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### Reddening

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**REDDENING**

by

**AMELIA RAE GROSS**

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

**PROFESSOR LIU  
PROFESSOR MANSOURI**

**DECEMBER 11, 2023**

# ***R E D D E N I N G***

*Mel Gross*

# Contents

## I. *Dear Judge*

### **THE VESSEL**

## II. *Coyote Attacks on the Rise in Southern California; Humans to Blame* (NBC News)

## III. *Body*

## IV. *4 Charged in Illegal Sale of Dinosaur Bones that were Shipped to China* (NBC News)

## V. *Love*

## VI. *Goat Is Still Goat Despite Magic Rite* (New York Times)

## VII. *The Flaying*

## VIII. *Nighttime Molting*

### **BAD MEN**

## IX. *How I Came To Be Here (Heaped in Bits of Sudden Shatter Among the Linoleum Tiles Outside the Laundry Room)*

## X. *Couldn't Lose Dead Cat* (New York Times)

## XI. *Three. Two. Once.*

## XII. *Omegle Shuts Down After its Founder Announces "Unspeakably Heinous Crimes"* (Business Insider)

## XIII. *My Ex-Boyfriend is Elvis*

## XIV. *Plan to Use Helicopter Sharpshooters to Take Out Deer on Catalina Island Sparks Protest* (ABC News)

## XV. *Manatee Tries to Borrow Florida Boy's Surfboard* (ABC News)

- XVI. *My Ex-Lover*
- XVII. *Scientists Create Synthetic Sperm Cells*  
(NBC News)
- XVIII. *Untitled; But in Writing This I Have Thought of Plath & the Tulips*
- XIX. *Mourning the Swallow*
- XX. *Pilot Rescued After Crashing & Spending 9 Hours in Alligator-Infested Swamp*  
(Vice News)
- XXI. *In Memoriam of the Baddest Man I Have Ever Known:*  
*An Extended Metaphor in Which I Imagine that the Love I Bore Him*  
*Is So Easily Given Rest & So Easily Turned Away From*

## **BLUSH**

- XXII. *California Storms Sow Superbloom of Wildflowers*  
(NPR News)
- XXIII. *How I Have Yearned*
- XXIV. *Seam Splitting*
- XXV. *Australia Hunts for Tiny Radioactive Capsule Missing from Rio Tinto Mining Truck*  
(NBC News)
- XXVI. *This Knowing*
- XXVII. *For Her*

## **MAMA**

- XXVIII. *Mama*
- XXIX. *Untitled*
- XXX. *No Fair*
- XXXI. *Self-Soothing (If You Loved Me, You Would Stop)*

DEAR JUDGE

*Testament of Character:*

*I'm writing in support of Amelia Gross and to attest to her exceptional character.*

*I have known Amelia Gross for more than ten years. She is a very mature and responsible young lady.*

*I've only known her to exhibit exceptional honesty, sound judgment and strength of character.*

DEAR JUDGE

Know that I have been good. Know that it was not enough this time. 10:37am, I went 50mph in a 25 zone. Now you ask about my character. I am good. A good daughter. Last night there was a terrible sound on the stairs as my mother fell. When I drove her to the ER I thought of how I used to play with the AA coins in her purse. The hollow sound they made against each other. The first one, rubbed raw from the pad of her thumb.

I have hated her. The shape of her on the floor.

DEAR JUDGE

Know that I have been as good as possible. There were nights when I took so much of my medication that my skin crept against my bones. I have been known to push the envelope.

DEAR JUDGE

Know that I have been bad, & that it is none of your business. I have screamed my voice into rasp. I have beat the hell out of myself. I have grated the nail file against my arm, the flesh going pink, then white, then red—

DEAR JUDGE

Know that I have been vengeful, & full of lust. No matter my goodness, I have lied, stolen, gossiped into filth. I have been touched & arched well into it. I have drank to excess, spilled liquor into my full breasts. I have wished for fuller breasts. I have forgotten the source of the bruise. I am the daughter of a drunk & I have played the part.

DEAR JUDGE

Know that in the court of girlhood, despair was not an adequate defense. Goodness was not enough to spare me from the sentence. Today I approach the stand, nakedly, the jury leering at this flesh. And when the gavel comes down I will hear the empty bottle go rolling. And when the court adjourns I will know none of my goodness was worth it. And I will walk through the pews of this court and I will piss drunkenly on your verdict, I will be so bad, I will be as terrible as my mother for once.

# *THE VESSEL*

*Live with your puny, vulnerable self  
Live with her <sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Maggie Nelson, "Morning En Route to the Hospital"



*Coyote Attacks on the Rise in Southern California; Humans to Blame (NBC News)*

*I.*

At the intersection I stand & wait for the coyotes  
 who could have me for prey if they were  
 braver  
     & dream of it:

jaws bloom wide. Hungry pink tunnels  
 of throats; the fangs, milk-white range  
 risen from wet gums; the tongues, wet snakes  
 rearing—

jaws, hinging shut; me, the lamb  
 in sudden shreds.

