"  
why not so too the daughters.

[Moonburnt Thighs]  
(bathroom)

- i. The first time I tried to drown the moon, it got caught in my drain and the bathwater couldn't escape and neither could I and it mouthed,  
"Do you understand now."
- ii. I kept finding the moon under my fingernails until I ripped them off.
- iii. You know when you put glue on your hand and let it dry and then you peel it off and it feels like snow on a roof? My skin came off.
- iv. The second time I tried to drown the moon, I took it to the ocean and let it laugh at me. The waves pulled it in, held it just above my head, and I screamed.
- v. The moon got caught in my eyelash once.
- vi. The sky doesn't believe in locked doors or open windows.
- vii. The moon isn't having me anymore.
- viii. The moon is a fucking rock.
- ix. The moon is a fucking rock.
- x. I told you it was lighter than I expected.
- xi. The last time I tried to drown the moon, it slipped under my grasp and into my blood and built a house from the platelets.
- xii. The last time I tried to drown the moon, I took it to the pool and put it in the shallow end and it sat at the bottom smiling up at me.
- xiii. The last time I tried to drown the moon, I swallowed it. That time, she screamed.
- xiv. Every time I cry now, I can hear the moon singing her revenge song and she clutches my salt to herself.
- xv. This is the time I give birth to the moon. I make her drink my mother blood.
- xvi. My rest is rust.                      xvi. I rest                      xvi. The rest is salt (and sea)    xvi.
- xvii. My rest is rust.                      xvii. I rest/rust

[Honey, Honey – E]  
(around the corner)

Next to me, someone's throat swallows  
mine

“Can I tell you some secrets?”

“Britain banned snails.

I smuggled 100 in.

Fifty under each breast.”

He doesn't even have breasts.

I'm trying to work

but the snails are all over the floor,

and they make noise.

And that's the story of how you and I met.

[thumb]

(bedroom, watching from the bookshelf)

He says goodbye in litany,  
in crescent moons  
that mark the flesh below my bra where  
the skin raises red  
from lace-wrapped wire.

His thumbnails grace the creased skin,  
leaving their curved prints  
in the shadow of my breast.  
He rolls me over, not gently.

His attention is an unwieldy thing. I  
struggle to carry it.  
I do not know how  
to be passive and  
I do not know how  
to keep men in my bed.

[Rogue Vogue Pt. I]  
(staircase)

Saying your name feels like walking on  
blacktop.

For the longest time I've been muttering it  
under my chin,

repeating the motions silently  
as to not disrupt  
the indifference I built.

I wonder if your name has the  
opposite reaction inside of me as  
“fuck”.

If I said your name,  
would a pit  
at the bottom of the stairs open.

If I put your name into the sea, would I  
find heels half buried in sand  
and rotting crab shells  
in my pocket.

Your name is too scared to speak haphazardly.  
It opens and exposes calmly  
so many physical opportunities.



[There Are Currently No Floors]  
(crashing around the hallways)

“Why did you leave?” I had no reason.  
“Why did you lie?” I had no reason.

Because you were accidental. Suicidal.  
How very convenient that you never move your mouth but the guile still looms in every  
hallway.

“But you said.” I never said.  
“But you were.” I never was.

These are daffodil seeds – waiting.

“I thought...” You thought wrong.  
“I meant...” Nothing.

The tears outside her eyes were seeds. They planted yellow.  
Because there was no room for romance here in his skull. Just empty violins tuning. We came down from  
euphoria with limbless minds. Disillusioned. And wasted. We cracked.  
“You were never one to deny.” What?  
“Anything.”

[This is for you, jackass]  
(under the bed)

The shame falls out of my ears through  
its own means.

The algorithms for letting go were not  
simply put.

I know there is God in my grandmother's  
garden. I just don't know where.

This is where I tell myself-  
"You'll make it as a human, somewhere."

I am calling this part of my life a  
reaction. The effect of having had.

(kitchen)

[year one]

Where you find flesh  
and salty bone.  
I couldn't prepare for this,  
the metallic curl of your lip,  
rolling, where you see for the first time  
my innards  
swollen with alcohol.  
I stand back  
and watch you peel away my skin  
with a standard aluminum key  
so basic in design  
that it could open the sky.

And I think about touching  
the polish on my toes,  
the calculated rows  
of ribcage,  
muscle and malnourished membrane  
that you're discovering.  
Suddenly,  
but not altogether ashamed.

[year two]

You told me on a Sunday  
that you wanted children.  
I told you I wanted to die  
slowly  
and with an audience.

[year three]  
(adult, kitchen)

I found an open wound  
creased in an old newspaper.

It fell  
luminous  
on our kitchen floor  
where you tried  
and I didn't  
set out the good china.

