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2022

[SLATE]

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[SLATE]

A Creative Project Submitted to the  
Graduate School of  
John Carroll University  
in the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Kate Weaver  
2022

# [SLATE]

a chapbook debut

by

Kate Weaver

*For all of them*

*... you & the Poets & the trees & the sun & the spring & the dark & windows &  
buttons & babies & washing machines & cooking oil & sticky grass & sushi &  
words & lips & dance shoes & feet & earrings & men & Jazz music & summer  
nights & seagulls & ocean waves & Greek history & boats & feasts & marble &  
brick & sweat & dust & bookshelves & sweaters & cigarettes & memory & time &  
space & time & space & time ...*

# **[TABLE OF CONTENTS]**

Critical Preface.....	5
<b>[ONE]</b> .....	10
Fossils	
The Spring	
Buds	
Encounters with the Dead	
How Much the Earth & the Mind Remember	
Grandeur	
The Spider	
The Smoker	
When We Lived in Ohio	
Behind the Hostess Stand	
<b>[TWO]</b> .....	21
Rehab	
Hot-pad	
Charybdis	
Set Me as a Seal	
Going Out	
Ice Breakers	
On the Field of Desire	
Why Does Everything Have to be About What Happens between Our Legs?	
What I Heard the Mountains Say When I Accidentally Took a Scenic Route on the Way to Ohio	
In the Neighborhood	
<b>[THREE]</b> .....	32
Slate	
Vision at the Chik-Fil-A	
Between the Lines	
Why Does Everything Have to be About What Happens between Our Legs? Part II	
For the Overlooked	
It's Strange but Whenever You're with Me	
The Unamusing Muse	
To Those Who Have Made It	
Goosebumps	

## Critical Preface

Poetry is like a glass box in which we knowingly hide. It is a space closed, yet wholly open, reflective at times, looking out and looking in. We see life and death in it, and often, something else entirely. I have not been a poet very long, but due to its nature, I think I have been writing all my life. Since before I could form words significant to others, I was forming a poetic soul, patiently awaiting my attention. To respond to what is a lot of the time unsayable, I began writing. Loss, change, heartbreak, maturity, and all the physical and emotional complexities that come with them bring me back to the page—a way to communicate completely, safely, unsafely. *Slate* has given me the space to pull over the covers of what we do not normally discuss aloud and bury myself under them to better understand what lies beneath. In one of my poems “Open Wounds,” I mention how “we are / not afraid of shadows.” The “we” refers to us poets, those who must charge headfirst into the belly of the beast that is life and reemerge with notes about what we saw, smelled, tasted. Notes then arrange themselves into lines and breaks and blocks of language—capturing the fullness and brokenness that defines us. Everything remains incomplete, within which we contradictorily find completeness. Although she is not my favorite poet, Louise Glück brings a microcosmic scope to the realm of nature, specifically flowers in her collection *The Wild Iris*. Other nature poets like Mary Oliver and Walt Whitman gravitate toward a similar realm. Similarly, my poem “The Spring” shows how moments in our past encase the universal within the particular— “to fill an empty vessel / with the fresh, icy tears of the mountain” (8). This pouring out and filling in is what I believe poetry is and does.

The reason I chose *Slate* has to do with the terminological connotations of the word and how they correlate to my poetic experience contained in this work as a whole. We tend to use the

“clean slate” metaphor as a way of starting over or beginning anew. But what if we were to remove that descriptor “clean”? We are constantly shifting, moving, developing, but are we really new? Can we truly carve out the deep etchings of identity from our souls and trade them in for something entirely fresh and different? Although the world’s cultural relativism says we can, I do not believe it is entirely possible, at least not in this life. Therefore, leaving that descriptive space empty opens up a great number of possibilities as to what kind of slate we are chalking our lives onto. The actual poem that begins the third section attempts to capture this sense of starting over without forgetting where we have been:

Grayness wisped above like aged pages turning,  
a slate space opening down as wide as the break  
between paragraphs, between each black button

