2018
deciduous qween

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deciduous qween

by

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(Matthew Layne Glasgow)

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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Ames, Iowa
2018
DEDICATION

for Mama
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Beaver as Fairy Drag Mother 1

I
deciduous qween, I 2
Texas was a time that never moved 4
I grew up wanting 5
Silly Goose 6
What the Mountains are Silent About 7
How to Triumph Like a Hippocampus 8
bodyslam glam 9
Elegy for Honeybee 10
Mama said funny things 11

II
deciduous qween, II 13
Lady Caribou is a Badass 15
here & there 16
reprise 17
I fell for Christian Slater 18
Little Queer on the Prairie 20
pedicles, or this is where 21
Boy Vultures in Love 22
For Ayotzinapa 23
boundary // fluidity 25
Burnside Climb 28

III
deciduous qween, III 30
The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938-2016) 32
aurora 36
cactus mouth, or *opuntia macrocentra kusb* 37
malignant 39
El Árbol del Tule 41
Voices from the Old Imperial Farm Cemetery 46
On hearing the original *Jurassic Park* theme… 47
How to be strong 48
bitter-berry 49
IV
deciduous qween, IV 50
Jazz June 53
the power(bottom) is yours 59
All Afternoon 60
haiku for my first boyfriend on his 28th birthday 61
Straight Boy 62
Quaking Aspen, or dendrophilia 63
Hot Shit 65

V
deciduous qween, V 67
make-believe queen bey 68
the quartering of tupac amaru, or how to disemboby a rebellion 69
Plumage 70
vixen within 71
how you go 72
rise again 73
Ash Mama 74
Pando 75
Bayou Baby 76

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 81
NOTES 82
Beaver as Fairy Drag Mother

The trees are queer magic, just look at them. Branches arch to sky like soft-wristed arms, hands twirl overhead doing the leafshutter in the evening breeze. I watch you girdle a willow on the river’s edge. Beneath his thick green weave of oval leaves, you incise a waist for him, you make an hourglass of his trunk—one bite at a time. His body knows how the years pass in rings within him, but you carve through that history, fashion him a tooth-chipped corset. Then you scurry down, and we watch that willow sway. You wait for him to fall like a drunk on a broken heel, for his finger-leafed hands to press into your riverbed. But I want this diva to stay on his feet, to find his balance with the wind because sometimes, we need to know a deciduous queen can rise again, even after she falls.
I

deciduous qween, I

of teeth, being shed at the end of a period of growth

I forget how sharpness first emerged
from my jaw
the way milk teeth pushed
through tender flesh
how they scratched then chewed
the insides of my cheeks
just to tear another part of me raw.
I forget the taste of blood
a toddler’s iron
on a toddler’s tongue
the guttural scream of a small creature
whose only language was pain.

You remember. Tell me
no toddler ever teet hed with such indignation
tell me your mama and I just wanted you
to be happy to be quiet. But your baby
just grew louder and louder into a gaudy
and ungodly thing
losing incisors and molars
like enamel sequins shedding canines
keen and shiny as plastic diamonds.
They’d all fall
out of my mouth like sighs
so high-pitched they shimmered
in glitter-dusted confetti.

This is how I learned to sell my body
one tooth at a time
for a quarter then a dollar
and you’d hold all the smallest parts of me
in your hand glistening white
opal stones unearthed from my gums
like words that only shine
when they are free from the dark caverns
of my unmuzzled maw.

This is how I learned to let go
for a price
those blood-stained roots
the only soft, dangling remnants

of loss.
Texas was a time that never moved

I came from a pearl of sweat that fell
from Mama's brow on a Texas day in
August. Texas was a time that never moved
forward. August was scorched earth & steam—
a thick haze that swayed over the pavement.
When that pearl fell through flame & burst,
I danced pretty for Mama & Daddy
& whoever else would watch, just to keep
my feet from roasting on the coals. Texas is still
an unsetting sun; it hangs in time, forgets
the bodies it's hanged & burned & buried.
August is a boy ablaze—cheeks flush full
of fire, his feet aflicker. But I learned to burn
the past on my arms & carry it with me.
I grew up wanting

to fuck my superhero, bend him
over, cape over face, & let him feel
something for once. Clark, baby,

you left those tortoiseshell rims on
the nightstand, your want the only
pulsing kryptonite that kept you

from coming too soon. Red boot tips
to sky, eyes swallowing universe as
it swallowed us both whole. It didn’t

take x-ray vision for them to see right
through us. Your invincibility buried
under a baggy jacket & a high-pitched

voice. My desire to strip all that away—
a growing weakness for curves like yours,
for a strength alien to me. Somewhere

beneath the s-curl of your yellow shield,
a part of you needed to lift us up, to save
the planet crumbling around us, but you

always did your best work on your back,
or against the wall, so you let the world
burn that day. We watched hellfire rain

& brimstone through the open window
while you taught me to build a fortress
from my solitude. I kept your red speedo

for a souvenir, left you your belt & blue
tights, those leather boots hovering
toward the door. I kept the cape, too.

Just a little stained something to hold onto,
to remember the mess we made & the ones
who expected so much more from us.
Silly Goose

I recently drew a map of my childhood: a cul-de-sac on the edge of a great lake, a bench beneath an old oak, a feather-dusted shoreline where I craved more than breadcrumbs or confit de canard. One summer night, I held stale bread between my fingers, like crusted sandpaper so dry mallards & geese quacked bitch, please! Squawked hell, naw! Until Mama’s scream pierced the flutter of feathers, & I saw a pair of white wings spread wide & shimmer in the streetlamp. The goose lowered his head, & his bristled beak tore right through her pantyhose. I remember how everything fell in the shadows—handfuls of bread on the grass, Mama’s blood dripping from her calf to the shore’s plumage. It’s strange how things that belong somewhere else always seem so violent out of place, like soft, wingless feathers or a hunger for the wrong kind of flesh.
What the Mountains Are Silent About

“In Chechnya, [gay men] met largely in private chat rooms on social networking sites with names like the Village or What the Mountains Are Silent About.”
- Andrew E. Kramer, New York Times

In Chechnya, you can watch the Greater Caucasus Mountains rise queerly along the southern border, like a man newly gone from this place—disappeared for wanting wrongly. Some might say his wings are snow-capped peaks, but I don’t believe in angels or heaven, so I wonder if those mountains aren’t just piles of ash. And if they could speak to us, would it be in a low whistle that shivers pine needles like limbs bound and trembling from the electrical current pulsing through them? Would they scream, the kind that musters all its breath from the tenderized flesh of a violet bruise or the space where bone fractures into sharp shards of what once held his body together? Listen. You can hear his pained cry in your own closeted dreams. You know the weight of these mountains, you’ve always been here holding your truth deep within like a flesh of Paleogene rock because if you made a sound, they’d come for you, they’d make you crumble.
How to Triumph Like a Hippocampus

*after Ada Limón*

If I were a boy, I’d be a seahorse, waiting
   for an underwater filly, just one, to court me
in the salted shade of coral and ocean jade.
   I’d care for her eggs, take them by the thousand

in my pouch and carry on. I'd keep them for days,
   until the push releases my fry into an amniotic fluid
of green plankton where they’d float freely. If I were
   a seahorse, I wouldn’t watch them as I leave to find

another filly, to hold her eggs, too. But I’m not
   the kind of boy who leaves. My body is a pouch
that longs to love a thousand lives, to push them
   into this reckless sea & hold them all together.
bodyslam glam

for Cassandro & all the queer exóticos

Papá always counted to three before he’d lay a hand on me. The sharp stench of tequila slipping through his lips, no slur in his warning just yet. Uno…dos…tres. & after those four syllables, en su borrachera, the hands that drove his truck & turned that wheel, left on my ass palms full of lavender, of lilac. I felt the pain bloom from my body like a garden that grew along with me. I wore the work of his fists & palms like a sundress, sitting in math class, mouthing my own emptiness—hollowed numbers—as los niños y las niñas contaron in a slow drone: uno…dos…tres. My petals throbbed & stung & shivered with each recitation. & outside, on the playground, I learned to play patty cake, patty cake with a boy like me, to press my palms into his, & never leave a flower behind. Now,

I live in the shadows of my own glitter-dusted eyes, wear purple shimmer like a veil because I grew tired of trying to fight from behind a mask. I love the spandex, too—shades of lavender that glimmer like a bruise beneath the lights. Tights that palm my waist & round ass like cling wrap as I strut to the ring, squat, & slip between the ropes that bend & pull & stretch, like our faith when the ones we love most let us down. But some ropes aren’t meant to hang or bind, but rather to bring someone back to us with more force. Preferably, a burly, masked luchador, himself half-naked & oiled up, so I can take him in my arms, lift him overhead, & throw him down on the mat. I want to cover all the strongest luchas with my bodyslam glam in a hot mist of purple glitter to the crowd chanting uno…dos…tres. & beneath the tights, my body still blooms.
Elegy for Honeybee

We were intimate once.