*Honey, honey, this wrecked us*  
and dead fish  
are filling up the house.

[Sojourn,

*Did you name the ache that slept with you? ]*

(wallpaper)

I'm still sorry about it all.

I hope the walls don't talk about me.

Words can only apologize for my lightning rod spine, but I swear

I never did get your letters. The ones where you explain your silence when I asked about your nightmares. It's been so long, and now I don't know what Everest's are catching your breath, but I'll take this feeling and drop it. This is to say I still want you, but now I just do it quietly.

There is a place in Istanbul where the light pours in through the mosques and everyone there becomes holy at once. I meet you in the beams every time. When I check my messages, I listen for the catch of your voice first.

[In an Open Ended Letter to All the Ones I Regret Fucking]  
(bedroom, somewhere forgotten)

The one who didn't like the noises I made during sex so I learned to curl my lips around my teeth and swallow my pleasure until it burned in my chest and curdled into something else entirely. The one who never came and blamed me for it. The one who didn't like to kiss on the mouth. The one who told me he didn't like girls in leggings so I stored all mine at my mom's house. The one who begged me to take out my nipple ring, who grinned up at me from where his head rested on my navel, my hand stroking the top of his head and he said, "I'll rip it out with my teeth." The one who laughed while he said this. The one who never chased me when I left. The one who made me walk home alone in a snowstorm while he slept. The one whose condom broke. The one who shivered on top of me like a wilted leaf, the fear dropping in salty beads from his chest. The one whose last words to me were, "Just get the fuck out okay?" as he stood with one hand holding the door, the other his already deflating erection. The one who cried a lot. The one who said he loved me and meant it.

The one who said he loved me and didn't.

The one who said they were broken up but weren't.

The one who ended it on Christmas Day. The one who begged me to shave all over and then laughed at how I looked when I did. The one who still has pictures of me, though he promised he'd delete them. The one who could shrink my whole world, hold it between his thumb and forefinger and squeeze it into nothingness if he wanted to. The one who wanted to. The one who was my first but refused to believe me. The one who hurt so badly I thought that I could never do it again. The one who lied. The one who told me to be quiet. The one who told me to use my words. The one who told me to come over. The one who called me at midnight and left the remnants of the dinner he cooked for his date on the counter. The ones who stayed when I puked. The one who took a scalpel to my sense of being, who carved out every cavernous quake of me, whose voice is my voice on the answering machine. The one who makes me question the veracity of mirrors. The one that's in every photo from my twenty-first birthday with his arm around my friend. The one who left a fibrous thread that runs down my throat and winds its way around my guts, out to the tips of my fingernails, to the edges of my eyelashes, stringing me up, cocooning me from the inside out. The one who doesn't remember my name.

[Dear Vagabond, Bury Me in Boxcars]  
(back of the house)

I took a break from writing about the dead  
and drinking from writing about the dead  
to walk around my childhood neighborhood.  
Everything's for rent.  
Or for sale. Three times its worth.

Someone planted pine trees in front of a mural  
of pine trees under Washington Bridge.  
In paint, fat horses  
are breaking  
free and running into Clear Creek.  
Why didn't I leave

My initials in cement,  
in front of my parents' apartment in the nineties?  
Taylor K. had the right idea in '99.  
I pass a basketball court where men play  
under the florescent butt  
of streetlights  
and nightly cigarettes.  
I could have been any of their wives  
at home, filling different rooms in  
different houses  
with hopeful cribs.

I will be the wives that let the cats out  
to hunt at night  
like premonitions of future sons  
who bring home bad news  
like some head of a black  
rat.

This says nothing of the man who's been here for years.  
I hear him

when I'm collecting the pieces of death  
I've admired. He's here when the clothed  
me no longer recognizes the naked.  
He's here while I'm writing and sleeping.  
He's here in my house.  
He touches  
the walls covered in my faces.  
I am ready to crawl  
behind it all and  
stop.



[The Glassy Death of Gibson Williams]

(adult, back door)

I was in the middle of a silent film. The stars were overhead. Blonde, and mostly on fire. There was opium too. It was the Golden Age of Hollywood and we poured champagne back and forth through the bones of the first fish. Pushing the warm rain in our pockets. There we lie, entranced by the starlit water, with a bullet for both our tender eyes.

[viii]

(garden behind the house)

If you put me in a place  
with daffodils  
and time,  
you could scrape away the dirt  
beneath the wash basin.

[ix]

(backyard, adult and child)

My girl, 9 years old, jumps off the swing  
and breaks her ankle.

I say, "What did it feel like on the way down?  
Did it feel good; did it feel soft and brutal?"

She says it felt good.

It felt soft and brutal.