*II.*

It is only natural that it ends as viciously  
 as it began: where I once tore free  
 from another, now I am torn free  
 from this body. It is only natural: the penetration  
 of tooth, snarl; the bloom  
 of red on the desert  
 bedsheets, pale &  
 slightly rumpled—

How sensual a death,  
 to nourish another;

how striking  
 my pale ribs arcing  
 from the red mess of me

*III.*

Somewhere my mother mourns while I am  
 cracked for marrow & lapped for blood,  
 the sun banishing dawn while the pack  
 lopes south    my grave a scatter of bits

Know that there was ecstasy in it, mother;

in the wake of me there was luxury.  
My body a gorgeous red display, my insides  
bared at last. For once I was honest—

What a death! to be desired  
into nothingness—

*Body*

In the pinched morning  
its light muted through pinhole clouds  
I wrap myself in pity I fall prey.

Skin in my hands. Underneath which  
there are pink sateen curtains, absurd yellow  
cushioning, some things purple, some moving,  
my interior of guts strange & full,

fistfuls of me. Where there was once a fingerful.

I overflow myself. My mother: *you are so beautiful  
to me*. But who does not cherish  
the fruit of their labor?

Fistfuls of me. What was once a taut plain  
now lazes into hills, damp canals, wide soft shores.

skin in my hands      dread in my throat  
tally marks here, tally marks there.

in the wide yellow morning  
the sun touches the floor, & then me.

I notice its body shifting as the day shifts  
opening glorious at its peak:

Languid on the dark fur of my cat,  
who squints in joy from her perch.  
Who has only ever been grateful  
for the expanse of her form.

Whose own beloved belly swings  
to & fro as she runs uncaring  
after dust motes brought into being  
by a wash of afternoon light.

*4 Charged in Illegal Sale of Dinosaur Bones that were Shipped to China (NBC News)*

State of shatter, the frail thing  
Huddled in its shale. Pressed  
Like a crocus between the damp palms  
Of the mudplains.

What could it mean, to be  
Of blinding value? For a body  
Which has withered into a husk,  
Its skin long stripped away.  
& What are these bones,  
If not the greatest commodity  
I have ever known? My bones,  
White & somewhere lurking  
Together. One million dollars  
In bones—

In Moab the convicts broke earth  
Somehow. Umber womb heavy  
With child an orphan to time.  
& Birthed once again, the oldest  
Living thing we have ever known,  
Birthed once again by Vint & Donna Wade  
In Moab.

No one will pay for my bones,  
Of this, I am sure. No one will loot  
My body from its rest, no one but the maggots  
Who will prepare me tirelessly for the soil,  
Which will prepare me for the white roots  
Of the yellow flowers that my father  
Calls weeds.

*Love*

The random braying,  
Like my grandmother's donkey at dawn,  
Cutting through the dew and the mildness  
Of the doves, screaming itself upon the world—

The cut onion,  
Sniffing its way into being known,  
Released by the serration of something sharper.  
The dread of it, the preparation—

The open palm,  
Ley lines falling where flesh creases,  
Canals of dampness at the oncoming kiss,  
To cup, to flatten, to grasp—

*Goat Is Still Goat Despite Magic Rite* (The New York Times)

The ordinary goat, bleating, has been plastered  
 In honey and tar and blood, shackled by the sultry paws of myth.  
 Unaware of slaughter or witches or Latin, the billygoat  
 Is mowing casual on the grasses as the incantation comes to pass.  
 If mystic is the mist, then man is surely damned to a gullible hell.

Once, a young girl across the grasses  
 sees a casual billygoat for the first time.  
 In her awe; honesty dwells cheekily.  
 The horns of a fairytale villain arc  
 From the goat's thick skull. She notes  
 The absurdity of his jaw, cyclic, as the blades  
 Of grass became smaller and smaller protrusions  
 From his maw. *Not unlike a cow*, she muses,  
*And yet so much more*. His willingness to leap  
 From stone to stone! To tangle himself  
 In the horns of a yardmate—to barrel blind,  
 Head lowered—to crowd his four nimble hoofs  
 On a shelf no larger than her palm—

Man's grasp for magic finds itself  
 Stupid and fruitless.  
 The sheet comes away  
 & The billygoat bleats, pitch keyhole  
 Of his pupil moored strangely  
 In the eye. Onlookers: jury of graspers  
 Sigh relief. There is no magic  
 To be had today—despite the screech  
 Of orange wild-  
 Flowers crushed  
 Beneath their shoes.

*The Flaying*

*All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman; [Ecclesiastes,] let the portion of a sinner fall upon her.* Bane of rationale, many-legged creature, weak and suckling, suckling until teat becomes husk. My father knelt in the lap of a god who has forsaken me, who has lent additional portions of pain upon the pink bed of my girlhood. My father's god: is he not loveless?

Oh, to be a woman: to be the odd bird. But the power of that bird, of her wingbeats.... And the bravery, and the spirit, and the horror: to be a woman who is ostrichized, fetishized for her featheryness, put on a pedestal which is also a spit which is also roasting, leisurely roasting, dripping fat into the fire.<sup>2</sup> The body, & how it dials the devil.

Sinner, fall upon me! If it is the wickedness that makes the woman, I shall indulge. *It is merely a lust of the blood* [Iago,] *and a permission / of the will.* Love is the body of the girl-sinner. The singing of skin upon touch. That yearning, which opens its beak for mans' regurgitation; which takes on the hot shape of sin. To love is to go hungry. To do as every poet before me has done: to starve, to write about love,  
to kneel upon the blade of a severance                      & pray.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustinian colonizers believed that Andean indigenous healers used fat to call upon demons. It was believed that the fat was thrown into a fire, at which time the image of the demon would appear and reveal the victim it had poisoned, at the request of the healer.