The space between trees and sky, between chapters in a book, between midnight and dawn provides an opportunity for change. It is both sad and surreal. Who we are changes with each new day and that slipperiness of identity is something of serious interest to me. Who we are to ourselves, who we are to our families, our histories, who we are to our lovers, to our God or gods, who we are to our clothes, our mouths, our talents, our memories? Each section of this collection ventures into the caves of these questions, following a somewhat linear path from childhood memory to current maturity. For example, “Grandeur” in the opening section dissects certain associations we make about our grandparents, praising the strangeness and particularity of each. Meanwhile, in the third section, “Rehab” rebukes this decline, although it is more of an incline upward, into writing on “springtime & grandparents, / plastic images of cartoons & crayons” as opposed to writing about self-deprecating habits, poor mental health, and internal struggle (not widely featured in this work). I enjoy shifting gears in my perspective so much that

I tend to personify my own thoughts and memories, speaking from a younger, more innocent self or from an older, more cynical one.

From this mode of self-personification comes three sections of poems, each section loosely centered around a particular theme. My initial plan outlined in my proposal ultimately restricted my focus on identity; therefore, the finished product has morphed into something more fluid and complicated—something ultimately more accurate to the human person. Although I left the sections untitled so as to not pigeon-hole my own creative process, each poem's placement has been chosen with purpose. The first section loosely focuses on childhood memory ("The Spring" and "When We Lived in Ohio"), familial encounters ("Encounters with the Dead," "Grandeur," and "The Smoker"), and the passage of time ("Behind the Hostess Stand"); the second, on more mature thoughts and questions concerning sexuality ("On the Field of Desire" and "Why Does Everything..."), depression ("Hot-pad" and "Rehab"), and the supernatural ("What I Heard the Mountains Say..."); lastly, the third crescendos the work into a hopeful end, speaking of new love ("Vision at the Chik-Fil-A"), fresh starts ("Slate"), integrating more ideas of family and time's passage ("It's Strange but Whenever You're With Me" and "Between the Lines"), and also anxiety about unfulfilled goals and desires ("To Those Who Have Made It"). Underneath and overtop this trifold angle on identity and relationship sings the music of language, the sharpness of creation, and the emotions invoked from each carefully chosen line.

This rhythm of my collection is indeed a mimesis of life itself. In reality, our young adulthood dissolves the myth of growing up, and writing is no exception to the ongoing process of becoming. I have yet to write my best work and may not for some time now. But I find comfort and excitement in knowing for certain that the power of language is no better harnessed than in poetic form, where each word, each beat is carefully chosen for each line produced. In the



words of Oscar Wilde, “A poet can survive anything but a misprint.” Within this capsule of clarity in language yet often times confusion in meaning, this genre (a dull word to refer to such a vibrant form) reserves a place for reconciliation, debauchery, ponderings, wonderment, sacredness, tribulation, discomfort, wrestling with angels, making love to devils, promising the impossible and expecting the inevitable. This place, this template of the Poem, can be filled with spirit, captivation, joy, loss, all hidden treasures that are shaped and misshaped by language—written symbols that are somehow able to embody our deepest fears, deepest desires, deepest hurts. We scribble our souls onto paper, attempting to at least define and at most achieve fulfillment, resolution, comfort, and mystery. That’s the kind of poetry I wish to write. The kind that doesn’t shy away from the terrors and beauties of being alive and the hope of what’s coming after death.

Now, as for how these poems come to be, it’s difficult to generalize when each poem emerges in its own unique way. From conception, through revision, to publication, a poem morphs in and out of existence so often that it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly how a poem relates to its creator. Personally, my process shares in consistencies and inconsistencies. I tend to have a journal dedicated to works-in-progress, but I’ve also utilized the Notes app on my phone and a small Memo book I carry everywhere I go. I am on high alert for words, phrases, and moments that strike me or relate to what I gravitate toward in my poetry. As soon as I witness something I can implement into my work, I write it down. Whether I return to it ten minutes later or ten years later, at least it’s there for the taking. Once I have a draft, I will return to it in reflective moments, when I comb through my accumulation of work and determine what’s worth salvaging. I then type up the poem (usually on a laptop, but I have used my typewriter on occasion) so I can see it closer to its completed form.

