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## The Drawdown

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE DRAWDOWN

By

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A Thesis submitted to the  
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*for Joe(l)*

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## ABSTRACT

The poems in this manuscript are an exploration of the post-divorce grieving process. They seek out a midpoint between grief and growth, the changing definition of family, and balance between self and Other. Each section of the manuscript begins with a poem centered on Lake Jackson, Florida, known locally for its sinkhole. The title of the manuscript as mentioned above describes the act of a lake draining through a sinkhole and, metaphorically, speaks to the draining of the speaker's former self. Because grief is cumulative, these poems establish the roots of their writer's grief: family, loss of childhood (along with its insularities), and divorce (the loss/changing nature of love). These poems are meant to strike a formal balance between confession and discipline, as well as to invite a shared experience through insight and quotidian details. The poems are arranged in a way that reveals the speaker's journey toward self-authorization and her willingness to assign meaning to all comers: calling upon inanimate sinkholes, mating cats, and even the "prick of mosquitos" in the hopes of turning the mirror outward.

# I

I may yet live, as I know others live,  
To wish in vain to let go with the mind—  
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

~Robert Frost, “Wild Grapes”



## **Sinkhole (Lake Jackson, Florida)**

This is the center of starting over. Black lunar lake-bed  
bristles, found out by unexpected guests.

I watch my footing

between the tea-brown beer bottle, beaded hair-band,  
and bent, red shotshell hull

lying loose at the surface.

In the noon mud, an infant marsh bird unhinges its jaw  
and I think, for a minute,  
expectations don't always have to end

in disappointment. But even if I did know how,  
I wouldn't kill another thing to feed it.  
It keeps its beak open.

Each moment can be a trial if it comes at the right time,  
like the red-breasted robin I'd waited for  
on the power lines out front,

and the day I buried it, eyeless and ant-ridden. At the end,  
cast me into this center that when it fills  
again, and drains,

you'll know me by a gray knuckle bone, or a femur.  
I'll be lying here and there, strewn,  
unencumbered.

## Chincoteague

For my sister freedom was knocking over the bucket  
of barnacled crabs we'd spent hours drawing out on strings.  
She chased them back to the dock and hid them there  
under the water, for safekeeping. I knew they were already gone.  
My older brother bit his tongue.

On the refuge trails we squatted in marsh weeds,  
hunting wild ponies—we weren't supposed to touch them.  
But when we spotted a low herd, none of us could resist.  
Our blood welled up to mount them and we knew it  
by the quick in one another's eyes.

The last moon-needed night smelled of manure.  
It was in my skin. The undertow had been hard.  
I lost a shirt, hours of sand, the three of us  
as we were then. Spawn determined to grow  
fins, to move away from the light, each other.

## Monogamy

You don't even shiver when I blow  
smoke in your face,  
cheeks wide and smooth as a boy's.  
You tell me addiction  
is not a character flaw

and I imagine your tongue  
lapping in and out  
of me, the pressure  
of you in my own mouth,  
so all I hear is the hiss  
and smack

of it behind your teeth.  
When the peddler walks up  
with a bundle of peach  
roses and a Polaroid camera,  
he says I'm beautiful  
and you agree.

He says you and I—  
we'll make *beautiful bambinos*—  
and I finally blush  
at the 3 dollars  
you thumb from your wallet,

hiding the 20  
with your palm.  
Your wife leans against

the headboard, cradling  
to her breasts  
the two babies  
you've already made with her,

their mouths perfect Os  
around her nipples,  
nipples you've pinched  
and sopped up yourself.

My own husband  
sleeps in our bed at home,  
pillows pressed beside him  
mimicking the shape of me—  
his mouth parted,

the labored way he sucks air  
when he dreams—  
I wish none of us  
had any mouths at all.

