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Fallible and Malleable, I Have Made it This Far

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FALLIBLE AND MALLEABLE: I HAVE MADE IT THIS FAR

A collection of poems by

FERN S. BAILEY

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR LIU
PROFESSOR MANSOURI

DECEMBER 12, 2022

*I would like to take a moment to thank Professor Liu,
I would not have made it this far without your continued support and reassurance. You embraced
my work with open arms and an open mind from the beginning, and for that I cannot thank you
enough.*

For all the ones I love.

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I. ‘I’

Observe

I am

So much nonsense

The entropy

The natural chaos

Inevitably present

A molecular mess

Disorder with bony wrists

And a sharp spine.

I am

So much greater

Than the sum of my parts

And sweeter

Than the words

I tend to speak.

I am

A gummy vitamin

So good and sweet

Hard to chew

Too easy to eat

Kept in a bottle

Maybe high on a shelf

Cut in whimsical shapes

A forced sense of self.

Good Bones

The floor is usually there,
I've never gotten out of bed
To find it's moved away.
That's nice.
And walls,
As much as they
Close in
Talk too much,
And always forget my name,
I'd like them to stay put.
All I know is carpet,
And popcorn ceilings,
And the worst shade of white
You could imagine,
Overhead lighting
Never the right kind, not kind at all,
The mirror I shouldn't have,
The window I wish I did,
Someone to make the bed,
And the distance between me
And all of that.
So, no it's not my favorite
But I am not allowed to hate it,
I am not allowed to leave
In pursuit of breathable air.

Humane

I have felt the dog's heart beating
Out of its chest
I have felt pulsing
Against my shoulder
I sharpened them
For this occasion
I point my shoulder at the pulse
I drive it into the heart
Growing bulging aching protruding
My clavicle is not a stake
And the dog did not have a heart
It was my own
Leaping futile bounds
Bouncing off of bad breath
Sticking to me
I wish its chest hair
Were knives
I wish thumb wars
Had prepared my strength
I wish I were strong
As its desire
Had I been fast
I'd have tightened a belt
Had it been light still
I'd have found the door
I wish chest hair were knives
Against sternum and blue veins
I wish it had finished the job.

Place Your Blame

Be kinder to your mother
On days you take the sidewalk
Offset your careless footsteps,
Listen when she talks
Do not resent
This woman you've just met,
She has lived most her life
Without you.
She didn't synthesize scissors
She might've hoped for glue,
She got you.

Fear hollowed our cheeks the same
But we'd never choose it to blame
Petite hands, elegant throats,
Above scrutiny, and we hope
The other has no clue we can't breathe.
If she knew how to inhale
Might she teach me?
Lungs contracted so long
We don't need air to go on,
Turning blue
But not the kind you paint walls.

The First Earth-Shattering Lie

There's a certain choreography,

Right?

You haven't programmed these movements

It's a dance you didn't know you were

Going to have to do

And yet, sponge to countertop

Wipe up the drops

Back to windowsill,

Wring out,

And then back to windowsill,

It's wet hand to towel

Hanging on oven door

And then hand to fridge,

You have to pull harder than before

It's sticky

It isn't usually sticky

Not so stuck

But your parents are

Separating

And it's become

Increasingly difficult

To get all of the jelly on the toast

These days,

Do you know what I mean?

Their eyes aren't as good

My eyes have never been good

Not in any sense

It's senseless all the way

But still I feel sticky,

Grab the milk close the door

That's not what I needed

See? Eyes.

Open the door again but it's loosened

So the same thoughts won't

Reverberate

Because this time you grab the cream cheese

Turn around

And your bagel is burning.

Messes Earned

There's a street that I picture
When certain names drop
An intersection
In which cars never stop
Though they ought to.

Crosswalks can't save you
From lawless behavior
From being a picture stapled
On file-able paper
From being shoved in a drawer,
Or the ground
Dug up later,
But I will never look both ways.