*Nighttime Molting*

It was sunset when we were in the ocean last, gritty everywhere,  
sinking down so we could only breathe & see, sunk the rest  
of our bodies, trying to float like the pelicans did, however that was.  
They knew about us, looked sideways knowingly, scoffed  
if pelicans could scoff. The sun sunk too, until it was shy  
behind the oil rig. Then we were all together lapped  
by the same water—pelican person ship sun—baptized  
into birdhood.

It came back to me last night  
after he had rolled over. After  
2 little pink pills, 2 shaky sips, 2 hands  
all over. Pricked with sweat, slick & cool,  
I felt full & dense & aquatic. It was dark,  
the ceiling was a body of water, it was all I had  
to look at, I was severed from my legs.

There is too much memory stored in this body,  
too small to put up a big enough fight:  
I used to cuff my ex-lover's jeans the way Jesus  
washed the feet of his disciples, I was pretty  
& pious for him, his ring would bruise the bone  
below my eye, a kind of caress which carried  
an ache that will never lose its teeth, nor cease  
its little rattles, it was my greatest effort—  
it was not nearly enough.

Looking up at the ceiling, I felt that my body  
was a friend I could part with, soil & discard,



a frame that I was messily loomed across,  
a shell from which softness could emerge.  
I have never wanted to die, but I have wanted  
to be something else—that desire eclipsed  
me, until I was sure my hands were gloves.

This morning was like usual, I had not grown  
gills despite my dreams. There was a time  
when I was a martyr. There was a time when I played  
pelican.

*Now that I understand, I like to  
 think of your terror—handed a girl  
 mad with love, her long, fresh  
 raw body thin as a pared  
 soap...*

# ***BAD MEN***

*... all you could  
 do in your fear was firk out her cherry like an  
 escargot from its dark shell and then  
 toss her away. I am in awe of terror that will  
 waste so much, I am in love with the girl who went  
 offering, came to you and  
 laid it out like a feast on a platter, the  
 delicate flesh—<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Sexton, "Poem to my First Lover"

*How I Came To Be Here (Heaped in Bits of Sudden Shatter Among the Linoleum Tiles Outside the Laundry Room)*

*I. My Lover*

Brought me to the lip of yearning just  
 Before plummet where we always used to dangle.  
 Brought me to the riverbed:

How could something so gentle as a stream  
 rake the shape of itself into rock?

*II. Kudzu*

Ate the south with fervor. Along I-95 it  
 Made green shapes in its wake. Devastating  
 Hunger, roving from gutters to gables, powerlines,  
 Playground long left to rust. There was a way, though,  
 That it made the tired world new.  
 It was a surrender: To be twined, held;  
                                 Hushed & shielded  
                                 From the rain

*III. I Loved a Man*

Wild through the gauntlet, all my hard edges  
 Rashed from the terrain. I followed the glimpses  
 Of him through the thicket & found him  
 In the clearing, his chin tilted up to the canopy.  
 I loved him then despite the red stinging  
 Of the thorns. He did not seem to notice me there,  
 Panting, stained green, smelling of cut life—

*IV. Picnic*

I, the martyr, the softheart, could not resist

The wicker basket on the doorstep & the man  
Who had brought himself to me along with it.  
There he was, with all the makings of our love:

    The dolled-up desire in its jam jar  
    The promises clattering trinket-like  
    & The grief, the butter knife: it was there  
    In the basket too.

I knew the coming pain & still  
Could not resist:  
I took him inside, past my threshold out  
Of the cold dawn  
& Into the pasture  
To lay loving, at least until  
The frost waned, eye-to-eye  
With the tender rabbits  
Romping through the field.

*“Couldn’t Lose Dead Cat”* (The New York Times)

*I.*

“Rats of the sky,” my father says  
About pigeons. But I find that I prefer their  
Iridescence

To the mild grey of the doves.  
Russet eye, flicking through the catalogue  
of threat & sustenance —

*How close is too close, they might wonder,  
For the devastating promise  
Of a crumb?*

*II.*

Hissing  
The new asphalt comes down  
In a cruel billow

I smell it through  
The windowpanes. Swaths  
Set into glitter like raveled

Velvet. The sad sun looms  
Its pale face. I am struck  
Bitter.

*III.*

At the Grace Street house there was a blue  
Chip of porcelain laid into the curb, its smoothness

Known intimately by my still-sucked thumb.

Squatting, knees a platter for my chin, I bore down  
On the soft pad of my thumb until the grit around the glossy chip  
Made an impression. I could feel it then, the callous

Blooming. I always wished for new cement,  
To put the shape of my hand into it, to make  
Permanence myself.

*IV.*

The asphalt comes & comes spilling  
Itself into the channel between curbs.  
It is grotesque, presumptuous, this languid spread.

*V.*

The pigeons are brave. I make the case  
For pigeons. They carve roosts atop air conditioning  
Units. They labor for an existence among the concrete,  
For crumbs amid shoe soles, jackhammers.