## My Father's Stories

*It doesn't matter what sweet thing  
you mix them with, shrooms taste like shit,*

he says over whiskey,

*and anyway, they turn everything purple.*

Like the Voodoo Queen in the bayou  
when he was eighteen,  
obscuring her face  
with dead chicken skin

the inky color of eggplant,  
how she refused to let him inside  
and called him *warlock*,  
her voice a carpet of violets

crawling toward him.

He's ripping Hendrix on a red Fender  
with his teeth  
and I know he could have been  
a six-string god,

but he loved his mother too much to leave her.

And how could he not  
love a woman  
who submerged him

in a Lysol bath,

to keep him from scarring

after his brother

pushed him into the bonfire—

the only signs of burning

the new carcinoma pocks

pinned like medals on his face?

Somewhere, that pink

clawfoot tub is rusting,

corroding the story by half-lives.

A cape, a horse and a hammer

gather at his feet

in the shape

of black and white photos.

He is two and a superhero. He is thirteen

and fat. He's grown

into his crows' feet

and lugs them around

like signposts so they don't disappear.

The light is creasing itself

into evening,

ducking into the bedroom

where his wife hangs

her head into a bucket  
familiar as its kidney shape—  
as three decades  
of collapsing bodies.

He boxes the guitar  
and drains  
the amber liquid  
from his highball—

*loin cloths and hair bones aren't so embarrassing,*

he grins,

*unless you're in a jail cell.*

Inside, he wipes my mother's brow  
and calls her baby  
as though her eyes are still  
the same unclouded blue.

## Cancro

Outside my house, wing-flutter  
calls me to light the dark.

My camera flash

silhouettes a salamander, black spots  
exquisite as tumors,  
jaw clamped

around the belly of a moth. Locked  
into the frame, they pose  
in death portrait,

remember, they say, violence  
and beauty  
have always existed

simultaneously: survival, cycle,  
karma, *cancro*. In Italian,  
the word for cancer

is the same as the word for rust.

Say it aloud, *cancro*,  
from the throat,

guttural as the rot in my cousin's neck,  
and his mother's bowels.

Think of her

leaning, medicated, inoperable,



against a porch railing.

She is there sewing

a sack for the ovary that's gone

missing inside the mass,

black distension

of her empty womb—sewing safekeeping

for her son's salivary glands,

his straight teeth,

the splinters of jaw-bone excised beneath

a blank Dallas sky,

pathos-blue backdrop

to her silence—the most delicate stitching.

Theoretical physics states

that everything

has an antithetical twin, the ability

to sync without touch.

So it goes:

an electron spins rightward

between mother and son.

Its corollary,

light years away, spins left

at the exact same moment.

Every action

produces an equal, opposite opportunity  
to react: karma.

My cousin's Atheism

de-stratifies death, undoes hierarchy.

His mother thumbs

Hail Marys.

Their doctor says science and the heart

bend toward each other;

it comes down

to instincts and intuition. So at night

in his bed, I tell my cousin

I'll bend time,

and for a moment, even I believe it.

## At The Beach

*Mother*, I watch a baby redden  
under the long reach of day  
and think of you.

How when my lover carves himself  
into the sand and hollows  
a space for me

in his fetal crook, I want to tell him  
what kind of mother  
I could be

but my voice is gullsquawk and grain.

I imagine you're drugged.  
The strawberry cluster in your eye,  
a portal to the saints,

a fist of grief. You commune  
with the lucid dead  
who are waiting for me,

a harvest of cankers  
telling you it doesn't matter how I go,  
only that I go.

You think I'm there in bed with you,  
clicking life from my knuckles,  
stealing toward sleep,

so you set your lidless eyes under my pillow.

You have always ignored the inevitable.

You'd keep doing it, too—

birth me

again and again until your ovaries

spilled out after me.

You won't let the water leave

my lungs. From the day you found me, two years old,

drowning beneath a ceramic sink,

you have kept my bones soft:

permanent blastosphere.

*You have never gotten this part right.*

I know the need

to fill a womb,

to hold the thing that fills it.

It isn't death I fear,

it's loss of touch.