Proof of Life

To shoot myself would be one thing
Entirely another if I decided to miss
Bottles of insoluble solutions
Or sharpness pressed to my wrist
In blue veins we trust
Not to burst,
Not to rust,
Capillaries full, I feel I'll combust.
My receipts, I recycle, might read,
If you read them,
A tale of a lost girl
Deserving of an addendum
You see, omissions end up
On the ground, or in a can
If you're smart, you save them
For one day you've planned,
To read them aloud
To fill in the holes,
People must be curious
How you've tread on these soles
For so long.
At least they will be when it's time to exhume,
I hope.

Green

I fear I'm doomed to press
My face further into prose
And windows of houses
I don't own
Perhaps not
Although it might fix my nose
And green grass is my favorite.

I've Got Curtains

I've got curtains
On my windows
Just to watch
Somebody dance
And ants
In my bedroom
I wish it looked out
Onto the ocean
And I like the notion
That I should
Stand on the rocks
Barefooted
Not even socks
And wear that dress
Crimson
Or red
And obsess
Over the salt
My hair keeps
As the waves
Jump,
Leap.
Unaware that I am there,
Water fills my evening gown
'How perfect'
It says
Laid to rest,
Impeccably dressed,
Singing all the while

Temporary Installment

My garbage is piled so high right now
Tissues on tampon wrappers,
Plastic bag, coated in phlegm
My grandmother is dead.

If we ever sell this house,
If my mother dies too,
Crayon and glue that I've caked on
Green walls, well...

I suppose I was a temporary installment
This gallery was mine for long and
I'll be so sad to see it go,
Not a single piece sold.

Every painting I've given away
Has come back to me;
Living entities get to reclaim
And I don't find it fair,

The ache and the shame
Because I'm not dead soon
Because I don't want to lug it around
Until I am.

Repossession of a canvas
That should've stayed on her wall.
And I know she admired it
Mistakes too small for her eyes.

For months I debated
What colors to paint it
Sent it by mail
I wouldn't be there to hang it,
Was it hung? I hope.

It was made for her eyes,
For only her to see
Now I hold it again,
Hear it chiding me
Sloppy brush strokes, how selfish

My garbage is piled so high
I am not dead soon.
I don't want to lug it around
Until I am.

II. You

Does Your Mother Know

You do not feel like much
Today. You are not much,
Not much more than sharp sleep
In your sockets and laundry
And activities that create more laundry,
Now that you can wash your own clothes,
Now that you'd rest if you could.

You are built on top of
Someone little, whose body never tired
Had she been able to reach permanent press
Sleepless nights might have
Had their use, tiptoeing to and fro
Tide pods in tiny hand, and
Her mother wouldn't have cared so much
About tiny shirts
Or yelled about dirt—
I digress.

Your mother doesn't know.
Should you explain to her
How miniscule
The atoms in your makeup,
She might recall the last time
She folded your socks,
Feels expendable when you fold fitted sheets.

She's seen you take up space.
Pants at once don't fit
Then shoes
Then the entire house.
Imagine telling her it was a waste,
And she shouldn't have bothered,
Finding you a place, an empty room.
She could have gone on
Making your room neat,
Cutting your meat.

You are either too much, or absolutely nothing
Come fall, you are the effect of the season
And handprints on her wall
Enormous inside her chest cavity
But outside her, very small.

You do not feel like much.

Do You Feel That Way Too?

It's hard to say just what I mean.

Do you feel that way too? Like blue but not the kind anyone ever painted their walls,

Still blue but not free to complain?

This brain. I swear.

I quit while I was ahead and now a head is all there is.

No limbs. Not ones that go places.

No, the furthest I've gone is one flight of stairs

And my mind likens landings to mountaintops.

Wasting My Breath

I'm sorry but I've accidentally-
Unknowingly or perhaps...
Just let me say I am sorry
I've somehow placed you somewhere
You've not asked to be put,
I never intended to
Hold you so high
But you floated on by
And I grabbed the thin string
Ever since
Quick thinking
Gentle grip
I don't make you come down
From so high above me
I haven't assumed
That you hate me
Or love me
You are red, so inflated
Tied up
Kind of free
All I know is you'd
Pop if I tied you to a tree
So you're mad that I carry you
Around on my walks
And you're tired of hearing
Me talk,
But you're still in one piece
I can't prove it to you,
But you're whole.