You plunged yourself into my young purlicue,
left your stinger & insides behind & split —
the day’s damp sheath spilling behind you.
I watched you leave, fierce & aflutter, gold
spiraling into darkness.

I was a child then,

listening to my pulse with each throb, listening
to your flight—a broken bow along a string
of wind. I wanted to wear your dissonance,
to shroud myself in the yellow sequins & black
leather of a gaudy drag ensemble, so you’d know

I was broken, too.

I never told you I loved the way you pierced
the soft flesh of my body, how you filled the space
between my fingers with a pain I learned to pinch
more and more pleasure from. Now,

absence is the quiet of your wings,

their soft sputter in drifting mists & avarice.
Your poison-soaked bodice, flaxen blackened,
writhes on the branch of an almond tree.
My regret is the pinprick scar I no longer feel.
There’s a buzz in the air.

It’s the world unzipping:
almond tree bare, petals sapped of their pigment.
I wilt in their grey perfume—an older, bitter queen
stitching together frayed costumes of younger days,
when I’d wear the leaves & flowers you left me.
I’m still here, unraveling your sacrifice in the hand

that could never keep you.
Mama said funny things

while she was dying, and the dying didn't take long.
like when some lady who ran a nonprofit for people
who were dying too young sent her a basket of stuff,
she said *what do I need all this shit for now?* she pulled
out the little bible and said *I don't have time to read,*
*I just wanna do do do.* holding some plastic inflatable
thing, she hissed *what the hell is this?* and she threw
that little amorphous ball at me, round like her belly
because all that fluid just had no place else to go.
there we sat on the floor together, riffling through
that dumb shit like little kids, throwing it all across
the bedroom. we laughed and laughed, until it hurt.

//

Mama said funny things while she was dying,
and sometimes it sounded like a song. like when
we went to the emergency room and she asked
*am I still an emergency, baby boy?* I said I’d always
turn the sirens on for her. and as she lay there
on the hospital bed while that poor nurse couldn’t
find a damn vein, Mama asked *what does triage mean
anyway?* I said it’s a place where there’s lots of blood.

and she said *well we certainly don’t have that problem
in here, do we baby?* and we giggled. and my daddy
and my brother laughed, too, and they laughed until
that laughter found a vein, and their eyes broke, and
their eyes bled like a dam. they just bled and bled until it hurt and they thought they’d never bleed again.

//

Mama said funny things while she was dying, but she was funny all along. I remember four days before all that funny breath left her forever. how daddy had been watching the ryder cup in the living room with his sister and my brother and me all weekend. Mama needed help from the bed to the toilet and back, so I wrapped my arm around her and shuffled real slow because it all just seemed to be going too fast.

and she asked *are they still in there watching fucking golf?* I told her no, that it was all over now. and she said *oh thank god, baby boy. it’s not even a sport, is it?* I laughed, and I said no, Mama, it’s not even a fucking sport.

it’s nothing. you could do it in your sleep. and she said *well, I’ll have plenty of time for that then, won’t I baby?* I laughed and I laughed until I felt like I’d never laugh again. she held me in her arms and said *baby boy, I’m so scared. I’m so so scared.*
There were two crowns. I wore them both like a pair of antlers—diamond-encrusted bone that began to grow from my pedicles when I was four, prancing about our living room in a Mickey Mouse onesie, doing the pretty dance on baby qween’s first stage—a shaggy carpet—twirling for baby qween’s first audience: Mama & Daddy & brother. That afternoon, I felt sparkling silver gleam sprout from my skull like all my bones were precious metal, & I just wanted to let them shine, to let anyone hold my body in the light so I could look like I was worth something. It took twenty years for the first coronation, for those fairy drag mothers to pin diamond & metal into my cheap wig. It took one year to let go, to pass that crown along to another queen like an omen, like the outline of a buck in headlights, his head tipped back, his eyes lost in the night sky as he braces for some sort of impact. Sometimes, I want to be crushed by an oilfield tanker on a road carved from West Texas dirt, somewhere between Ozona & Big Lake & Garden City, but I haven’t really thought about it. Sometimes, I want to be manhandled by an applause—the force of hand against hand channeled into my bones so fiercely cracks spider my crowns’ metallic stems until they shatter. I’ll grind what’s left into silver buds, smoke my reign into ash, feel those bone-fleshed flames fill my lungs. Maybe I’ll always wear my royalty on the inside, take a drag or a hit & hold onto that high because I learned nothing lasts, least of all an unloved body. I’ve met too many men who don’t want
the crown so much as the head it rests upon. So let them take that, too. I’d give up all my bones just to know they’re still worth wanting.
Lady Caribou Is A Badass

Deal with it. How she grows antlers just like the bulls—soft velvet crowns that harden into sharp-boned flames.

Zoologists say antlers are weapons that bulls use to control harems. Lady Caribou says *I can run my own crew,*

*fuckboy,* says *I know these antlers ain’t forever, but I’ll show you what I’m made of.* Zoologists say antlers are objects of sexual attraction. Lady Caribou says *We all want to be wanted,* says *we’re all drawn to the fire.* Some zoologists say Lady Caribou’s antlers are smaller & less complex than a bull’s. Most of those zoologists are men. Lady Caribou says *fuck you guys,* says *I’ve got a goddam crown on my head & a calf in my belly.* Yes, Lady Caribou wears a crown just like the boys, except she carries it through winter, even as a calf stirs within her, even as her body knows the weight of two lives. When she lowers her head, two hearts quicken. She says *this was never just about me,* boy, says *you don’t fuck with a mother or her flame.*
here & there

a mother in capris sits for a roadside photo. Her offspring fidget by her sides. They squint & smile at the sun, at the camera’s gaze. They are children, & then they are giggling pixies weaving a bed of bluebonnets into tall braided bulbs of sapphire hair — a wig that unfurls from a queen’s head, crowned with a white bow. They pinch stems of Indian paintbrush between their small fingers, give their queen her stage face — cheeks flush full of cerise petals, bright rouge lips to match. From a Mexican hat, the shiniest pixie cinches a waist, makes a body more narrow than true. Watch a single bloom cascade, a spill of burgundy over yellow petals toward the earth. This is the only way they know to make a dress: with a purple winecup, fashioned into a chalice-shaped bustier, petals curved to sky, supporting all of their queen’s flesh, even what’s not there. They are drunk on colors of renewal, their hues of navy blue & pink pastels, their golden flowers sallowed to shades of orange & blood. Now, I am here, & there is no mother, no smiling sun, no offspring nor pixies, no color-drunk hillside, no wildflower vista. Only me, staring at the snow-sodden horizon. Only this stem of Castilleja indivisa sprouting within my own pixie flesh, ready to paint this frozen tundra ’til the endless flat bleeds prairie-fire with the lust & rust of a Texas spring.
reprise

Do you remember the purple crocus,
how he threatened to tear the petals
from his own sepal? I loved that fucking
wildflower, how he stood with his yellow
pistil in hand wanting to bloom all over again,
how the wind proselytized reincarnation
because to blow away as the Earth spins,
as pressures high & low squeeze your petals,
your stems—well, there’s just no justice
in that demise, to end on such a gusty whim.