In “To Those Who Have Made It” I portray the common struggle of any artist. Aristotle, Sydney, Eliot, and many other canonical poets defend the mimetic nature of art and poetry. There is both a comfort and a panic that results, something I explore in the aforementioned poem—how are we to make a splash in the already-rippling pool of art, centuries-old water that seems to always be changing yet always remaining the same? Stein and Eliot, of many, both recognize this simultaneity of writing across past, present, and future time frames. So where in this myriad of literature do I fit? How does *Slate* relate to the current poetic sphere? (which in fact means how it relates to all poetic spheres). The mimesis that has emerged in my composition process comes in many sizes and colors. Inspired by the work of Tomás Machete, Dorianne Laux, Terrance Hayes, and Ocean Vuong, to name a few, the poems in *Slate* attempt to find a balance between clear, pleasant narrative and a certain mystical elusiveness. For example, “How Much the Earth & the Mind Remember” engages with the geography of memory, how the mind contains memories at times hidden in the same way the earth has been discovered by globe trotters and adventurers. On the other hand, poems like “Vision at the Chik-Fil-A” bring in a certain element of familiarity, clarity, and humor as the sacramentality of marriage collides with the craving for “an extra-large fry” (31). And, somewhere in between, I have written works like “On the Field of Desire” and “Goosebumps,” aiming to unite a celebration of language to personal experiences. It is this range of poetic flavors that centralizes *Slate* within the contemporary sphere. Much of my poetic philosophies rest in this work: poetry should be unapologetic in its form and its content, but at the same time, it should invite the reader in, bring them in on secrets and perceptions never witnessed before. I wish to continue to carve into this notion of elevation above and well-rootedness within the human experience in poetry. I believe this project will ultimately be a catalyst for similar future endeavors.

**[ONE]**

---

## *Fossils*

It finally stopped snowing.

Water leaked and oozed out from under  
piles of dirtied snow, trailing into chilled  
puddles, reflecting the monotonous sky.

Beneath, frozen & discolored, appeared  
Sunkist bottles & Target bags, sopping wet.  
Litters of unmarked cardboard boxes filled  
with more unmarked boxes & old socks.  
Used medical masks, a single black glove,  
& blue plastic Amazon packaging emerged  
from the depths of earlier November days,  
muddied as trench-caked men & strays.

It had finally stopped snowing.

Dark water ran into gullies, gossiping.

Everything thought to be long-forgotten, returned.

### *The Spring*

We walked down to the spring, me & Daddy &  
I can't remember if I'd volunteered or if  
Mama told me to go, figuring I would enjoy it,  
but we kept walking farther away from the house.

The big white bucket bonged hollowly each time  
it swung and bounced off the side of his leg. Off the side  
of the dirt road, the spring burst and gushed,  
sheltered by a moss-covered rock. I kept looking over  
my shoulder, waiting to see a bear snarl &  
run to devour us, like it knew we would be there,  
but the bucket was filling quickly & cold water stung  
my hands & shins quaking over the soggy-leafed ground.

Daddy stood below me, to the left, making sure that  
I watched where I put my feet, holding the bottom of  
the bucket. He'd wanted me to fill it, I think.  
I know he did because he knew  
how thrilling it was to fill an empty vessel  
with the fresh, icy tears of the mountain.

## *Buds*

I remember when I used to be afraid  
that the random snowfall in April would kill  
the newly-sprung buds on every tree.  
Green grass had finally made its way back  
into the open air, daffodils confidently shooting up,  
the earliest of the season. And those perfectly  
bulbous buds of hope, perched on the edge of  
every slender branch, shivered bitterly  
under the unwanted layer of cold.  
The three of us sat at the bay window,  
Easter dresses spread out passed our knees,  
pinks and yellows and tight pretty bows  
laced around our sapling waists.  
I remember seeing from the car window so many  
colorful eggs lying abandoned under the cold white tide  
as our creaky mini-van pulled down Nana's drive.  
Now, I walk to my car, salt crunching underfoot,  
knowing just how quickly those first buds will appear  
and just how quickly they will vanish.

*Encounters with the Dead*

*for Great Gram & Great Pap*

I.