Taste Something Sweet

Taste something sweet
Right now.
You can't, can you?
Let some of it drip down your face
But you won't
Peel the stickers off
Or eat it whole
You aren't going to
Because there's nothing in the bowl,
Right?
Remove the pit
From your stomach
And the knives
And the surfaces meant
For knives
And the counter
The fruit flies
The island that you are,
And then I'll ask you one more time
To take a bite.

Simple Gestures

Melted it down to make you a ring
And it's shiny and plastic
And pink of all things
Said you'd wear it at parties
Or shopping downtown
For friends at the bookstore
In all sorts of crowds
And I loved the idea
That you loved me enough
To let glue and glitter
Get stuck in your stuff
To replace your toothbrush
Every once in a blue moon
And make room on your fingers
For bedazzled polyethylene spoons

No Room

My favorite things are full
The glass at least halfway
My mouth, of pearls
These days I can't seem to hide them
Lungs expanding
Stomach growing, bulging, aching, protruding
I'm taking up more space
I'm outgrowing a single couch cushion
And your heart was at capacity before we met.

III. Amalgamation, A Collective

Now and Later

I.

Now is the time
 When it's the most perfect thing
 New and small and beautiful
 Can't run away or say 'fuck off'
 Needs you to teach it to drive,
 Keep it alive while you're at the wheel.
 It's going to draw lots of pictures
 You'll shred, forget to resent you
 As long as you fit in its bed.
 Entertained by supermarket lobsters,
 Elevators, and illusions like you.

Combs your dresser drawers for cash
 Yells words you've never heard,
 But certainly said,
 Right back in your face,
 Crosses the road successfully alone
 Makes its own lunch
 Makes you miserable
 Makes you eggs all wrong
 Forgets baking soda sometimes,
 Vanilla extract,
 To close the gas cap,
 To close their tab,
 And you think it's sinking in
 They'll need a coat,
 They'll never learn,
 They'll learn slowly.

II.

When I'm buying my own groceries,
 I have to push the cart,
 Not because I'm with my mother and asked to,
 When she'd pretend to size me up for the task, "can you?"
 (A privilege threatened every time I caught her heel)
 This time it's because I need frozen things,
 Someone to love me,
 Everyone pushes their own shopping cart now.

Check out lines went faster when mom needed
 To use the bathroom, when money was no object of mine
 So slowly I slide through now, this is where I pay
 Scanning *People*, practically raised by these racks
 Grabbing gum from those little last minute shelves,
 Immediately putting it back,
 Placing my shit on the belt,
 Cold stuff has to go first
 CHECK UNDER THE CART!
 (There is never anything under the cart)
 DON'T TOUCH THE COUNTER
 Mom yelled every time so stop doing it.
 Infuriating density, but precious.

There had to have been a time
 When I was the most perfect thing
 New and small and beautiful
 Couldn't run away or tell you to fuck off
 Fit so nicely in a shopping cart seat
 Just new and small and beautiful.

This Glass House He Bought Me

My father writes his grocery lists
On the backs of envelopes
And I don't think he ever really coped
With his father's death.
He loves the Eagles they're his favorite
And he sings their songs to me
He has no idea that I've written and
Re-written his eulogy.
Such an energetic man at 63
God he's old now, still has all his teeth,
But good memories of me
I don't think have been spared
I'm sure he looks back and all he sees is
How I never really cared.
Deceit and double vision
I lie about something every day
But he still calls me by my sister's name
I call it justice,
That makes it kind of okay.

Christmas Eve

Today we sat at a table
A couple of blocks
Down her street.
It was nice, she wanted
Exposed brick and coffee
I just needed something
To eat.
Nothing looked like it
Would stay down
But I was hungry,
I ordered eggs.
My fingers, they bled
And I couldn't stop moving,
Crossing then uncrossing
My legs.
We talked about our
Lives, as if our rooms
Weren't side by side,
For years before
We'd ever know
Twinflames, before we tried.
The coffee wasn't hot enough
And I couldn't
Finish my toast,
I told her how I shrink
Myself, how much lately
I've wanted to be a ghost.
And for two or three seconds
Our eyes looked the same,