I would follow the riptide to break with you,

to feel the slippery heave

of emerging,

and the sea is stronger than your birth canal.

## Poem About Moths and Moving On

All the things I ever wanted to say to the moth,  
    *thief, moon-hugger, frailty*  
scaled my throat and stuck there.

Unprovoked, I could not flutter—  
I didn't think to fly.

Every day is a summer night in the valley  
of the Blue Ridge Mountains.  
A packed U-Haul is nothing like a foothill,  
a nest of fire ants,  
or the sweep of a pregnant woman's belly.

There's nothing to forgive.  
95 dollars worth of wedding silk sits  
in my mother's attic diminishing  
by larvae in the dark.

Ours was a conjugal bullet,  
a short white train  
I keep boarding over and over.

## Splitting

Sister, it may surprise you,  
but you have always been more free

than I, your eyes gaping throats to the sea,  
your toes more fin than flesh—my own, less true.

I am sand packing itself, a billion shrewd  
omens, one flat side from turning quick.

We are untimely astrological seeds  
separated by suns, ascendants, and moons.

I do not love our differences. I loathe  
your easily detached heart, your mad tongue—

and I long for the thread of your fingers  
tracing down my back, like our mother's own—

my infant way to sleep. How when we were young,  
you split your twinned self with me, and lingered.

## **When My Mother Considers Suicide**

A fig cookie recipe four generations  
old, parallelograms of dough and orange  
peel, my mother recalls the stir and tang  
of her grandmother's hands with precision,  
the floury, arthritic undulations  
like God's bent fingers—  
were He a portly, Sicilian matron  
with accurate, blue-eyed premonitions.

I cannot keep your traditions, Mother.  
My hindsight's perfect: I will always know  
the bend of your bedside, the coarse strands  
of your hair; how dyes make you look younger.  
But I see no one's future, no one's ghost—  
so if you leave, I'll forget our hands.

## **A Wife To Her Ex-Husband**

We're sadder in the new stories,  
black moths giving us back to time.  
Our voice belongs to the past.

Each grave we enter  
is exactly as deep as it seems,  
honest in its dimensions,

every blade of grass, a clean knife  
free from over-picked remains,  
these new bodies luminous

and smooth as infants' gums.  
Nothing was left unsaid  
and you still don't get it.

A husband refused his wife a child.  
Now we've both gone the way  
of worms, nightmaring

about the brightness of the sun.  
You were rough with me,  
so I've roughened. The days

steam, and I can no longer  
see the birds dipping their wings  
in sky-ink like fortune-tellers.



## II

My eyes are waiting for me  
in the dusk  
they are still closed  
they have been waiting a long time  
and I am feeling my way toward them

W.S. Merwin,

“Words From a Totem Animal”

## **Sinkhole (Dear Sinkhole)**

Wound:

rings of largemouth bass rot concentrically  
at your throat,  
gifting hundreds  
of beautiful caniniform teeth—

how have you become this altar?

The drawdown's left you wanting.  
I slip my hands  
inside your opening,  
lick your stony tonsils.

I could squeeze  
myself down  
your dried-out gullet, change  
your carrion nature.

Overhead, a man  
floats in a fan-powered lawn chair,  
hollers hellos from the sky,  
and your innards  
turn with jealousy.

You, inverted  
taker, how finely crafted—  
how taut—your tethers.

## **I Would Have Stayed**

The vodka sweat of her  
after a long run; her poem  
pinned on green paper above our bed—  
her tongue every day nursing  
your piano fingers  
over morning coffee.

All this and I admit,  
when I was thirsty I let you spit  
in my mouth. You can't make a wife  
an infant bird unless you plan  
to unload her. This is how  
it happened: I plucked out  
each new feather until  
scars sat thick over  
my pores and I grew  
backwards. Now my tongue's turned  
base, recalling nothing  
but the salt and sour of your skin.