I kept wondering why there was a fish tank in a funeral home.

Shining black Mary Jane's and lace socks  
hugged my feet, tip-toeing on a velvet stool to peer over,  
the edge like a ship's polished rail.

Daddy stood there, answering questions about something  
we couldn't fully understand. There the tank squatted full  
of goldfish, fins flapping, the water saturated with blue, rippling light.

I saw how the fancy box cradled Great Gram's head,  
enclosing her hair like oysters around their pearls.

II.

They cremated him. I bet his smoke smelled of Pittsburgh  
seasons preserved between crammed suburban houses.  
We watched soldiers carry the folded flag & his daughter whispered  
something about the fading past: *he's part of a dying generation.*

But they are very much alive when they look  
out from their sepia portraits inside untouched frames  
fragments of a world long gone  
hanging in the dining room of my uncle's house.

I'd never asked Great Pap about the war—  
regret, mystery, and lost time, & why didn't I?

It's hard to picture him in battle.  
I only see a row of red-cushioned choir stalls,  
where he would stand and belt out "On Eagles Wings"  
with his blue robe and gold fabric draped over him.

*How Much the Earth & the Mind Remember*

They saw them there—  
They knew them there.

The earth keeps count  
of the knees that buckle &  
the heads that thump against  
its expansive chest, soaking wet.

“Cast off, lads!” the captain cries  
into the gridded waves  
the haul plows, tilling the  
unknown & yet the well-known,  
hidden beneath skulls  
cough through dust coating the shadowed  
layers of the heart beating as violently as  
stowaways beating fists against the  
sealed valves, blood-choked

They arrive.

anchor piercing the reef,  
steel de-robing the forest

the people & the sailors & the others

saw them there & I  
knew them there.



## *Grandeur*

They carry it with them, everywhere.  
And they travel a lot, driving mostly  
from state to state to see the grandkids.  
They carry it, that smell, everywhere.  
The smell of over-stuffed refrigerators  
and long weeks spent in the dandelion summer,  
riding the mower & chomping on Klondike bars.

I breathe it all in with each long-awaited hug:  
the perfumes of pantry cookies & holiday pine,  
an incense wafting around them  
in their laughter, bulky photo albums, & Lazy Boys.  
I can smell it from inside her red leather pocket book  
& see it fingerprinted around his whiskey glass.

We discover it buried inside those Christmas gifts,  
giant Dollar Tree bags filled to the brim with  
books, shoes, ornaments, socks, stuffed animals,  
antique jewelry, over-sized t-shirts, chocolate, & calendars.  
They may have mislabeled some things, maybe  
included a previously forgotten birthday present, too.  
But that's how they must have done it.

Giftwrapping the unwrappable,  
fossilizing in memory their humble spirits of grandeur.

## *The Spider*

White picket fence posts snaked in tight, folding intervals up to the gate. At its end stood the dreaded measuring pole, painted a golden yellow, its black ticks glaring out and down at the little ones. The ones just like me, wearing bedazzled Hello Kitty t-shirts and blue shorts from JCPenney. I shifted in my sneakers.

Screams came and went in the wind. The eight black tentacles spun and plunged and rose up again, carrying the cargo of hair-tousled heads and raised hands. Daddy stood next to me, silently watching. My older sister said “it was so much fun!” but I wanted to run far away and not stop until I was back home in bed with my ladybug book and pink blanket. I looked back across the line to the rides I knew I liked. The safe ones. “Come on, Katherine.” We were next. I stood beside the scowling measuring pole, and for the first time in my short existence, I felt disappointed to be just tall enough. We climbed in. The compartment door slammed over our knees.

the wooden coaster rumbles,  
sun beating on necks,  
distant Merry-go-round music plays.