That fear unfolds within me like a field
of violet spring: a petal-less stem all out
of bloom, the gunshot on the prairie, spirit
drifting over the meadow like a hollow echo:

another qween boy collapsed on a bed
of wildflowers, waiting to rise.
I fell for Christian Slater

when he took an arrow through his palm
& ran with Sherwood splintered in his hand.
I pined: for his will, for that drip of scarlet
from his fingers to the forest floor, the sharp pain
of medieval steel & his merrie men ragtag swag.
Maybe it was the patchwork of his pants, too.

How that black fishnet overlay came so close to
the stockings I’d slip on some day, that I’d palm
on stage in drag with that better tip your fag swag.
How decades before I took the razor in my hand
& carved my hairless child cheek. I fell for pain—
the soothing sting of the blade, the taste of scarlet
on my tongue. I was four & beginning my Will Scarlet
ways, cutting across our lawn in Oxshott with two
kitchen knives in my hands—an American pain
in the ass for the neighbors. I felt my father’s palm
smacking sense on my nether cheeks ’til I got a handle
on my keenness for the razor’s edge & assuaged
him. I lost my British accent, my ’lil Londoner swagger
to a Texas drawl & a Middle Age bravado. My scarlet-flushed cheeks, my fragile voice, my limp-wristed hand
all raised suspicion of my nature. But I had Christian to
believe in, how he’d brush his bangs back with his palm
& reveal his widow’s peaked brow. My want pained
me—each gay & faggot—a fist full of rage through a pane
of glass. How I picked up one of the shards, let is sway
back & forth in my hand before I clenched it in my palm,
to feel the sharp sting of shame & that slow-flow of scarlet.
How my arm became that lawn that I still ran & cut across to
feel the blades & a slow-dried trail of pain by my own hand.

I always found comfort in sharp shiny things handled
with care, with a zeal for medieval steel & more pain.
Because when I fell for Christian Slater, I began to
fall into everything, into my own sharp Will Scarlet swag,
into my own skin. Now, my fingertips trace each scar. Let them follow the rigid flesh like the ridges of my palms

& remember when my will was too strong, how my scarlet never stayed where it belonged. I shake & my palms sway still holding my want & pain & all of Sherwood in my hand.
**Little Queer on the Prairie**

Oh prairie, whip out your big bluestem. Let me watch it grow, that laurel stalk so flush full of fiber as it takes form. Come winter

I want to awaken to your golden rod, your feathery head never too close to my face. Stem-slap me, baby. Let me feel you on my cheek.

Spread your seed & conceive of a sea of bobbing amber tender to the touch. I know, the white man, he let you down, aroused you upon his colonial arrival, left you with blue balls for roots, then castrated them. So Superman that bro. Make him bathe in your second coming.
pedicles,
or this is where

every antler is an adolescence
that sheds its vascular skin—bloodied

velvet scraped like childhood against
a red maple's trunk. Call it ritual—

how you leave that tenderness on
the forest floor for these hardened,

honeycombed bones ephemerally
fastened to your skull. How your

flesh softens as your testosterone
begins to fade, and you remember

what it is to be more fawn than buck,
to feel that sharpness weigh on your

head and body like a shame that weakens
the blood. I am those heavy antlers;

this is where I leave you— between
eyes of burnt umber and soft salt-

&-pepper-furred ears. You'll learn
to seduce without a crown, to survive

without a weapon—hide soaked in
your will to grow and grow and
Boy Vultures in Love

On Wednesday, May 31st, 2017, Artis Amsterdam Royal Zoo announced two male vultures had successfully hatched an abandoned egg together.
“A Gay Vulture Couple Hatched a Chick Together: ‘They Proved They Can’”
-Time, June 1, 2017

Male vultures are known as sporks, which is to say these two are versatile in the nest, scavengers in the sack who make it work with what they’ve found in one another. They were the only ones who saw the egg on the feathered floor of that aviary & understood what it meant to be unwanted by one’s mother, or father, even if just for a moment—slow caress of unbroken shell abandoned on soft plumage. Those two lovebirds built a nest of scavenged twigs & hopeless longing.

The news articles called them gay, said they proved they can, as though there were ever any doubt. What is that word to birds of prey anyway? I’m told they speak Dutch there, so really they’re homoseksueel, or just two boy vultures in love, their zonderling days all await for larger beasts to fall, curved beaks ready to carve any carrion rife & ripe from long afternoons steeped in summer heat. All await for an unhatched life, feathers eager & ruffling for a beak to crack the warmth of a fathered shell—its halved emptiness the only thing forsaken.
For Ayotzinapa

On September 26, 2014, forty-three students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Normal School of Ayotzinapa were detained by local police in Iguala, Guerrero. They were never seen again.

when you left I bathed
the baby in the kitchen sink
he turned to ashes in my arms
that’s how I learned
to be covered in loss

to wear it like the black
hood tied around
your neck, hands bound
to be severed fingers
plunged into the red soil

your eyes opened to a starless night sky but you
didn’t need the sun
to burn now i feel
the heat in every sunrise

& look out the window
to where our State cut you
down, your limbs down, your
trunk & body & leaf blossom
fingers down heart down

i found it in the riverbed
char-soaked from a narco
blaze the kind that smells
like it don’t give a fuck like
our State is his i knew

where to bury you
to make you grow again
so you disappeared once
more beneath this land
of bone chips & dried flesh
i'd never watched a man
rise pull himself out
of the earth
body & branches still
covered in ash that's how
you learned to live again
i haven't looked out
the window since that day
too afraid of what
i might see the way
you stand rooted in death
& feel the wind blow right
through you like bullets
Along the shore of the Rio Bravo, we watch the silty current sunder your home from mine—
a slow flow of brown water that cuts through Santa Elena’s Canyon. On the opposite bank,
a girl stands in faded grey jeans, her arms drowned in a bulky poncho, her body breathless beneath quilted green & red. She sinks into the muddy shoreline like a dream, eyes tracing the patchwork of our entwined fingers as we follow the river’s edge. Some things are made to be crossed, some flesh is meant to tangle. You are a man & I am a man & we are contained by no boundary on this day.

For 1,254 miles, the Rio Bravo serves as the natural border between the U.S. state of Texas and Mexico.

My body lies. I want to love a man, a woman. I am the girl. I want to be in the arms of another girl, taste her, yearn for the soft-petaled flavor of truth. I part my lips, but everything going in & coming out deceives me. My words are muddy, too soft to rise toward the unforgiving sun like a canyon wall. Too cold & wet in the shadows of red rock to be a flame, but all of me needs to flicker.

What is the natural boundary between us? I want to wade in that water, to feel the current that keeps
me on the southern bank & you on the other side. 
I want to drown with all the others who want more.

_The vilest carcasses are the floaters. They turn green, swell up like a balloon, & stink to high heaven._

The girl is a ghost. She is every woman & every man who ever wanted. Her poncho bleeds until she wears the grey of her jeans on her flesh, drapes her loss over her empty chest, sinks & slips away into any soft, cold earth that will take her. The girl is a ghost. He needs to be the girl, before she drowned in her own body, before she understood she was not a girl, but a boy.

This is what it feels like to be trapped. A ghost has no body, only regret. The girl is a woman, a man. The girl is a dream. The girl is my dead mother. The girl is.