I don't know how to write  
this way about you,  
gently, slowly, and without  
anger. Here, I'll try:  
in the Burren, your eyes cleared  
over the limestone flats.  
The uneven flush of your cheeks  
lined up, patterned itself against  
40 kinds of rain. Heather

dripped for miles. Worry  
puckered, convulsed, and vanished  
from you like the blue smoke  
of burning peat—an easy  
apparition—*this* face  
haunts me every night.

So thank you for leaving me  
the insignificant: Virginia air  
in July at 4am—coarse  
fog bending your parents' porch  
light until our own faces  
disappeared. The pregnancy  
book you bought me,  
then took away.

How our hands  
were the exact same size,  
the cigarette stains on your teeth,  
the gap in front, the shape  
and shade of your lips, and her.

## No Moon

If the fortune teller needs a cigarette lighter  
just to see my palm,

already I'm a ghost.

For months even the moon's brushed me off,  
so the nights, Cimmerian, roll,

one into another, my absence

convincing as three cracked robin's eggs  
on concrete—convincing

as my own skin.

I mark calendars with long red X's  
to track the disappearance—

lines so straight

they must be true—cocoon myself  
in clocks, lamp light and Frost.

Ritual, if it lasts long enough,

can be an excuse, the way swamp water waits  
for the prick of mosquitos—

how, hidden too long,

the body becomes a drop in temperature,  
nothing more.

## Upon My Death: Post-Divorce Letter to the Secret Lover of My Ex

They were old-school Catholics, Amy, they didn't believe  
in cremation. But Old Maw-Maw was too large  
for the tomb, meaning, she was too fat, so her brothers exhumed  
the other dead sister thinking she'd be little more  
than a splinter pile. Imagine their faces when they found  
she'd hardly decomposed at all. Like your grandmother  
who opened up her own feet and sanded down the bunions.

You know about these things. How he walks chest-puffed  
like a corpse. How narrow his eyes are. Is there anything  
he doesn't hate? Try explaining to him the benefits of cremation,  
and how he's never known what's best for me.

Worms, like the ones I saved from our flooding porches,  
aren't involved. And there's little chance of reanimation.  
Hand me over to him like a space-saving carry-on, liquidless  
and bald. Save him from those nasty Sunday visits  
to the graveyard, save him, at least, from stepping on the dead.

Please keep me out of attics and basements, I've never looked good  
as a haunt, and anyway, is he still afraid of the dark?  
Clip his nails, they get hawk-sharp in bed. French him often. Put vibrato  
back in his throat. Make his penis burn. He's gotten so thin  
these days—remember to name the baby after me.

## Poem That Exorcises My Ex-Husband

Grief is five stages  
of fucked, Love,  
you have smoked  
these hand-rolled nights  
until the moon  
scorched my sleep,  
and since I stopped  
meaning wife to you,  
there's little need for  
whispering or bedrooms.

I don't forgive you.  
You balled up in bed  
like a flatulent god.  
Made mountains scale you.  
Ate your own lambs  
for dinner and angled  
your pelvis away  
from me until your image  
grew more sacred  
than you. David,

you died all the way  
in Florida in a house  
with blue carpet.  
You let a hawk  
eat our oldest cat.  
I dug under rotting  
logs for pieces of



your girlish hands  
and when I found some  
I stomped them to bits  
because, you see,  
they keep coming

back. My father  
hates you. Now  
there's a girl in Tennessee  
with your cum  
in her belly and her  
clit in my craw.  
The ground's pregnant  
and ugly—come up  
for air, fit yourself  
in a sharp beak  
and regenerate the sky.

## 150 Words for Snow

Love can be like that too,  
striated, gusted into banks,  
burying itself beneath itself—  
one not less than another,

but when I stroke  
his head, I notice  
his hair line falls lower  
than yours, breaks along a shore  
of swarthier skin, flush-less  
cheek hollows. The jawbone  
cutting into my sternum  
is all gravel and ice pick.

His bed smells like smokehouses  
and soap. The A/C window unit  
bombinates. Drawn blinds  
crack the light so I think  
it could almost be winter—  
the last, with you.