*The Smoker*

fantasizes a life in shadow & flame—  
in other words, craves ash—no,  
craves the light, the ballooning air  
inside porous lungs, sponged in charcoal.  
Growing up, breathing in exhaled smoke,  
white & cunning. My father plunges at the tray.  
Put it out. Leave it alone. I watch his jump  
to cigars, not understanding how they  
were any different. Tobacco lives within the folds  
of every pull-over and button-down, seeping  
into skin like cologne, and when he found out  
about my drunken night, tumbling into the yard,  
inhaling that smell of childhood & home,  
he asked—no, begged, made me promise  
I'd stop. I said I would but soon realized  
how closely my bones resemble the foundation  
from that house of smoke, how irreversible it is—  
the muscle memory my lungs cannot forget.

*When We Lived in Ohio*

When we lived in Ohio  
with the white house & bleached sidewalks,  
leading to libraries & parks & softball games  
past the steepest sledding hill behind  
the Methodist church parking lot, where kids  
would speak words much too old for them,  
& exhale smoke once hidden  
with the monsters under their beds.

When we lived in Ohio  
we didn't know anything beyond  
our parents' blue Jeep Cherokee  
or the sound of crisp heat on scattered gravel.  
We slept in tents for the hell of it, after watching  
movie-like portraits of gazeboed events  
& seeing white, smiling faces fold & unfold  
in the subterranean summer light.

When we lived there, not here, then,  
not now, our parents lived secret lives,  
lives we now see so clearly that we force  
our mouths to suck in & blow out the smoke  
we once thought sickening, blurring realities  
we never wanted to know.

*Behind the Hostess Stand*

amidst the disheveled coat-rack tags & Lysol can,  
a lime green binder rests, dust sticking between plastic.  
its cover crinkles open to pages encased in translucent sheets.

under “phone numbers,” I find a list of hotels—  
*Ritz Carlton-Cleveland, Statler, Alcazar*—  
& taxi cabs, with no mention of downloading Lyft or Uber.

the list must have been made when  
men and women dressed up to go out,  
heading to Filene’s or even Linens-n-Things:  
when tights preceded leggings and men wore ties  
& collared shirts. Heavy coats hung up  
in administrative closets while guests in Houndstooth suits  
& loafers were shown to their seats. The massively bound  
yellow pages continually consulted for rides & hotel beds.

I feel the winter wind blow inside from the open door  
& hear “Table for two, under Johnson.”  
Jeans, torn on the thighs. Beanie & muddied Converse.

I slide the binder back on the shelf.

**[TWO]**

---

*Rehab*

I would normally be drunk at this point  
in the evening. I would be able to escape  
onto the numbed corners of the page,  
the pen ruining my handwriting's reputation.

Now, a sober poet wilts and writes  
about springtime & grandparents,  
plastic images of cartoons & crayons.  
Song, dance, clear thoughts, healthy skin.  
I suppose I could admit that I'm growing,  
but the truth is, I've always loved being short.

## *Hot-pad*

I went for a walk because my mother said  
it would help me with my serotonin levels.  
I also went for a walk because I wanted to know  
if she was right.

Coming out onto the main road,  
I looked down  
& a red hot-pad looked up at me  
    squashed into the concrete, powdered with  
sand & gravel. Above, “Gutter Cleaner” announced  
itself in big bold letters against a white sign  
crucified by ten staples to the telephone pole.

Someone had abandoned, or lost, or  
paid a gutter cleaner to take their gutted  
leaves ‘n shit along with their grandmother’s hot-pad  
that she’d probably used for all her famous casserole dishes  
& placed it, looking like an abandoned piece of gum,  
in the path of a semi-depressed graduate student.

How generous.

Needless to say,  
those serotonin levels rose  
as I circled back home.

The sky was magnificently blue.



*Charybdis*

Ramen noodles & bits of lobster  
coming like welded wax & pine  
down the rusting kitchen drain

*Set Me as a Seal*

Innocent love letters written  
from what we believe to be  
the depths of our souls.

        a silver kiss  
polished, rounded  
between fingers  
bending outward, down  
onto the crown.  
a castle tower,  
falls slowly,  
lowering the minted sign  
        onto oozing red wax.

Pressure  
        holding  
        squeezing  
like reconciling lovers

until all is released  
leaving behind  
the wet tattoo on parchment,  
pliable as flesh, your skin, sinking  
into the hardening, imprinted seal

## *Going Out*

The whole day revolves around it. Anticipation, choosing the jewelry to go with the dress, pulling out the pointed-toe nude heels from the rack. Gray sky darkens gradually, lamplight warm. Undressing into the steam-filled shower, shaving almost everything. Hair and exfoliated skin clump at the drain. Lotion lathers smooth, dry limbs.