‘They’re insane,’
We’ve both said it,
And for different reasons
We’re right,
I loved watching the
Runny yolk
As she talked about how they’d fight.
‘We were meant to fix them,
Entirely too small,’
Scraping my fork
I hate that I was
There, I hate reliving it all.
I wish people left
Their thoughts
Unsaid,
Sealed their lips quietly.
I never know what goes
On in my dad’s head
Except once he decided to tell me,
‘Your reality is a lie,
Hope you’ve noticed that by now.’
What was I supposed to say?
‘You’ve shattered the illusion.’
I never believed it anyway.
And I asked her why he said that
When I was like 13 years old,
My life going at a snail’s pace,
Somewhere I couldn’t leave,
Doing what I’m told.
Home was always close
When it was really

Nowhere near at all,
And when she told me
She loved me
I wanted to fall
Into life by her side
She can fix me I think.
I want my own place,
My own kitchen sink,
But I've stared at hers
And I don't know how
I'll get there myself
I can't picture it now.
The table was small
The food was a lot
She paid, I accepted
We left
And all was forgot.

Ode

She reflects on car doors,
Clean windows, and dirty spoons
And no matter how she shrinks herself
She can't find the room
And I've told her
'I love you.
Your face, I adore
Beyond words I am contentedly,
Irretrievably
Yours.'
I wish her heart reserved some space
For her stomach
And her waist,
All her mismatched socks,
The seasonal freckles on her face.
She has tattoos from ages before
We'd begun,
And I've loved hearing the story
Behind every single one
Because she is so beautiful and I couldn't
Pretend any less,
It's her head of tangled hair
I want on my chest
And the more breath I hold
Stopping time, freezing her frame
The more I want to scream
"YOU, it's YOU I blame!"
For becoming the skin cells I care about
Most

For scrambling my eggs
And burning my toast,
I'm in love with your voice box
And the folds of your brain,
And the pages you've written for me,
And your name,
Don't retreat, solid ground
For your feet I have found.
Take up space, stick around
I just love you so much

Pantone Off White

The elusion of sleep is no longer a choice
We can't stay up all night
In our breathtaking noise,
You aren't here to make staring at walls
Something fun,
Watching dried paint and wond'ring
Just how it was done
With a roller, a brush,
Why they settled on this white
If they sat down and said
'Bone just wouldn't be right,'
If they sat in this chair in this corner
For days
Absent-minded, observing
The sun, how its rays—
The trusting inhabitant,
Warming skin on display,
And then picked
From spread-out swatches
They had to have known
In this room we would act
Most alive,
Entirely grown.
You called the hue milquetoast,
Decidedly our own.

The time we allotted
To staring and thought
The decisions we made

In that room, for the plot
And that room is still standing,
Now eggshell I'm sure,
But we couldn't exist there
Now, how we did there before.

We were what we ate,
Mostly words.

Ink Well

Friends are hollow
Bird bones,
So light
I've changed who I follow
She's out of my sight,
She listens to words
No one else wants to hear,
She's reserved me
The negative space in her ears,
Losing tears is okay
She adheres to uncertainty
You're empty of ink
She puts it so perfectly.

Birds go south these days.
Too afraid of the sky,
I might leave it be
I might wait til July,
I might clip my own wings
And be cruel and unkind,
So when she calls me sweet
I can tell myself she lied.

Mess is Learned

And you live in a room
 Without sponges or brooms
 To make clean what is now caked in dirt.
 If I cared somewhat more
 To declutter the floor
 You might enter without getting hurt.
 But the stains have long soaked,
 Long before I could care



I stare at the smell,
 Far too thick not to see
 As it floats above thin sheets
 And chastises me
 For not washing the day off myself
 Before bed
 Trading fresh air and fake words
 For stale breaths instead.

there is No One to blame

I don't feel things, out of convenience.

A physical form without sentience, needless.

There is no one to blame, a task insurmountable.

Disassociated no doubt, she can't be held accountable.

Swallow Song

Birds don't eat much right?
That's the implication, I suppose
That's what people say
When I no longer fit my clothes.
They'll start noticing my bones
And say 'look how hollow'
Incredible I've lived as long
Merely circling the dreaded swallow.