_Since 1998, more than 6,000 migrants have died trying to cross the border from Mexico into the United States._

What happens the day we can no longer take refuge in our own hearts? Remember, the will to cross anything is to wade in one’s courage, to trust our flesh-wrapped bones to cut through the current. Tell me, who guards the borders of my body? You are the girl on the southern bank. I am standing alone, toes sinking into the mud because I want you beside me before the currents quicken & rise, like those years we can never return to. I want
to trace your frailty with my fingertips, your slender arms swimming in quilted fabric, to look you in your emerald eyes, to lay my head upon your hollow chest & squeeze the life back into you. The girl on the southern bank is always sinking, always watching the silty current until it runs dry & we meet once more in the riverbed.
Burnside Climb
*Ruidoso, New Mexico*

My hands cling to the wheel like it’s a branch, & this mountain is just another trunk to scale, another thing we must hoist ourselves over to look out from its crown. You are the pristine diamond. I am a flawed emerald, which is to say, to this mountain, we are both adornments.

We move higher & higher still, but I’m already there—my lungs all kushy & smoke-stained from a morning bowl. I should not be driving, but you are not worried. You look to the burnside of the Sierra Blanca—pines nearly indiscernible in their black needle-less death. The aspens, too, those boys all char-soaked & done up with ash. It’s hard to watch the young ones go, but we can’t call it needless, how the flame takes the old spruce back into the earth, & lets this forest grow again.

We reach a locked gate & park. The hike up to the lookout sores my lungs & all my soft edges, slack & full of winter’s sloth. All I see is shadow, trunk after trunk an effigy, what the fire leaves behind in its climb. You wait several yards ahead—sleeves rolled & hand shading your face—looking.

Here’s where the flames stopped: the half-burned pine, the aspen un-singed, the spruce still ever-green. Here’s where I catch up to you, where we follow the white of thriving aspens up to the peak.
How these boys up here must have quaked to the crackling of barkskin, how their blond leaves must have flickered all night in the light of nearby fire. How my lungs feel like those rings within them now—here, but shaken. Or like us for that matter, remembering what it is to burn without the flames.
III

deciduous qween, III

*of the body, the breath, not permanent; transitory or ephemeral*

I can’t lie on my back & look at the sky
without trembling—my haunches sunk

into the grass, my mind wondering when
the ground will let go. Call it a universal fear

of what holds us in space. Call it vertigo—
how we are all in constant motion, even

in our stillness. My yoga instructor says
the final pose is the hardest. Play dead.

Pretend you’re okay with it. You deserve
this. When my grandfather died, I heard

my mother moan from her bedroom—her
fear all staccato & breathless *no*, her pain

hollowing my body from belly to chest to
throat. What I lost that night was my faith.

I looked up into darkness. I begged the sky
to show me a place I’d never believe in,

to shed the space between us & let me see
the other side of the horizon. I once knew

a fiery woman, her throat so full of death
she couldn’t speak a word. She didn’t want

the morphine. Shook her head & groaned as
I squeezed the drops under her dry tongue.

I would have swallowed all the pain for her,
let it fill the emptiness my body carried since
I first heard her cry all those years ago & learned what it meant to be gone. I want to

be brave, to say it’s not the being gone but the going that scares me. But it’s all of it.

How my bones will shed this flesh while I’m still wearing it, how what’s left will go in flame

or in the ground days after all I see is darkness. But I’m still looking up into it. I’m not on my

knees, but if there’s some place worth believing in out there, I’m still begging it to show me.
The Adventures of Robin Hood, 1938-2016

1994

My mother gives me a VHS of Errol Flynn in those tight—his quads toned, his glutes rippling in all of that Lincoln green fabric—& all of me & my seven years longs to be one of his Merrie Men, unsheath a plastic blade & play-duel in my early middle ages. I long for Will Scarlet & his quiet sharpness to ride, to laugh, to smile with me. To keep his white stallion just a nose behind mine.

1938

Errol Flynn shows himself in technicolor for the first time—brown locks curling over his ears as he raises his bow, lets each arrow go & watches them plunge into the Normans. Coy smile beneath his pencil mustache, a cluster of hair on his chin because this Robin Hood is a Hollywood wilderness man.

1994

I spend afternoons saving Maid Marian from her own backyard, from her suburban palace. We all need rescuing sometimes. We run circles around the Sheriff of Rope Swing, glide down silver slide drawbridges over moats of parched Texas sod, flee the winds that never stop chasing us like Norman lords. Maggie plays Marian, & I am Robin, most of the time.
2004

My mother wants to go to church because Maid Marian is singing with the praise band today, & Maid Marian will be going to college next year, & we only have so many more chances to get to hear that angelic voice. My mother wants to listen. So I go to church with my mother because I want to sit beside her & watch her smile & listen too.

1974

My mother is nineteen watching The Adventures of Robin Hood. She loves Maid Marian’s floral print—the red, green & blue petalled clusters across her chest, the bronze wimple & gorget tucked beneath the golden coronet. My mother loves the fashion, sees the green of her own eyes in the emeralds that fasten Marian’s cape to her dress. She wants Olivia de Havilland’s sass, how she rolls her eyes at the commoner who dares speak to a maiden. But a part of her wants that commoner, too. She admires a handsome man in tights—the firmness, the masculine curves.

My mother the adventurer, who drives or rides on the backs of dirt bikes with those country boys.
2012

I am in Maid Marian’s apartment on the Upper East Side when I get the phone call from my mother, when I realize our breaths & our bodies are finite, when tears & I’m so sorry’s are not to make it better, but to remind ourselves it’s not okay.

I am the last member of my family my mother tells, but she doesn’t tell me. She just says she needs me to listen, & then she cries. Not the deep dirge of the daughter who lost her father—a woman’s faint wail like the wind’s far off whisper.

1958

Errol Flynn hauls a dead stag into the great hall on his shoulders. He flips the limp royal dear onto the banquet table, antlers & all. Prince John & Maid Marian & the Normans cry treason. They snarl at the commoner who dare pierce the royal flesh of the King’s dear.

1959

On October 14th, Errol Flynn dies of a heart attack brought on by cirrhosis of the liver. He is fifty years old.

2012

My mother dies of pancreatic cancer on October 4th. Her internal organs become a moat that drowns her. There is no drawbridge, no silver slide.
2014

I wait for Will Scarlet to find me. To ride up on his white stallion, raise his bow & arrow like I taught him, & release one into my chest. I pray for Will Scarlet to find me. To release me. To steady my hand holding the blade that never presses deep enough until it, too, goes pale.

2016

When I sleep, I see my mother. I never feel more awake than in those moments of slumber & sobriety & quiet. I never feel while I’m awake.

2012

Maid Marian sings at my mother’s funeral, & I listen because her voice is all that makes sense in this sanctuary. She trills In the garden & I am back in her yard as we flee from a lord, now more phantom than Norman, who chases & chases e’t the joy we share as we tarry there is at once so close & so far away. I just want to feel something real & true, so I listen to the wind’s low whistle, to the delicate tremolo in her voice.
aurora

Through the padlocked window, I watched
a cardinal cut through morning’s hot, dewy flesh.
His feathers crimson-soaked in sunrise. Each wing
a freshly sharpened blade. Each high-pitched pulse
of song loosening memory’s stitched wound. I saw my
mother’s face and a past lover and a dark comedy.
They all ended the same. I remember mourning, waking
to dawn-soaked bandages holding those feathers within
me. I lay curled under the sheets as you sat on the other
side of the bedrails, head in your hands, wondering how
such a soft, feathery thing could make the morning bleed.
cactus mouth,
_or opuntia macrocentra kush_

wake, wake
& bake these west
texas cheeks, these
garden city gums

eye’re so thirsty
to hollow

arid me
terrain me
until I bear
only you
take you in

these lamesa lips
where you bury
your spines
in my sand-fleshed
cheeks—a sore
memory—so purple

prickly pear kush
you wet succulent
you thorny yellow
blossom, this

mouthful didn’t come
from some small pot
on a windowsill

it’s a wild one
just off an anxious
gravel road where
I’m on my knees

looking as far
as my glazed eyes
can see into
a fearless flatline
horizon

some other
joyous kind of desert
malignant

my words are like my mother’s
cells—a bit rebellious & out of
line. how i called a dying woman
crazy.