Spotify plays anonymous pop music, the room fluttering with the blush brushes and the sun setting. Dry hair, don dress, maybe dance a bit. Hairspray, lipstick, earrings, shoes, each action spaced by glances out the window. The snow comes down. He drives up slowly. I know, but pretend not to know, that he is watching me walk to him, head down, knees peeking out from my coat's long, beige lips. A table for two awaits under amber lights.

heels land muted on carpet.  
glassware glistens.  
eyes are made.

*Ice Breakers*

I never liked them.  
What's it to me  
to know a fleeting stranger's  
favorite color or food?  
"Let's all go around and..."

\*

It shook inside the glass  
when his knee accidentally hit  
the leg of the table-clothed two-top.  
We kissed, undressed in his Toyota  
because I failed to think of a fun fact  
to share about myself.

*On the Field of Desire*

The shore lay there disheveled and wet. It  
always seems to rain on the eve of battle.

Viking ships pierce fogged skies, slipping  
quietly closer and closer. Specks, pebbles

slosh under the weight of the waves. The  
rocks tremble, smelling their wanted enemy—

Lovers heave on the mattress,  
nostrils smothered in hair, in smells

foreign land uncharted, yet marked,  
pricked with colored flags, ships

pushed into place. The shore drowns  
under the Viking keel, pressing massive weight down

on soft, pliable sand the color of skin. The enemy  
closes in and victory cries out to its history.

*Why Does Everything Have to be about What Happens between Our Legs?*

Bosoms are not roses or moons,  
but platters of jiggling jello like  
the ones made for parties in the 70s.  
Genitals are not gentle petals  
but a wrinkled bag of chips—  
You straighten the ends & purse  
your lips around, opening wide for  
the crummy remains, suck fingers clean.

We do not see with our eyes. We  
keep them closed feeling only blood  
in the ears, around the brain,  
through the gut, between the legs. Why, to you,  
am I merely a pussy and two breasts—  
Do not ask me my name.

*What I Heard the Mountains Say When I Mistakenly Took a Scenic Route on the Way to Ohio*

I am a brushstroke.

I am a pulling wave, never  
to fall ceaselessly  
unmoving within the sky.

I am cut by asphalt rivers.  
I am pressed by painted lights.

I am welcoming.  
I am enticing.  
I am terrifying.

As the settlers once toiled  
with their wagons & legacies,  
you now stare agape,  
eyes like infant hands,

useless  
unconditioned  
untouched

*In the Neighborhood*

Back in September, when the bush in our front yard  
still blocked the view of Bellfield Avenue  
I walked out of my house, distracted,  
looking down, fumbling with the keys.  
If I'd turned to check the mail, I would've missed them.

A family of deer, alert but calm, strolled  
down the sidewalk. They looked around  
as if browsing the housing market, in search  
of a place with lots of character and a front porch.  
Maybe a fenced-in backyard for the kids.

Jaw dropping open, I watched the buck with his  
slow gait bringing up the rear, snout sniffing.  
The neighborhood hummed, unmoving. Even  
the pockets of white noise, the static of cars  
and distant conversation, the sun setting behind  
it all stopped. The subtle intrusion of bodies  
in a space often void of them ignited a sacred tenor.

I blinked. scrambled for my phone.  
By the time I tapped into my camera,  
quietly rushing onto the sidewalk,  
they had somehow vanished down an alleyway  
ribbed with scattered mulch and greenery.



**[THREE]**

---

*Slate*

I had forgotten to sew the middle button  
back onto my peacoat. So, I walked with it,  
black tabs flapping open. Our hair and noses  
nuzzled into that yearly mutiny of spring.

We walked among the clouds, in puddles  
reflected, snow melting in its delayed baptism.  
The porous earth bubbled in sockets beneath  
your brown, marble eyes: deep and timeless.  
The street lay there still. wet. freshly exhumed.