Silent Racket

The enormity of my addiction
An unprecedented affliction
I never thought my lungs could feel this way.
I've never told the truth,
Isn't it shameful?
And blame isn't hard to place
Just painful.
It started somewhere
I'd hoped I could leave
Even time zones and happiness
Couldn't take it from me.
It's got legs and they've grown
So it stands, tall as I do
Perhaps those are my own
It's just something I cling to
Disrespecting my novels,
The ones I flip through,
And leaving traces,
Splotchy clues
I wonder if that's all I'll leave behind
Disgusting stains,
No one to blame,
And slant rhyme.

The Spotted Mind

Soup stains surely weren't the worst
As a kid, too-big sleeves found their way
In the bowl first,
But these days
They're something I cannot stand
Rolled all the way up
So they can't even graze my hand,
I had planned to be messy
The rest of my days
Spilling sauces on blood stains
And loving the ways
My puke made the carpet stiff.

Now it seems there's no soap
I can soak in too strong,
I fixate on dirt in my nails for too long
The same song reverberates
And skin it agitates
Please just shut the FUCK UP

I can't think straight.

Maybe vacuuming will drown out the noise.

No More Resemblance

I have my father's eyelashes.

He was the first to tell me, but not the only one who noticed.

And I probably never would have known.

Cut short and then singed, they grew back only kind of.

No more resemblance, they're mine now. Still, I thank him all the time.

From very far away, and silently.

I've clung to their beauty, or at least the idea that they are in fact beautiful,

Because the rest of my face is his too. Same nose, thin lips, sharp teeth, big forehead.

You can see the resentment in our wrinkles. Did you know fear can hollow out cheeks?

The hairs on our arms stand too tall. Relentless sun spots us with red.

I've certainly not loved being an extension of him. Makes me mad that our cells share so much.

But I can't say he never gave me something. Can't complain when one falls in my eye.

I suppose if he'd known...

If her prose he'd been shown
If one floorboard had loosened
Or creaked or groaned
Under the weight she had waited to feel in her bones,
If her nose after spurning spoons would grow
Holding her breath and her tongue
As her skin lost its glow
If something tipped him off
Betrayed her and told
Those words could be heard
Or tasted or seen
But she chose
To exist so that no one would know

An Extension of Him

Plastic bags are like tumbleweed
‘Thank you for shopping
And saving with us’
And you’re saving, alright
In grimy snapshots we trust
In one ear to the pavement
Or carpet on the bus
Soaking irises can’t blur
What he did to us.
There I go placing blame
Like we’ve got the same brain
Like he split in half,
But I am him all the same
Like we are identical,
Save for long legs and name,
Like he hurt me
And it’s him who should be ashamed
No. That’s me.
Sometimes I confuse
Adoration and abuse
I don’t recognize my habits
My own short fuse,
Or the lack of ambition
With which I’m imbued
How’d that happen?
What good is the skin
That looks just like his
If it won’t go as far
And remains paper thin?

What chance does she have
Outside of the womb?
She swore she would leave
But she's way past due
All she wants is another
Minute, or two.
I have tried to stay small
All this time.

Clipped, Unequipped

And flightless birds
And crazy mothers
Clip my fingernails
Until I can do it myself
And cut my meat.
The first time I used a knife
The toaster
Mascara from her closet
Lipstick like I had lips
Like I knew what lips did well
Before I knew where my lips would land
Before they spoke
And someone would listen
And the fear of creaking floors
Coughs covering up shuffling drawers
I stood taller than I do now
To reach something red
I did it quietly, at six I was more deferent
And more unsure how much movement
Made a mountain, looking back
I see mole hills
My heart shouldn't have waited
In my throat for so long
But I wasn't permitted simple joy,
Nothing that showed on my face

Stairway

Somewhere I know you've never been
So I don't expect you to remember
Or care
What it looked like
And my eyes didn't work
For the first couple years
So who's to say what I saw
But that cool metal spiral
Coaxed fears out of me
Ascending so high
Thinning air
Gravity.
My bedroom window collected
Ladybugs
I had to be okay with that.
It's where I've traced back the first
Earth shattering lie
The only time I asked for assurance
The only promise I wanted kept
That's where it was made
And I was okay with that.
It's where I learned not to touch the walls
Oily hands
Probably crayons and glue
Too
The white was too precious
Too fresh and too new
So I lied when it was my fault
That they lost their hue.