_rebel_ is a word
for those who refuse to remain contained
by form
or body,
who break lines like bones, watch
thoughts splinter & bury themselves
in the world’s flesh.

a body is a form
of poetry, how certain lines
like _her eyes, the thirsty green_
_of a west Texas cactus_ emerge
from a dying body of work.

i want my words to multiply,
to overwhelm the page
like cancer so cantankerous,
to hollow out the pancreas
of homophobia until it no longer secretes
its bile, leaves the carcass
of the bigot in its wake—
bones picked clean by maggots
& faggots.

my words are like my mother’s
cells—furious & caustic & out of
time. i’m sure they’ll be the death
of me too
some day. until then

i’ll gladly push two mLs of morphine
beneath the tongue of the afflicted
as i did for her
each day near & until the end
because the last thing we

need is more pain.
El Árbol del Tule (variations on creation)

I. *ahuehuete, or old man of the water*

Montezuma cypress, you aged, girthy hombre, do you miss your swamp, that freshwater marsh from which you rose more than a thousand years ago? They threw a seed in there, watched it sink, & from that seed the stoutest tree, & from that tree an old man of the water rose. Ahuehuete, I can see your shaggy needles, like a lazy evergreen, you are such a big boy now. Not so tall, but *thick—*

braids of ancient trunks wide as any Zapotec or Mixe or Mixtec has seen. You are getting older, mi amigo. The water has long left you, wrinkled bark dark in your bushy shade, but your green needles still do *nuestra danza temblón* in Oaxaca’s afternoon breeze, just like bulrush tule from all those years ago—thin-stemmed & bushy-headed, wiggling over the marshy sheen, shaking all the thickness it held.
II. cane in the ground

El viejo, you were just a means to the land.

I heard the story once:

cómo un rey named Condoy, or a god—they’re so often interchangeable, in their own minds—wanted to erect a great palace, una gran ciudad for his people, or himself. He passed through the land of Tule, the skinny-stemmed sedge all green grass with golden tassel heads. On the edge of the marsh, he let his body rest, stuck his walking cane in la tierra for good keeping. When he awoke, there you were. A little sapling in bloom, a young Montezuma ready to widen y rise, to cover all of Oaxaca in your shaggy-needled shade. I heard the story once: cómo otro rey u otro dios wanted that land too. But you, old man, thick as thieves under el sol de verano, you are the palace, the great city of the cane, Condoy’s only claim to the marsh. They say he will die with you—el hombre, o el dios. How your trunk, your branches will unfurl like the severed end of a rope, all dry y parched from marshless centuries. So take that man, that god into the ground with you. Thank him for your tired, bitter thirst.
III. La asunción de María

Mira,
eres una escalera
para su hijo
su dios

de esa pequeña iglesia
el Templo de Santa María
de la Asunción
erigido a tu sombra

levantarla
levantarla

Look,
you are a stair
to her child
her god

of the little church
the Temple of the Virgin
Mary of the Assumption
erected in your shadow

lift her
lift her
IV. *in the wind*

Antes de ti, before you,
the amber heads of tule bulrush
bobbed in Ehecatl’s wind.
Ahora, there is only
you,
y you know Ehecatl too,
how he shakes your green needles
with each breath,
how his priest, Pechocha,
planted a single seed
fourteen hundred years ago.
Y here you are,
obbing y rustling y thick
as ever en la brisa de tu padre.
V. Montezuma cypress

Some say los hombres came from the cypress trees, walked out of a Montezuma—gash in his great belly—y left him there, a thick thing wounded.

It does not matter how they came, just that they came,

con their highway, con their pollution y tamaron tu agua.

Do you remember the marsh, the swamp from which you rose?

Y la espadaña, their soft golden smiles ever upon you in the dust of the water they took.
Voices from the Old Imperial Farm Cemetery
for Reginald Moore

Just so history knows we are still here,
pull the weeds from our dirt-drowned bodies.
Dust those gravestones; listen to ghostwhisper
rustle stalks of sugar cane like chains because
buried inmates have stories to tell, too.
Like in the beginning, when He made all our skin
of sugar—sweet granules of every shade.
Brown sugar worked the fields. Brown sugar cut
the cane. Brown sugar ran & drowned in water
two feet deep. White sugar held our shoulders down,
watched the stream turn muddy & bittersweet.
We built this town on brown mounds—light & dark.
So lick these hands clean of the blood-dried earth.
Go on. Tell us how that sugar tastes now.
On hearing the original *Jurassic Park* theme on piano in *Jurassic World* & finally realizing how quickly time flies

even for dinosaurs—
& not just archaeopteryx
or microraptors. It flies
for the feathered, wingless
ones, too. Extinction never
did reptilian bodies so good
until now, re-engineering
all those species so sleek—
inauthentically scaled in
scarier greens & blues.

As a new child actor
pushes the doors open
to my memory, to a place
overgrown in island vines,
the soft notes of a piano suite
take me back to an old park
& a classic theme. To when
I was that boy’s age, opening
things out of curiosity, young
arms lifted by the strings of
a triumphant crescendo.

But I can’t hear the violins
anymore, just this piano’s
high-pitched dream. & I don’t
want to know the truth: scales
or feathers, sharp teeth
or dull molars. It took
a dinosaur & hundreds more
to show me how time passes
& comes back—it’s skin
smoother & in every color,
teeth sharper, ready to tear
apart anything that’s left.
How to be strong

Truth is
I cry for weeks at a time.
Truth is
my cheeks tasted of saline
    long before
my mother died, flushed & full
    of something
like shame. My eyes needed to
let go.
    I’ve been told not to break
    a line
without forethought, but
    melancholia doesn’t
come on like that. Some of us
never learned
to smile & mean it.
    If I could,
I wouldn’t
be writing this poem, so I’m
    gonna let
it feel like it doesn’t need to be
    a man, to be
brave. I’m gonna let this poem
lie
    in the fetal position in its
apartment for days
    not knowing
when
    or if
    it will move again.
bitter-berry

"It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is & to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.”
- Sethe, Beloved

Listen:

a hummingbird’s wings move with a quiet rage, a buzz that dizzies you like the unborn turning soft head over tiny heels in your patient womb until you push that babygirl free. What is a life bound to a branch? Raceme stem, white flower cluster, you wait for a lone cherry blossom, for a blood red berry fleshy & plump with its own mortality. His whip splits open a chokecherry tree on your back, leaves you to carry a lattice of razor-edged leafbloom, of cyanide seed, such deathly gifts. The berry dies before it falls. This is how he keeps you—your body’s fatal fruit forever out of reach. No poison end for you, no sharpened-blade demise. You cannot climb the tree that becomes you. He comes for babygirl. Listen: how the little hummingbirds stick their needle beaks right through your head cloth. Listen: how you fly, cartilage of your mother wings sore with fear, desperate to carry you both to a dark freedom—the kitchen knife a spiny-honed leaf.

Listen: footsteps outside the door like a rattling chain, a cracking whip. But he will never bind a branch to her now. He will never root a choke-cherry upon babygirl, skin slack as a fallen berry.
deciduous qween, IV

of a tree or shrub, relatively broad-leaved, rather than needlelike or scalelike

A boy once called me a beech leaf—
too straight-veined & sharp around
the edges to love, he said. Clearly,

he was no dendrologist. But guapo,
you know. You watched me fall from
a birch tree. Picked me up all torn

& dusty—another fragile dying thing
the world couldn’t hold onto anymore.
My grooves, they aren’t unswerving,

& I’ve never been able to commit
to the curves of my own body, how
stretch marks bloom from my love

defines, they aren’t unswerving,

handles like sanguine veins ready
for autumn, ready for this flesh to
turn color and fall from my bones.