Pigeonholed in my attic room,  
I watch the asphalt lay down atop the shaken  
Cloud of dust. My chest shutters, damp &  
Closed like a fist.

*Three. Two. Once.*

Upstairs: The bean bag forcing me into arch and  
his hands touching me, pushing, grasping—

Over his shoulder the clock said it's 11am  
which meant there would be another hour of this before

I ride home with my mom, and we go to  
Marshalls and I tell her he kissed me and she asks

if he asked to kiss me. I say, blushing, *yes, Mom;*  
but I think to myself *Why the fuck would he ask*

Of course he did not ask to kiss me. His hands grabbed at me  
the way my first cat used to fist his paws into my blanket

one after the other, rhythmic, suckling at the fibers, soothing  
his little cat mind to sleep. It kept me up late, the kneading.

Once I asked my mom *why?* She said he got separated  
from his mother too early, and the suckling comforts him.

Then I asked if he wouldn't like me anymore if I pushed him off.  
She laughed. *Yeah, honey, he might not come to see you as much.*

So I let him keep me up late. Wetting my blanket with his cat  
spit, needling my skin with his grasping paws. I could not bear it

if he didn't like me anymore. He died three years later and three years  
after that I was fourteen, on the beanbag, thinking about

how it felt to be kneaded and how it felt to be needed and  
wondering *Really, why the fuck would he ask?*

*Omegle Shuts Down After Its Founder Announces “Unspeakably Heinous Crimes”* (Business Insider)

The founder was a man, young & naïve,  
When he launched the site in 2009.

*“...then-18-year-old founder Leif K-Brooks saw the internet as a ‘global village,’ he said in a long post Thursday. He said he wanted the site to be like ‘strolling down a street in that village, striking up conversations with the people you ran into along the way.’”*

For a girl, even a village has its salivations,  
Its insatiable appetites, its vices for which  
She will suffer. Leif K-Brooks could not have  
Foreseen it—a man’s stroll is all  
Triumph & leisure, toothless, without periphery.  
I imagine that for Leif, threat is mere paranoia,  
Hardly a factor worthy of consideration.

But there will always be a girl who suffers  
At the well-meaning invention of man:  
Today she was eleven, cusp of girlhood,  
Softness still limning her features,  
Yesterday she was me & tomorrow  
She is the daughter I have yet to bear,  
The sweet bud I cannot shield,  
Who is blind to the leering  
Of the neighbors.



*My Ex-Boyfriend is Elvis*

*\*\* On Watching "Priscilla" (2023) in Theaters*

Like a needle in the haystack of  
Him, I am useless. I have never  
Hated a man as much as I  
Loved him, & yet here he is,  
The meanest paradox.

I had him when I had him  
& That was all. But he came  
To my mother's house with rashes & roses,  
He called me from the end  
Of the line.

I let the applause for his deeds rattle  
My convictions, I let him pose me  
Atop the bullseye, shoot darts careless  
& Miss the mark; I was  
A terrible fool.

He made me princess of the pedestal & then  
He made me accomplice, flinching as he stumbled  
To our curb—as he beat bloody  
The drywall beside my head.

He was a ruin of loved bits, a scatter  
Of parts so truly loved by me. I wanted  
To mark him mine, with my mouth & its  
Makeup, & sometimes with something sharper.

He waits for me even now, slim dark  
On my horizon. I must turn away  
Until I am dizzy with the wild rush  
Of escape, until I am rushed  
By fear, & remember how  
He loved me bitter, jaded, & only  
From the corner.

*Plan to Use Helicopter Sharpshooters to Take Out Deer on Catalina Island Sparks Protests*  
(ABC News)

*In this poem I will attempt to address  
The ethical problem of sniping  
An animal from above.*

2010

My grandmother, an avid gardener,  
Saw the lithe silhouettes of pregnant does  
Grazing on the sweet young leaves of her  
Beef tomato plants at dawn.  
After I woke up, she made me pancakes  
From her own mother's recipe. She loaded  
Me into the truck, took me to Walmart,  
& Bought a gun.

2019

My brother has a gun. He let me  
Hold it once. It was dark & heavy,  
Just as I imagined it, & I understood  
The desire. It was as close to god-like  
As I have ever been, because I could have  
Maimed anything. It would have been easy.  
Death is so easily dealt that we have  
Made courts & officers & cells to punish  
Those who choose to partake. & Yet, my brother  
Has a gun. For fear or anticipation, triumph  
Or terror.

*Topic 1*

What is a pest? This is important to note.

*[A pest is] a destructive insect or other animal that attacks crops, food, livestock, etc.*

*Ex. "the tomato plant attracts a pest called whitefly."*

In our case the pests are the deer who find sustenance  
From the native Catalina Island plants.

Therefore, the deer are destructive. They do not eat,  
Rather, they attack. In this definition, the doe  
Is given teeth, claws, & ruinous appetite.

*Topic 2*

In contemplating, I have found that I cannot help but abstract  
 The issue at hand. What deer made the first pilgrimage  
 Across the channel to Catalina? Or was it god-given:  
 Perhaps the deer decided it was theirs by right. Perhaps,  
 In their attempt to spread gospel, the plants just ended up  
 In their tawny bellies. This is a story we know.