Grayness wisped above like aged pages turning,  
a slate space opening down as wide as the break  
between paragraphs, between each black button

on a well-worn peacoat. Beyond us the horizon,  
graying, living, stretching farther ahead and closer behind.

*Vision at the Chik-Fil-A*

We walked down the aisle  
toward the bustling kitchen.  
On either side the booths sat  
behind a plastic runway,  
blurred by ridged panels.  
Tunnel vision reformed  
the counter into an altar,  
flanked by red & white candles.  
And suddenly we weren't walking  
toward it but away from it,  
light pouring onto the floor  
from the opening double doors,  
familiar faces beaming  
on either side—everything exhaling  
in and out—joy ahead of us.

He looks at me, eyes calm.  
“Do you know what you want?”  
*What a question*, I thought.

I want a full moon swaying over a skirt-swirling tide,  
black in night. I want a simple but busy wedding  
with white roses & classy décor. I want sex  
five times a week and twice on Sunday. I want  
winter to only last three weeks & to never run out of eggs.  
I want six babies, each one birthed by a perfect set of abs.  
I want a brand-new wardrobe & a balanced bank account,  
funds tucked tightly away for beach trips & college tuition  
& broken hips in our old age. I want critical acclaim  
& three degrees. To have the world know this name,  
the one under each title of each neatly-knitted poem. I want  
to pour life out from a large glass pitcher into never-ending goblets  
like the Anglo-Saxon wives did within echoing halls,  
rich and strong. I want sticky fingers & toddler feet  
running on hard wood floors. Messy kitchens & cars  
packed with Christmas gifts. I want to know God  
through you. I want to never want anything else outside you,  
you & your brown freckled gaze, come what may.

“What do I want?” faking a puzzled look,  
I order an extra-large fry.

*Between the Lines*

Somewhere at the border of North Carolina,  
it appears from behind a line of trees.  
A crimson canvas billowing behind  
bolded lettering: one of the “Top Ten” schools  
in the country. Presuming that anyone  
barreling down I-85 has a chance  
to read about it without risking death,  
the billboard stands as a proud token  
for their small but mighty marketing team.  
But we don’t read in between the lines about  
the early morning walks to class or the smell  
of the steaming locker room. No place  
for the exact moment friendships are made  
in an out-of-date dorm room or a moonlit quad.  
There is no place to put the drunken nights  
in the downtown park, dew-smeared brick,  
unexcused absences, suitemates blaring Lizzo,  
random Walmart runs for a pint of Ben & Jerry’s,  
the way the light seems to shift in the sky  
when the bells start ringing at Vespers.

*Why Does Everything Have to be about What Happens between Our Legs?*  
*Part II*

I am in Your house but then  
when I play “I Spy” during  
prayers and the windows stare  
down at me, my mind wanders,  
strolling with hands behind back,  
admiring art work with perverted eyes—

Spying the carved ball sacks  
and how they trim the ceiling above  
those hard-knobbed nipples,  
jutting out from the confessional doors.  
Light sensitive to the touch  
of a sinner’s fingertips.

Temptation penetrates even here,  
even between every “Lord hear our prayer”—

*For the Overlooked*

For the unexpected dime tucked  
into the pocket of unwashed jeans.  
For browned, soggy grass peeking out  
from under the oppressive gray snow.

For the paper mâché project & crayon-stained carpet,  
childhood bracelets & locks of baby hair.  
For nightmares bringing a child into her parents' bed.  
For the resistance to eat another piece of cake,  
                                take another shot of whiskey,  
                                kiss another stranger in the dark.

For stray pubic hairs clumped in bathroom corners.  
For named & unnamed headstones,  
rust on a green-stained mower,  
an eyelash mounted on a wishful cheek,  
the yellow box fan, hibernating under the bed.

For brand names & commercials selling  
Prozac & Mucinex & Coca-Cola.  
For the slowed traffic at the sound of sirens  
& the flicker of three or four fingers,  
welcoming a timid pedestrian to cross.

For washing away the night from dishes & from hands,  
listening to the same album over & over again,  
the weight of the ocean on sleeping bodies.