I’ve got a broad-leaved base. It sags
a little, hangs heavier than in those
twinkish spring days of my youth

when it took less than a stiff breeze
to send me fluttering dizzy-headed
to some new resting place.

//

We call the broad flat part of a leaf
its blade, or lamina. It cuts through
the wind, rustles with the soft chime
of a knife when blown against other keen-green & dangling things. The boy was right about my edge, I’ll give him that. I’m still a jagged-toothed blade—the serration of a breadknife that opens up those soft & most delicate loaves like a prayer, like every slice is the body of christ. But I worship carbohydrates, & the only body I’ve opened with a blade is my own—flesh so full of yeast & flour it pulls my skin apart, brings rise to my leaf-bottomed jeans. How does a toothed edge shape a body? One sacramental mouthful at a time. This is my blade broken for you. Remember me.

//

My father says I used to have such a natural smile—pristine white teeth & cheeks full of something, like joy.

*What happened?* he asks. *I started to wear my shame like a muzzle,* I say, to hide the shiny edges of my lamina. Maybe I like to be bound. Maybe I need you to fold me along my midrib vein, gently fasten the toothed jaw of this birch leaf closed. Maybe there’s a dimension somewhere within me that must be contained. Let’s call that place *truth.*

//
The boy never told me I have a booty like a thick-ass birch leaf. Others did. I still just want to do the leafshutter with the evening breeze, to make every ounce of my round-bottomed blade shake & jiggle in a whirlwind of drums & bass. That’s the truth, let’s go there. Make me grin & you can see everything this body has ever been in my sharp, broken smile. Feel it in the soft dissonance of white scars, the ones that spider around just above my waist, webbed etchings of all the flesh that has come & gone.

Guapo, you aren’t the first to touch me, to trace your fingers through the empty grooves that bloom from my ribs like ridges of symmetrical leaf-skin. Maybe you’ll be the last. Unfold me. Rub me into nothing in your palms. I’m ready to turn to ash, as long as it’s in your hands.
Jazz June

I. *Urban Dictionary* says

it’s slang for doing the nasty,
like a sweet saxophone moan:

summertime & the living is easy
& I’m feeling good & I just want
to make love to you. Well, I want
to be something nasty, too, so give
me the name. Call me Jazz June,
& I’ll be a queen as long as life

is like a song. Just wrap my heart
up in clover; put its petaled beat

into a dress—Ella’s sequined
shimmer, blossoms in my wig

like Billie—so this body can feel
close to a woman, again. No black-

face; this isn’t that kind of show.
Drag is about the look & the song,

so put some Nina on. Play me Etta
& Sarah Vaughan ’cause this boy

likes to sway slow on stage. I could
read Gwendolyn—real cool, real

slow; this is that kind of show. Some-
times we just need a poem or a song,

especially in Texas & Mississippi—
goddam.
II. *sweet, soft things*

I’m lying on the shag carpet in my grandparents’ living room, threads fraying in all the shades from brown to green, yellowed & golden & in between, like Texas sod in late June—parched & dying. I’m thirsty too, for a dream that I can speak to, that I can call my own. This is that dream. From the dream’s kitchen, I smell apples simmering in cinnamon, the sour flesh of Granny Smiths bubbling in a sweet earthen spice. Soon those apples will soften, like the woman over the stove, her red curls thinner than in those photos on the wall. Same color though, fiercely bright & aflame. Nanny stirs with some fire too; she sways her shoulders to the Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B. I’m eight, so I still think the Andrews sisters can sing. It’s true, they got some brass, but no slow moan. Goddam, it’s been such a jazzless June. Until she comes at me with this earthen tune, at last. My love has come along on the radio. Etta’s voice croons on, so I know Nanny’s still groovin’, with a deeper lean now ’cause she sure ain’t turning that dial. I spread my fingers wide & bury them in the carpet. They are flames from the friction, dying to press their heat to something soft & sweet. I want to fill the empty spaces of my body with summer & this slow song, now that I’ve found a thrill to press my cheek to. I don’t know if Nanny’s really moving along to that slow simmer of percussion, to that stovetop beat, but those apples sure do smell sweet. Someday, I’ll be a sweet, soft thing too—a tender fruit that tastes like home. But this is just a dream where I press my palms into the carpet like a bone-dry lawn, where I reach for a woman’s brawny voice & let my hips sing along. This is the dream where I touch those dead or dying things that make a boy’s little body move.
III. *Jazz June used to thin gin*

before I changed my name & took
to the stage, back when I was just a boy
thirsty for something to change my state

of mind. I would go over to your house
when your parents were overseas, palms
sweaty & heart pulsing like a trombone’s

heavy breath before Etta’s voice comes in,
& she just wanna, & I just wanna make
love to you. I remember how you’d empty

enough from each bottle—like Hendrick’s
or Tanqueray or Bombay Sapphire—so we
could forget what we both really wanted,

or maybe we’d remember. You joked about
putting your lips around me. I just laughed
& watched the way your body filled those

jerseys & shorts to the brim with something
worth wanting. I just wanna, I just wanna,
but we’d just fill the bottles back up with

water, ’cause some poisons are too strong,
too dangerous. I learned to dilute those urges,
the ones from the empty spaces of my body.

I just drank until I could forget & listen
to how she don’t want me sad & blue,
she just wanna, she just wanna. Me, too.
IV. My daddy bad a trumpet

I never heard him play.
Found it in a velvet case—
rusty brass bent & buoyed
into some pitchless thing.
He let me wrap my mouth
around that instrument,
blow all kinds of ungodly
moans out its bell. From
my bedroom, from out back,
I’d raise all kinds of brassy
hell. He showed me how to
empty a full water key too,
how to press my finger to a
curved clip & watch the spit
drain from the valve. Yes,
my daddy wanted me to be
a sweet & tidy little thing;
he told me never to swallow
the fruits of my labor. Daddy,
I tried, but I just love to play
& play, & when I’ve got my
mind on that slow moan, those
notes, they sweat in the thick
bayou air, they taste like the
sweet sucrose of any fruit.
V. The first time I jazzed June

was in the front seat of a 1986 Ford pick-up. He parked between some baseball fields just off the shore in La Porte. That summer night was dark & silent & awful. All I could hear was our breath, faint & light as trumpet gasps, but no crescendo moan, only the sticky, humid mess of our sweat & Texas heat. Before I left,

he told me it might have been better if I’d used lube. Even spit would work, he said. I just thought of that water key draining. The fruit of that trumpet’s labor, how my child lips made a broken horn let go of a rusty song. All we heard in the cab of that old truck was the soft, quiet hum of waves on the shore. When I came back from school the next summer, we met again. Different truck. Same boy. This time he reminded me to bring all we’d need to make things go smoothly. That June heat made our flesh so limber, & we both made something like music that afternoon—a reprise of a softer tune, first so slow & low, then faster with more moan.

I still don’t remember his name. Let me call him Jazz ’cause it was June, & our breath was hot-mouthed, just wanting to be nasty on a smooth neck, an open ear. He laid there & asked, Do you think you can go again? I just sang, Again, again.
VI. *Urban Dictionary* says

it’s something we do after we
thin gin & before we die soon,

like a swan song, or Billie’s *last*
*recording* — all the ones that left her

lips too soon. *So why not take all of me?*
I’m still here in a flicker of silver heels

on stage, but I’ve seen thinner days.
You can feel them in the fraying threads

of this corset, in my love handles’ soft
flesh uncinched after the show. But while

I’m up there, running my palms down
my shaved thighs with the friction

of a child’s fingers through shag carpet,
I still hear an earthen tone,

a deep dirge moan from the grave.
I know that’s where I’m heading too,

but I wanna stay, I just wanna
shake the thick bayou air, the smell

of the bay through a cracked window.
I wanna fuck a time, fill those days

with a song. I just wanna, I just
wanna move & groove with you.
the power(bottom) is yours
for Captain Planet

I wanted you then—
all the silver-blue & crystalline
waves of muscle washing over
your body. Your hydro-powered
biceps, turbine thighs, washboard
abs. I imagined my tongue gliding
through every trough, pausing
on each crest. You were the world
in my child eyes. Even now,
that green mullet has me crying

O captain, my captain. So I guess
I’ve always loved your planet.