*Topic 3*

Or maybe the plants wanted it. After all,  
 The tomato *attracts* the whitefly. Maybe  
 The grasses & crocus flowers & ferns  
 Showed a bit too much stem. The undulation  
 Of petals in the wind... It is no fault of the faun  
 To give into temptation. This is a story we know.

*2020*

We stared at each other for a long moment  
 Before the doe crumpled against the hood of the car.  
 It was strange, how we both braced ourselves,  
 Certain the other would find a way to stop it.  
 My father hated the doe for its poor timing,  
 Its stupid wet stare into the headlights. But the fawn  
 Behind the guardrail mourned, left to wither  
 As the rabbits dashed for their burrows.  
 I was certain that the doe must have seen something  
 Worthwhile in the headlights, something eclipsing  
 Fear. Later in life, I would remember how I became still  
 In the face of terrible danger. It is a kind of acceptance,  
 Knowing that man has deemed you the weaker thing.

*2023*

I know the desire to make something go away.  
 I am intimately familiar with wrongdoing.  
 I have been hurt terribly, have been made bare,  
 All the natural sustenance of my body stripped  
 From me by circumstance or love or whatever  
 Mean thing evolves from the two. I know  
 Righteousness. Some part of me understands  
 The itching finger of Catalina's helicopter sniper,

Certain he can make things right  
With enough bullets,  
With enough bullseyes.

*Manatee Tries to Borrow Florida Boy's Surfboard (ABC News)*

Give a man a manatee,  
& He will make from it  
A woman.

John Smith once wrote  
Of "mermaids:"

*"They were not as beautiful as they are painted,  
Since in some ways they have a face like a man."*

Butterface, he says! Their face more like a man?  
No, John, their face more like a mammal.

John never mistook a shark for a woman,  
I can say that much for sure. Slow grazers,  
Manatees, creatures without tooth or claw.

Man & his lust: the deplorable bane of us.  
One historian justifies:

*"Deprivation of intimacy inflamed all these voyages...  
Anything in the water became a projection of the sailors' need for contact."*

John, I have a question. I writhe  
With loneliness, my bed is bare  
As bone. Shall I rampage the kennels?  
Make man of beast?

I hate you, John. You disgust me  
Like the rest of them. Give the manatee  
The surfboard & be done with it.

*My Ex-Lover*

Is complicated. What a terrific excuse  
I once gave! *He's complicated, it's complicated.*

But it was simple, he made it achingly simple,  
& I was too wrapped up in those four syllables  
to notice:

*com- pli - ca - ted.*

This is what *complicated* looks like:  
Once, on a Friday night, while we made  
Love, he hit me.

The force of his unhappiness hit me first, & then the force of his open  
Palm, with all that heavy discontent behind it. It was as if he'd been waiting

To hit something, & it was easier to hit me than it was to hit  
Something else, like drywall—houses don't heal themselves

The way bodies do, & so it was an easy damage, a practical damage;  
A damage that hardly had anything to do with me at all.

This was the logic of my love for him:  
*Com-pli-ca-ted.*

His ring had clapped against my cheek, a certain kind of caress, which yielded  
A blossoming bruise that unfurled across my face, with layers of delicate color,

Delicate as a peony, with its many aching petals. I forgave him, told my mother  
I had fallen down the stairs. Which was mostly true—except it was love, not stairs,

But both are accidental, both are  
Complicated, both take the breath & body—

In all my confusion, I forgot how simple it is, to fall down the stairs: it starts  
With a wrong glance, a little obstruction. Sometimes the obstruction is your own

Body, you betray yourself, you trip over yourself. & Then the stairs have their way with  
you. Everything after that one little obstruction is a battering. You did not ask to be

Battered by the stairs: you just tripped. Even if it was your own feet that did  
The tripping. Even if you were in a rush, even if you were being clumsy & didn't

Notice your shoes were untied. Even if you had a bad feeling, at the top of the stairs,  
& Took them by twos anyway. Even if, at the aching end, you knew it was your fault—

Who can blame the stairs for the bruise? After all  
I was wearing that dress he hated. I was wearing those shoes.

Now that I understand, the meanest pain  
Is not the bruise, the complacency, the lie—

It is the brute misconception  
Of love & its machinations.

To think I was so certain that love must be  
Labor: I knew how hard it was for him to

Unfist. To me, his love was the labor  
Of his hand opening, even in the process

Of that hand coming down hard  
Against my face. To me, that was

Just another  
Type of touch.

*Scientists Create Synthetic Sperm Cells* (NBC News)

*I.*

This is what I learn: "*Stem cells taken  
from the bone marrow of men  
can be coaxed into something  
that resembles an immature  
sperm cell.*"

The next headline I find:  
*Women to Self-Create; & then,  
Will Science Render Men Unnecessary?*

Open me up, doctor,  
Pare me down. Pry the lining  
From its shell. Put me under  
& Take that Jell-O from my  
Bones. Make from it, *coax*  
The minnow of life, in all its  
Stupidity, & make from that  
Another girl-child to suffer,  
Or a boy to be cradled.