When I walk outside,  
late spring eases under my clothes,  
long as his hands that reach  
both ends of me at once.  
The sky squats, bloated,  
to birth a storm,  
vines turn back on themselves  
and choke, leaves flip pale side up,

baring veins like teeth—  
and I think of trying not to bite down  
when he empties into my mouth—  
such difference—almost no taste at all.

## **Devolution of Love**

Think of my tongue opening  
on you, plumbing  
your penetralia,  
how I hold myself under  
your inky weight,  
draw the dark out  
of you like a glowfish.

I have taken love  
without permission—

eaten every single January  
blossom to stop  
spring from coming again.

And now, nights, we move  
in opposite streams,  
our elusive current,

how buoyant  
and boneless

in the end.

The way meanness illuminates  
the exits, keeps us  
half in,

and half out.

## DeSoto Street

I keep waiting for the mosquitos to burn the sky  
into night. Across the street gardeners milk  
the neighbors' grass, rip August out

of their hydrangeas, keep everything living  
off the lawn. Under the carport cats make love,  
pitching yowls. I want what they want.

A child wrapped himself around me today  
and his mother warned me of his love for beauty;  
I hoped he would kiss me. May our unborn son

have night terrors to remind me of you.  
May he smooth our skin so when we touch  
each other, it's unknown, the kind of closeness

two lovers have the first time. Outside your room,  
daylight sweats. Leaf blowers drive me  
from your bed into someone else's dreams.

## One-Year Lover

He hates his father. Sweats through his sheets  
at night *really letting him have it*, anger

wedging his throat like too big a morsel,  
more blood-filled gall than heart. He tells me

I've been a *bright light in his life* only after  
extinguishing me. The way staring into the sun

too long, you begin to see your own retina,  
you begin to see inward. I wanted him

to come slowly once, but *the body just took over*  
until he rammed out everything inside him

and, quaking, asked *do you need anything?*  
I needed him to be my last love, one

that does not happen *carefully and apart*,  
but, given permission, sharpens quick as a knife,

the sound of it breaking skin, beautiful.

## My Mother's Journals: A Translation

I, too, was young once, and beautiful in Norco,  
a Louisiana of refinery fathers and two-room houses  
on cinder blocks, where Catholic-green  
never really meant *go*, the cool barrel of my own  
mother's shotgun chambered the last moment  
I would ever love her, how she hoped to rid the sin  
of her genes, the sin of my first lover and husband,  
neither telling me of conception  
beyond the Virgin Mary's stone-folded robes—  
a flash of carnality my mother tried to keep  
from me—*ladies don't* she said, and so I did.

On the outskirts of time, beside myself,  
molecules began their cosmic function,  
matter molding consciousness  
out of random probabilities.  
I'd never known God as chaos,  
building a child in my womb,  
the cells splitting, production from reduction,  
the way, moving backwards,  
light always follows dark.

\*\*\*

I was young and beautiful in Bald Cypress hell,  
longing for the dank angels of Venice,  
longing so hard I moved you thirteen times  
in as many years to find it. Daughter,  
you tell me it doesn't exist, believe  
the reconciliation of extremes is an unknown

quantity to me, but I've shown you how to love  
the sound of Virginia blue birds infesting a chain-link fence,  
the stain of red clay, as much as the swamp-loam  
you will never be able to clean from beneath your fingernails.

\*\*\*

It's about love, Infinity outdoing Time, you  
my symmetry, my gendered seed,  
a girl who knows the grief of women.  
I have only lied to spare you.

\*\*\*

Everywhere is Norco.  
All of it happens in our beds, the picture windows  
in our rented houses framing growth and loss—  
where there are no visible canals,  
the only outward channels unforgiving rails—  
where you, too, are an ex-wife.  
Where we are infinitely X—  
How we exist inside our own hearts  
that beat black as bruises.