Just call me Ma-ti—all heart
with a big gay monkey on my back.

Was it always so obvious? Did those
planeteers see him sitting there
before I even knew? It’s strange how
shame can change the climate of our
cheeks. How it tastes like petrol
when it leaks from my veins.

You always said, the power is yours,
but I want to give it back to you.

This ring glows heavy on my hand.
It’s all earth & fire, wind & water,

but no love left in this drowning world.
All Afternoon

Yesterday, I built a glory hole, but no one came, so I knelt alone—without acclaim—my eyes on the clean tile floor, the wall unstained. What’s a boy to do with such shame, kneeling hollow-jawed in a duct-taped-frame? I crooned *A hole is a hole* all afternoon—a sinful hymn to fan some flamer’s flame. There was no pilgrimage, no semen monsoon strewn hard-pressed against that holy wall. Just an empty arc, an unanswered call. Blame anonymity. But we’ll make this stall a relic today; I’ve got to un-tame your body. So come on, lean in, lay claim. When you can’t see the face, it’s all the same.
haiku for my first boyfriend on his twenty-eighth birthday

queer. another year.
my how all the years (and queers)
have loosened your rear.
Straight Boy

who hurt you? Who told you
  you had to be a man & nothing
more? I can see it in your eyes,
  a kind of suffering, like fear
of being something less than
  your father. Don't worry,
straight boy, I'm not going
to touch you, I'm not going
to leave you lying there
  if you fall. I know the weight
of expectation, how it pulls
  you to your knees & tells you
you're nothing if you can't
  stand on your own again. I know
it's not easy, straight boy.
  I know you want to hum along
to show tunes, even when
  you're sober; I know you want
to stretch your legs over
  your head like all the limber
ladies around us, their backs
  on their yoga mats. Just let go.
I tried to be you once, to hold
  onto the hopes of the ones who
made us. Straight boy, just fold
  into who you are; it's gonna ache
in the flesh & the bone, in your
  hips where you hold your past
& your pain & your truth.
  Ease into that pain, straight
boy, & be good. Just be good
to those girls.
Quaking Aspen,  
or dendrophilia

naked boy  
two hundred years young  
winter stripped you —  
wig gone  
blond leaves blown  
into the valley

you are a smooth one  
now  
bark slick as  
winter’s icy lick  
tonguing your

tremblebranch  
& barkquiver  
until you come  
again — flourish  
of green sheen  
budding from  
your white skin

the years in dark  
streaks across your  
thick trunk

i feel your weak  
sway today

let my hot breath  
make you flicker  
this morning —  
a flame on our ridge  
beneath this  
sallow-hazed  
dawn

bury my purple  
lips
in your light
fading
bark
Hot Shit

after Chen Chen

In winter, he taught you to love your shit, that everything coming out of your body is perfect, & you can touch that beauty if you want. You understand it is all about love by the end, how you hope someone will handle your mess like it's still a part of you worth protecting. Remember all of those times it wasn’t about love? The one man who looked down at the small fleck on his cock afterwards, said that’s fucking disgusting. You just stared blankly at him, wondered what he used his asshole for.

You said the same thing to your first, & it was about love that time. Remember the empty feeling in your belly when you saw it on yourself? Of course you do. You still feel bad, want to apologize to every love you’ve ever wronged, but you’re getting older.

Your insides have only ever known a hollow shame you’ve tried to fill with nameless men. Know that I only say you, because I’m scared, because I’ve heard it’s bad to be too wrapped up in the first person, because I hear too many people describe other people’s words as shit lately, & I don’t speak up. I don’t say we can all be some kind of hot shit, that I imagine how someone must have fucked those words free.
Give me more of that shit. I’ll hold that shit in my hands all night. I’m quiet, stare blankly, & remember it’s all about love in the end.
deciduous queen, V
of plants and shrubs, shedding foliage at the end of the growing season

Will I remember how to move without emeralds, without boas green as leaves wound around every branch of this body? Summer is a gown, a canopy of stems & blades that rustle to The Elm Tree Hustle like a windy song over swaying hips, or a slow pose that’s all eyes & puckered lips. Summer hides those parts of me that sprouted in early spring—rice-filled hose knotted into d cups, foam pads that bloomed some hips from a girthy trunk. Truth, like the wind, is an invisible thing, but you can see it in the leaves’ gentle flicker, in a drag queen’s heavy wrists arched toward the spotlight—silver rings & press-on nails glistening in summer heat. Truth: I am most fulfilled when I move in another name, when I cinch & shave the excess of my body, bury it beneath a sequined sheen. Call me Twiggy. Call me Jazz June. Call me Sharon Stoned. Call me anything but a man’s name because I was never a gospel. I’m all branch & blade & cool summer shade until the show ends & autumn air settles in, blows layers of foundation & concealer from my cracked skin, my wrinkled bark. This is how an identity lingers, how it floats like a powdered cloud across a fiercely rusted sky, or dissipates in a faux fog over an empty stage. One winter evening, you’ll find me standing naked in the woods, jewelry mounds of silver shine & diamond rinds all around me like kindling—those earrings & necklaces & bracelets that still cling to the warmth of the spotlight. You’ll watch me sway & creak in the frosty air, branches reaching for those ornaments that will always make a dark stage shimmer.
make-believe queen bey

many a gay have played Beyoncé for a day. a night really. we drag ourselves on stage, reach for revenge in that paper — those ones & fives we tuck under the seams. tuck, like everything else between our thighs. down in the bayou, I wove a weave into my own fair hair, glued fierceness to my lashes, layered my face with base after a close shave — let that green shimmer beneath my eyes.

how i filled nude hose with rice, tied two knots for c cups so the boys could cop a more natural feel, as though they would know the difference. how i cinched my love handles with a duct-tape corset, i squeezed into red sequin hot pants & stomped those six-inch stilettos down the steps. Bootylicious. i knew my audience. how they watched me — bite by bite — down that pb&j on stage. they weren’t ready for that jelly. you can’t serve a crowd what they expect. but i’ll never be the Queen. my body can’t fill those cups. i’ll never wipe away the base & still carry color on my face. no natural ‘fro to tuck beneath a black beret, & i’d never fit into leather hot pants these days. i can’t afford the golden rounds of ammo to drape over my flat-chested fantasy of what it must be like. but I do know that bullets look so much better outside of a beautiful black body.
the quartering of tupac amaru,
or how to disembowel a rebellion

somewhere is a brown boy, a black girl
who tells the story: how the ropes still pull
& flex like each stallion’s hind legs, how
sun & scream careen that May day in all
directions. but this body cannot break until
lightning falls & thunder-clap over Cuzco.
somewhere is a 1957 Mexican comic
book—rebel as super-hero: hairless torso,
arms & pecs cut like lean meat & holding
those horses in place until the skies open &
blade severs head from body because he
can never be pulled apart. somewhere is an
arm buried, a leg buried, the head buried,
& ashes scattered over Peru.

everywhere is a Brown girl, a Black boy
who knows the story too well, the way
bullets push through flesh, & this sharp
white background drains the color from
their bodies. everywhere the sky opens
over hands up, falls on don’t shoot—final
cries as elegies of a Brown girl, a Black
boy. everywhere is a video filmed & posted
& buried beneath our white background.
everywhere is a Black boy buried, a Brown
girl buried, a Black girl buried, a Brown
boy buried. everywhere law & order pulls
these bodies like rope, sinks their color
into the earth, & a country watches.
Plumage

You are on the phone with a customer service representative or a restaurant’s hostess or a potential employer, and they mistake you for a woman again. They say *How can I help you, ma’am?* as you ruffle your manhood to hide your high-pitched plume. Then silence. Then *I’m so sorry, sir.* You wonder where their regret comes from—how their embarrassment cracks under the belief that emasculation is a cardinal sin. You are not sorry anymore. All that hollow-stomach-dry-throat-wet-eyed shame never changed how you can’t control the shape or shade or tone of your own body.