*II.*

My father's favorite delicacy,  
*Uni*, is the wet yellow carved  
From the dangerous body  
Of a sea urchin. Designed  
Only to maim, the sea urchin  
Huddles in crevice. Until it dies  
Or is pried open, its sex organ  
Harvested for consumption  
By strange fleshy humans  
Like me, like my father. We have  
Bonded over the consumption  
Of the urchin's yellow sex.

*This is a bad one*, sometimes we say,  
When it isn't as sweet. In the refuse,  
The body of the urchin lies cracked



& Ruined among other scraps.

*III.*

If I did not shudder, I would laugh.

*Will Science Render Men Unnecessary?*

Man? To whom a child

Is a twinkle in the eye,

Not a twitch in the gut?

Man? Who cannot purge red

Or bring forth—

Man—who has convinced

Themselves of their own

Necessity—know this fear:

That the soft thing between

Your legs & its potency, its use,

Is the fickle axis upon which

Your life—with all its unknown

Preciousness—is prized, or

Bred, or swept careless

Aside with the other scraps.

*Untitled; But In Writing This I Have Thought Of Plath & the Tulips*

His hands are in the attic, touching  
 Me. His hands like a bouquet presented  
 To a lover. Cloying, vibrant, an apology,  
 An assumption. His hands red-hot  
 Branding my sex a secret      *hush.*

My sex, which had not grown hair  
 Or desire or knowing. The bud  
 Of pleasure & the stone of guilt  
 Making mash of me. Ruin  
 This little body. The nacre of shame  
 At the seam's tip      growing.

For years after it was over,  
 After his family left the house across  
 From ours dark & vacant, I would pray  
 To a god I had never known;  
 The fear was so terrible: *I promise*  
*I'll never do it again, just this once,*  
*Just this once, to feel      good—*

I never forgot the pull of that desire,  
 & The way it twined with shame.  
 I remember when his baby sister was born,  
 Just seven years younger than me, I petted  
 Her duckling-soft hair, & the dread yawned  
 In my chest, to know she would sleep  
 Just one door down  
 From his red, red      hands.

*Mourning the Swallow*

There is a lump of rage  
At the maul of her, laid  
Redly on the welcome mat.

Her eggs lay cold in that cradle made  
Tirelessly from twigs & cotton,  
Lint harvested from my father's sweaters

On the clothesline in the spring. Fragile,  
There has never been such a fragile blue  
As the blue of those swallow's eggs,

Their blueness threatened even  
By the wash of the sun. The pink  
Bundles within, a pinch of life.

Shame puts its cold hands down  
On the tender juncture of my  
Neck & shoulders

This cat who I have  
Loved, his belly a sway in his step,  
Twitches with smug pleasure at the ripe

Death of this smaller thing & I cannot  
Help him understand what his play has taken  
From the world.

This is my confession, to the small

Pink of the hatchlings, to the daddy-swallow,  
To the nest scattered to bits:

It was my fat-bellied tomcat  
Who slaughtered the swallow  
On the third Sunday of April.

*Pilot Rescued After Crashing & Spending 9 Hours in Alligator-Infested Swamp (Vice News)*

To know that someone  
Is coming for you: a luxury.

Danger is a pulsing.  
Your soft hide

Weak as an eggshell  
Frail, membranous.

The teeth are everywhere  
Silt makes murk of the way

Hunger beats frantic  
In the chest of everything else.

I learn this: how the world leers  
At the misfortune, slavering,

When I make a wreck of my own vessel  
& Find myself swamped in the city dark.

Bathing in the yellow light  
Of the streetlamp's weak puddle:

It would be a luxury to know  
That someone is coming for me.

*In Memoriam of the Baddest Man I Have Ever Known:  
An Extended Metaphor in Which I Imagine that the Love I Bore Him Is So Easily Given Rest  
& So Easily Walked Away From*

The memory of our thirteen months together  
Has become a shrine here, in the damp alley,  
Candlesoaked, wet wax rolling down to the socket,  
To the petals below, to the concrete, rivulets pushing  
The burden of their being through the grit  
Of our sex & its grave, the headstone inscription  
Gleaned solely by touch, I made sure of it: that the final  
Word could only be harvested with intimacy,  
That the final word be mine.

Our thirteen months: eggshells  
Pulverized underfoot, the crescendo of the crack,  
The lament of each wooden tread under his  
Careless weight—which I was often under, which  
Stilled me like prey at the threshold of threat;  
My silks, a fragrant rind by the bedside, my skin  
Splitting under the pressure of a silhouette. But light  
Does shift, makes new the wound's shape, puts hot  
Palms down on bitten neck; & there is a thrum  
In the throat of the ache, a machination, something  
Sweeter than dawn playing beyond the treeline, & I am  
Walking there, past blister, past him & his begging,  
Past the cobble of the alleyway, the candles  
Like littered bodies behind me, I am a walking  
Bruise—a gasp of dark—

*Like a leaf scuttling after the dream of itself,  
 Into the sharp-wet of the snow against the skin, on into the West  
 Where desire—and sometimes pleasure—is a type of faith  
 What you call me to in this spilling, this motion of night:  
 Your hair loose in the water of your back. <sup>4</sup>*

# *BLUSH*

*I dreamed I was a mannequin in the pawnshop window  
 of your conjectures.*

*I dreamed I was a lament to hear the deep sorrow places  
 of your lungs.*

*I dreamed I was a hummingbird sipping from the tulip of your ear.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Reeves, "Into the West"