I didn't understand gravity
Because my world didn't spin
On an axis that relied on white walls
To keep going
Who cares if the marker is blue
Permanent and unsupervised?
Outside our insulation
They mix paints at Ace hardware,
If I had known
I'd have grown less fearful
Of my mark
The stains I've caused
The messes I've made
The permanence of the grime
And not wholly convinced
This detached existence
Is too dirty
To be worth your time.

She said, she said

Today you feel like the child
You remember yourself to have been
Though mothers recount
The years differently, surely they are mistaken

Disbelief befalls her face
When memories of truth come out
Undeniably subjective, you elect
To give in to the doubt

You decide your recollection's hyperbole,
Elevated to the absurd,
It couldn't have been so outrageous
Through thick walls, what you thought you heard

Her conviction, though convincing
Won't quiet the noise upstairs or down
Only fueling the malignant mass
That uncannily shrinks when she isn't around

On the same couch, you've seen action movies
The same memories as a pair you've have amassed
From opposite ends, melancholic bookends
Seen the damage of lighting up gas

But volatility is a choice
You have been given, You decide to diffuse
Because to strike and match her enthalpy
You are surely fated to lose.

IV. The Emergent 'I'

Becoming Sturdy

‘Imitators idolize, I intimidate’¹

I suppose I’m the former

But I don’t think it’s too late

For a change.

Not that I want to be seen

As a monster, mean

I like jelly on eggs

And the length of my legs

Quite a lot.

I am spoonfuls of garbage

And forks down your spine

I am nothing but intense

Okay,

And then just

Fine.

I am the epitome of nonsense

Whimsical silence

Embodiment of absence

And my kink is violence.

My future is planned as far as

Mugs in my cabinets

And rather than address

Every stupid little bad habit

That will keep me

From owning dish-ware,

I will find a soft spot

And then sit there,

Master the art of braiding hair,

¹ From Blackalicious’ *Alphabet Aerobics*

Chastise myself for how much I swear,
Eat a pear with the sticker still on it,
Pretend bugs want to hear my sonnets,
I don't care if they crawl on my legs anymore
I'm content just to be in the way

Thawed

And it's enough for me,
For now,
To live above the grass
And ground
To use my legs
And clear my throat
To drink and taste
The words I wrote.
I'm on paper these days
Less afraid of my nose
For she's always been one
To appreciate prose,
Scratch and sniff.

They say ink lasts
So I'll be around
I've committed to a 4-pack of highlighters.

Something Common

Strikes me now and again that we may all understand each other completely
If only we had the words. I don't want to die,
I want you to want me to live.
But not every sidewalk crack cares how hot my coffee is
No matter how careless my step,
And not every bee wants to sting me, in fact none do.
I've killed a lot of grass and more bugs but I'm working on letting them crawl away.
It used to be fear and now it's worse fear,
Worse and better. I like my own light and my own windows
Which I guess I've never had but I will. I get it kind of, I do.
I understand but I'll never be able to say. We've all tried.
I'd like to believe there is something common. One big plant,
Soft carpet, overhead lighting I'll never hit my head on,
At least one corner to turn but no more than three,
The absence of sighs once the door locks,
And maybe someone to watch me float from room to room.
That's what I'd do. I'm changing my answer:
If I could steal just one thing
From the world it would be the desire for more than cabbage and a two-slot toaster.
Yeah.
Because there are some who'd want nothing more,
Forced to take a lot less, at the mercy of those who want absolutely everything.
I'd just like solid ice cube trays and a place for my stapler.

A Sailor's Life

Insignificant I'd say
Unremarkable and unclear
How in a lifetime of years
I'd become something sturdy
A ship with huge sails
A schooner among scurvy
And absence and whales
My hair is adjusting
And breakfast stays down.

I feel safe in the sea.