For dances with time, preying on the sun,  
drowsy picnics, with dirt under fingernails  
all together unfurling, all together come undone.

*It's Strange but Whenever You're with Me*

I think about my mother. The way she looks out  
from her hazel green eyes back into my father's.  
I can see them in the amber light of the evening,  
the glow growing out from lamps instead of sky.  
It glistens along their thinly-rimmed wine glasses.  
Their limbs limp, faces sharp, & mouths  
curling playfully upward into flushed cheeks.

I turn & stare into your Spanish eyes. It's like  
studying history, how it's stacked in thin layers down  
their hollowing, brown barrellness. They look like  
miniature palimpsests etched onto forgotten manuscripts.  
Deep, generational. How assuring that they will look  
just the same fifty years from now.

& I wonder if your first *abuela* thought the same  
as she stared into her loyal husband's face.

## *The Unamusing Muse*

Writers need a muse, so I've heard.  
That voice of hot breath & cool thoughts,  
injecting a delightful elixir of talent & unchecked time.  
We need a muse like an Alzheimer's patient needs a nurse  
to put our hand on the door to the room  
we have forgotten is ours.

But what do you call the kind of muse  
that also suffers from memory loss?  
Or the one that accidentally steals  
the poet's spell-book, the one bound by centuries?  
What happens when you have the kind of muse  
that outshines Romeo's moon & innocently  
cloaks the excitement of all else in shadow,  
like curtains drawn across darkening windows?

What am I supposed to do with *that* Muse?

Somehow the blood rushing into cheeks &  
between legs & lungs diseases the poet's mind  
with viruses of sweet, succulent juices laced  
by seductive breaths hawing in & out of mouths.  
Ruptured rhythms clash into harmonies.  
We rise holding the doe-eyed gaze on the precipice  
of noses, tips of lips barely touching—

I would like to do nothing that I am supposed to be doing—  
& is *that* what you, my unexpected Muse, are supposed to do?



*To Those Who Have Made It*

I read the poems of Kaminsky & Vuong & McConnell  
& I wonder if I am somehow living the wrong life.  
Language sinched in veins just like the way  
the needle pinches skin—*it cannot flow out*.  
The Nurse looks out from under her eyebrows,  
as if *I* have an explanation. Tell me,  
am I wearing the wrong sleeve of skin? The wrong  
history or color or lying under the wrong sky? with blue  
lines refusing to let red words flow into clear, plastic bags,  
labeled “Wisdom: outgoing”—most likely a typo.

I want to apologize for making your eyes search  
for a range of clouds I have yet to define; looking  
for the reason sun & rain pray during the same hour in June.  
I do not know where the other sock could’ve possibly gone.  
I cannot tell you the exact route Oedipus took to exile,  
unless I somehow arrive there by accident.

What floorboards under rugs have I missed? Where  
is the check-in booth that has waited for me to sign  
my name below so many others?

## *Goosebumps*

Google tells me that moles, skunks, & leopards have been known to survive the suffocation of loneliness. Burrowed in their grubby holes or well-kept caves, hidden & encased by earth, they tuck themselves away, eyes pierced by an occasional tunnel of light.

Sometime earlier, maybe two years ago, I was sitting in one of my apartment's unfurnished rooms since IKEA didn't deserve my paycheck. Below, past the paint-chipped window sill, a row of decorative shrubbery shivered from the sputtering wings of spastic sparrows, a gaggle of siblings with no sense of personal space, not a single one able to venture from the group, feverishly fearing to miss an important rumor. I knew that's where I was headed, into the chaos of clattering pans, snorting laughter, toddler tantrums, wanting to drink without risking regret. With eyes closed, I sponged up the solitude, bleak sky stretched above.

But I never wanted to be a squinting mole or prowling leopard, but I always loved strolling through the garden of my own life, but now I'm suddenly swept up by the surrounding breeze, your arms bumping from its cool touch. Behind, already fading, the solitude remains, while here & now, your skin curves, ripples like feathers within abandoned pillows atop bed sheets churned by legs unexpected, marking the cavern between worlds, red clay gouged, filled by water lapping the copper walls.