<sup>5</sup> Sean Thomas Dougherty, "Dear Tiara"

*California Storms Sow Superbloom of Wildflowers\** (NPR News)

*\*a qasida inspired by Shadab Zeest Hashmi*

Coming: broken from dormancy, the flowers birthe like orange scalpels or a lot of condoms—their suddenness is almost violent. And their greed! Their gasping vulgarity, their presence like a cuss. There is a certain sensuousness to a bud—how its tightness implies a virginal unraveling... grotesque & alluring, these fields of wetness, this blushing ovulation, mocking a landscape born to grovel. Today I am certain: drought is just wanting that goes unmet. Along I-5 the blooms roll outwards like a cloth in the wind. The news says *Wettest Season on Record* and I can only imagine the quench, the relent, granules loosening. Pity the soil that knows no better, thinking a lover has come to stay. It is a cruelty, the flowers, their knowing. Breathing fertile whimpers into the wind, notice how the ecstatic roots grip fistfuls, this is true excess, the pleasure of parch, desert lush with orgasm & still cumming—



*How I Have Yearned*

In my periphery  
she is perfect, her hand

rising like the sun  
to tuck back the hair

at her temple. *That is my  
job*, I almost say.

With me, she would want  
For nothing.

I would fetch her grapes  
& delight in the sound

of their flesh minced  
between her molars.

In my periphery  
her legs twine like two swan  
necks

I watch her & imagine that  
she unzips me, her hands

at my back  
where I am soft—

I am jealous  
as a man. I want to pluck

her raw & scream,  
*why not me*

& also trace the shape of her  
with my hands. It is all new—

something in me knelt

the first time she touched my elbow

to guide me. This is a danger  
I have not known with men,

who are fruitless & gross,  
for whom I refuse to kneel.

But her—Oh, she surpasses  
me, she usurps me,

she takes me by the throat  
unknowingly

& I cannot help  
but succumb

& all I am  
becomes  
the wake of her

*Seam Splitting*

My father handing me the knife  
Out on the dock where the dusk  
Is blue. He shows me the joint  
Which must be severed.

The water of the oyster's body  
Is brackish & sometimes with grit.  
My father & I open them, many  
Of them, noticing how  
They struggle themselves closed—

All that suffering, it is alive until  
The last second. It is the most living thing  
I have consumed.

It takes me back to her, months back,  
As I was cradled wetly in her palm,  
My joint failing against her devices.

She shucked me so raw, so neatly,  
Right down to pearl, before I even knew  
I was losing myself. She propped me  
Before the mirror I was not ready to see,  
Said into my flesh *See how lovely,*  
*These insides?*

Still, I cannot face her without the sensation  
Of crushing. I must cherish her  
Sidelong, from the catty-corner, lest I bear  
The weight of it, the knowing, that I am in love  
With the blade of her & how she cleaves me  
At my softest hinge—

*Australia Hunts for Tiny Radioactive Capsule Missing from Rio Tinto Mining Truck*  
(NBC News)

To desire  
is to pray, I have  
decided. Knelt  
in the dirt  
in the throes  
of wanting,  
I have decided.

What ecstasy, to be a threat on the loose! A noxious Tic-Tac in the great outback, thrust away  
from purpose & destination, slipping through the bolthole of opportunity—

There is not  
a god, but there might  
be a girl  
who turns circles  
in the rain.  
Whose face  
I have kissed  
in the dark.

Where do we go, when we are severed? A sheer follicle in the wind:  
Her body is a scarf in the tide. Proud pillar of new stem. Aspiring bud, its blushing fragrance.  
Shy crouch of smaller creatures. & the inevitable: we know that the ants  
must reap each peony's waxy flesh,  
it is the way of things.

To pray is to shed  
the rind. To go  
unheard. Once  
I put my hair  
behind my ears  
& bore the sun  
upon me & asked  
so nicely *please*,  
*promise me, please*,

But I have a suspicion that the rest was lost. Fallen from the truck bed of my mouth

into the live vacuum of the world, dangerous as any shivering isotope. To listen is to hold the throat—shhhh...

Limb from limb.  
That is how  
I have learned  
to tear into the body  
of worship.

*This Knowing*

Wicker ley lines, some girlfate  
Winding our palms into joint crease,  
Weaving this knowing a vessel I can bear  
Without wince or weariness—

Fine hairs on her arm, defiant  
In the face of beam, little soldiers  
Stood in ranks, noongold.

In me a well burbles over  
Against its better nature—no,  
Not a well—a tricklestream gone raving  
Into narrow depth, gouging its wild  
Shape down, down, swollen  
By the runoff of some old mountainous  
Fear in my distance, melting,  
The melee of its escape  
& The roar of it—*what if*—

The pink terror of us so close.  
A thundering in the teacup of this  
Brittle-skinned desire, just filled, thinly  
Confining its scald, boiling over—

*For Her*

It will be months before I understand that what I felt  
for her is the rich keening of want: its reverberations  
loosening me. A slip of gasp, her body is wind  
in the clothesline, making new what I have known,  
stained, lathered. From her comes the vicious frolick  
of stallions, the warm meander of wax from its wick.  
From her comes openings, the burgeoning grasp  
of dawn on the hills. Laying among the grasses, her presence  
is a shudder. Blush, bruise, change with force of touch,  
anything to feel her against me. Her presence  
is the ocean reeling back, and I the shoreline in awe,  
rooted to my convictions as she sweeps me fierce, washing us  
in the sweet wet of sensation. With her, there is a swelling  
of desire, a boundless heat, a terror at the ache to weld  
    our two bodies  
    into shatter.