You know the western marsh harrier, how he circles over wetlands—reeds and wisps of tall grass all limber in the afternoon squalls. After two years, his feathers turn dark brown, like a hen’s—tufts of soft white upon his nape and crown, light cream patches where the neck meets the wing like it’s still 1980 and feathered shoulder pads are all the rage. You have his sallow yellow eyes, the only way to distinguish him from the girls. Your voice—light and feathered in frailty—still makes a sound, which is to say a hen’s feather still cuts through a sheet of wind, keeps a boy safe from a territorial cock, or two.
vixen within

Alan-a-Dale still feather-strums me scales,
that lute-playing rooster fool. Plucks his strings
& sings me Disney folklore, foxy love tales
couched in ochre fur. His chestnut eyes wink

for a vixen's smile while the Sheriff of Notting-
ham badgers poor church mice. Their pious sighs
& the cock's brooding croon accompany the clink
of coins in his pouch. & it's those little lies—

how they anthropomorphize for our child eyes
the nature of things, how we ought to be.
But I see that sly fox pull on his gypsy disguise,
straw hair & bags of gold for breasts, & leave

not one pence in that prince's paw, only
this vixen within me clawing her way free.
how you go

“One day, time becomes ill. might storm the brittle trunk. The crown, it shatters. Tree snaps seedlings, gives of green light. Begin.

Heart’s content now, & leaves & needles — that bright light.

-Peter Wohlleben
One day, it's finally time. The mother tree reaches the end of her life or become ill. The showdown might take place during a summer storm. As torrents of rain pour down, the brittle trunk can no longer support the weight of several tons of crown, and it shatters. As the tree hits the ground, it snaps a couple of waiting seedlings. The gap that has opened up in the canopy gives the remaining members of the kindergarten the green light, and they can begin photosynthesizing to their heart's content. Now their metabolism gets into gear, and the trees grow sturdier leaves that can withstand and metabolize bright light.

—Peter Wohlleben

Mother tree, end.

Become summer—
torrents & shatters

of waiting in canopy.

The remaining can begin

their now,
their sturdier leaves—

withstand & light.
Ash Mama

I never called you *Mother Tree*. May I now that your body felled you—bark sallow & unfurling from your hollow bones? I saw an emerald ash borer in your pancreas, watched it loosen your skin, swallow you whole in one month. They said it would take years. I never called you *Great Ash*, until that’s what you were—dust through my fingers, filling your own mother’s grave. You never called me seedling, your weak-limbed boy—frail-leaved & thin-veined in shadow. Every tree needs light, every crown wants to rise. We each wore ours differently. You died before your mother. No sun for you, no head in star-soaked canopy. You kept me alive all the same, until they took you away, left your roots in the ground, bound to mine, as if to say *Grow, baby. Reach, queen boy. Let your crown shine.*
Pando

*for Iran*

Mi amor, if you ever find yourself in Utah, look for Pando. He is a Trembling Giant of a man, a Quaking Aspen of a tree. Trust me, guapo, he knows the way I love you, how I’d spread myself across one hundred acres, y seis más if need be, just to give you un bosque—forty thousand trunks bound by the same root. He’s watched for eighty thousand years—before your god walked this earth, before I buried mine in la tierra roja—how I have waited for this lasting warmth, for the fires to stave off all those skinny ass conifers. My heart is that clonal colony queen, all thirteen million pounds of him, so I’m heavy for you too, my love. All the suckering that got us here, every trunk a new root, every root a new stem—you always make us rise again & again. But maybe, you shouldn’t go to Utah. Maybe seeing it there, all old & heavy, tangled & coming out of the ground might just be too real. They say the deer are too hungry, the bark beetles too many, y root rot y cankers y lo demás. They say he’s dying. How could such a trembling, quaking giant rise & spread from a single seed, then go? When he hollows, we will watch him fall trunk by trunk until we bury him with our gods. I will tell you I adore you, & you will ask, *Cuánto?* Hear me from my roots: *Mi amor, Pando.*
Bayou Baby

Hurricane Harvey, August 27, 2017

I.

When I was a child, I followed a nutria up out the ditch, which is to say we came from the same place. My little hands smeared muddy paw prints. My fingers sunk into a water-swept incline. I couldn’t catch up to those buck teeth, to that grey fur & snake tail all awash in ocean rain. I said *Bye, you.* I asked, *Where you going?* I said *I’m scared of this water, too.*
II.

A woman rose from that soggy refuge—orchid bloom & alligator teeth in her dirty blond hair. I called her mother. I asked *Mama, where you been?* I said *I just wanna stay by you.*

Her eyes were the severe green of that dangerous sky. Her body was covered in ocean—water so dirty it glistened like a silver gown. She said *I'm gonna wear this storm out.*
III.

I learned to love a man the same way I love the bayou—I got used to his beauty. How much can you take for me? How much will you hold before you crest? I know you just want to protect me. I can’t stay.
IV.

There are two dried petals & 13 teeth on my daddy’s mantle. He just sits at home alone, waiting for the dirty water to rise, to bring all that death to his front porch. He’d welcome it inside too, if he didn’t love sitting in the rain so much. & he’d leave if he could walk on water, if he had somewhere else to go.
V.

There’s a tuft of grey fur atop the fence out back, a thin-scaled tail that hangs & dips in the silver flow. A voice escapes those buck teeth. *Where you going?* it asks. *Bye, you.*
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Rust + Moth: “malignant”
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The Collagist: “Silly Goose”
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“How to Triumph Like a Hippocampus” is in conversation with Ada Limon’s poem “How to Triumph Like a Girl.”

“here & there,” Castilleja indivisa is commonly known as Texas Indian Paintbrush.

“Voices from the Old Imperial Farm Cemetery” is dedicated to Reginald Moore, the guardian & caretaker of the Old Imperial Farm Cemetery in Sugar Land, Texas where the bodies of countless Black inmates were laid to rest during the era of convict leasing & forced labor.

“bitter-berry” is in conversation with and incorporates language from Toni Morrison’s Beloved.


“Hot Shit” is in conversation with Chen Chen’s poem “Winter.”

“how you go” & “rise again” are both erasures which use language from Peter Wohlleben’s The Secret Life of Trees.

“boundary // fluidity” incorporates quotes or information from Brendan Borrel’s article “Ghosts of the Rio Grande” & Collin Schultz’s article “Nearly 6,000 Migrants Have Died Along the Mexican-U.S. Border Since 2000” as interludes between each section of the poem.

“cactus mouth,” opuntia macrocentra is commonly known as purple pricklypear cactus, & opuntia macrocentra kush refers to an imagined strain of marijuana from west Texas.

“El Árbol del Tule” incorporates information from Diane Cook & Len Jenshel’s book Wise Tree, as well as mythology from the Mixe, Mixtec, & Zapotec indigenous populations of Oaxaca, Mexico.

“Pando,” Latin for “to spread out,” is a clonal colony of a single male Populus tremuloides, or quaking aspen, thought to be one of the largest single living organisms alive on Earth.

“the quartering of tupac amaru, or how to disembody a rebellion” incorporates language from Zora Neale Hurston’s quote, “I feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white background” and is also inspired by Claudia Rankine’s Citizen.