*You think I left — I was the child  
who got away, thousands of miles,  
but not a day goes past that I am not  
turning someone into you. <sup>6</sup>*

**MAMA**

*Mother,  
I've done no better  
than the others, but for now,  
here is your clever failure. <sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Sexton, "Possessed"

<sup>7</sup> Erin Belieu, "Another Poem for Mothers"



*Mama*

*“Poems to  
mothers make us feel  
little again”*

*– Erin Belieu*

& How utterly tiny I feel.

*I.*

My mother, her hands, she will never  
know her palms the way I do. She will never  
know the thrill of her laugh, its cadence, its fullness.  
She will never know my joy in hearing it —  
I was not always funny, but I became so,  
solely in pursuit of her laugh.

*II.*

My mother, the smell of her sheets just  
after she has left bed, still warm  
with her, how I roll myself in them,  
her warmth is so true & so right. The oil  
of her skin has thinned the linen  
in the years she has rested, the sheets  
have faded into the gentlest  
of fabrics, mother-soft.

*III.*

Her rings  
on the counter when she washes  
dishes, the water so hot that I hiss  
away, but something about motherhood  
has made her invincible to such things.  
She passes the sponge over the cutting  
board once, twice, the way she must have  
washed my small back when I was small  
enough to bathe  
in the sink.

*IV.*

Six pounds, so little, me  
in my small pinks  
at the hospital. I imagine  
my hand like a starfish blindly  
clinging to her, to what was  
closest, which was always  
her. I think of us  
as we were then, at our first  
meeting, before the terror  
of my consciousness  
rose like a callous  
against the world.

*Untitled*

The bottle, the burden,  
the occasion of slip.  
The heaping of shame  
in the shape of my mother  
on the stairs

The flood of grass. Its cut smell,  
my father in the yard turned away.  
The mower. Its state of screech—

The drywall. Ruined  
by the crown of her skull  
as she fell. The red wash  
of hospital lights

Her hand. Limp & stupid,  
her shin open to the white.  
There is no one but me  
& my mother & whatever  
terrible thing was made that night  
in the drunken space between us

Elsewhere. My father,  
with his hands that taught me  
to shuck & fish & fix & hold  
lets the mower scream  
ever louder as he shaves  
the grass to its scalp.

*No Fair*

How come Creeley  
Gets to write  
Six lines about  
The woodpecker

& I must justify  
The eel-silk, the fan  
Of seawater on the  
Hull, skimmed froth —

Can anyone know  
How the pelican  
Gapes at me?

How the cacti  
Mock — *Look who*  
*Can't handle their*  
*Thirst* —

Can anyone know  
This coiled ache  
This urgency? —

Chance melting butter  
Into the back pocket  
Of the jeans that pinch  
When I sit, shift—

Can anyone know  
This chattering bareness,  
Seal-slick arms wrapped  
Around themselves—

Must I explain this flesh  
Cloaking these bones,  
These eyes peering fruitless  
From their moorings

Searching for a familiar scalp  
Among the many  
On the teeming & lonely  
Shores?

But my mother isn't here,  
Waiting like she swore  
She'd be after I wrenched  
Myself from the tide.

I suppose she is  
Back in bed, overcome  
By aches & ridden  
With bleakness.

Alone, un-wombed, I cradle myself.  
The wind raises me to shiver.  
The waves don their many  
White caps.

*Self-Soothing (If You Loved Me, You Would Stop)*

I have written this all before, her on the stairs, it was the nexus, bear with me, there is nowhere else for me to go. My father on the phone is heavy. The lines between us are burdened, carrying us to each other, woven silk of satellite pings bringing his heaviness to me. There is no magic nor intervention. There is only the living weight of something terrible, and it opens me from the inside out, carving away fistfuls of meat like James in his peach, lost in the ocean and gorging, gorging. I cannot believe there is more left to eat. I am a husk.

I want to go back to the lullaby, wet with fever, thin soup scald. I want to crawl again, sand filming the tub after the water drains. I would swallow a flu if only to feel my mother's hand turning flat circles on my back. I would rip the dark liver of a smaller thing from its wet cave. I would press my forehead to the gravel & pray. To see my parents play again, throw grapes that are not yet wine at the shape of each other's laugh.

I remember how the highest note of the lullaby used to wander from her, stumbling, skinning its knees in the dark & not-yet-treacherous space between us. Her hum was clumsy like that. But it was the murmur of her breath, drawn between measures, that gave me sleep. To think that I ever pushed her away. To think that I hated my shape, which is the shape of her, which was the first gift.

I open the wound. Prod its fester. I listen to the voicemail, I collect petals and teeth and lint, I smell the smell of my mother on her thin sleepshirt, I assemble something that feels like her. I make for myself a surrogate and put myself in her still arms and hum in my grown-up voice which is close enough, just close enough to hers.