\*\*\*

Caged in small-town womanhood, I met my lover  
between tracks and sideboards, insomnia crawling  
up my knee-length skirts like chiggers,  
how my hipbones canceled love, and mornings  
I hovered, sweaty, over toilet bowls.  
A girl with a baby in her belly.

I left Louisiana for you, promised



you would never know your roots, scraped off  
the familial stink onto the pavement of I-95, roads  
that have never seen the desert, kept going  
until you knew nothing  
but the immediacy of me and the fear  
of red clay—how I molded your hair with it,  
set your ancestry in blue feathers.

*No.*

I stood upright, scooped flight into your jowls,  
the deciduous blinders heading North  
splintering the mystery of Spanish Moss,  
taught you how to forget where you come from,  
how a man makes offspring of a woman.  
How he makes off.

\*\*\*

Listen. I know exactly what I'm saying,  
I will always be seventeen in a pit-stop town.  
You will always be divorced at twenty-nine,  
infinitely lacking anything after X.

Love does not exist in rational figures,  
the way you question everything—

when theory fails,  
how many futures become probable?  
What Louisiana? What home?  
Y is shaped like divergence.  
X, a crooked fork that slants everything we ingest.

\*\*\*

You must not end up here:

The old woman down the way has dementia,  
a black dog that bites, she's trying to steal my land:  
incision through my chicken coup—I've named them  
all after you—they stay cooped up now,  
dug out all the mulch, killed the new Dogwood.  
I'm in bed again with Fentanyl  
and all four dogs, the black one reminds me of you...

...the disc between L-5 and L-6 is bulging,  
the backbone disintegrating. I dream of burning  
down houses and all of my butterfly bushes.

\*\*\*

You must not leave me:  
the chickens are dying one by one.

*How did my chickens die?*

Of murder—see there, they've been decapitated  
like your pet rabbits.

*How did my chickens die?*

Of heartbreak—see they curl their claws  
to their breasts like your hands  
during your long, divorced nights.

*How did my chickens die?*

By one another's beaks—see the holes  
they've made in each other.

*How did my chickens die?*

Of old age—time would not stop  
for any of them.

*How did my chickens die?*

Of neglect—see their unkempt feathers,  
the longing in their cold dead eyes,  
how they're fenced in by their own feces.

*How did my chickens die?*

Of love—I clipped their wings and overfed them.

\*\*\*

You're heart weary,  
the way you keep enjambling G-R-I-E-F.

*In search of love, time accelerates.*

Daughter, try to remember that time is made-up.

Grief can be both an end and a beginning.  
Think how the sun will continue to rise every day  
of your life even though it is already dying.

Sleep may not come easy after love,  
but who says we should sleep in the dark,  
when making our own light means something?

### III

But what's the point if you just have to die and not be and forget everything? [...]. Appetite, her grandmother said finally, breaking the silence. And the end of appetite. That's it."

~Robert Coover, "Grandmother's Nose"

## **Sinkhole (The Sinkhole Speaks)**

I am nothing but a littoral error—omnipotent Eater of God's shores.  
You build your anchored boat at my lips because you insist on having it both ways.  
The fox loping about your feet knows this hole is someone else's house:  
    even unplanned violations are violations.  
Your desire to find shelter here shows: anything can be a womb—a function,  
    incubation has always been temporary shelter.  
You treat me like your own personal hull, gathering egret feathers and regret.  
You stow them inside me like a plug and hope the next rain will be the new flood,  
    thinking in the meantime, I will care for you—  
an accidental mother scratching your back with an unaccounted for claw.  
Dear Poet, you forget yourself. You have made me up—the marshland wind.  
The snake tunneling inside me is simply a snake.  
You harp on the zoo, want to abandon it,  
  but Dear, there was never any Noah.

## Poem Recording a Lawn Party in Winter

The raccoon had no business dying in Joe's swimming pool.

The balance is all fucked up. It's spring in January, a spiking  
74 degrees and blooming. The kind of weather calling for brunch  
and laundry lines, so Tony layers lox and red onion on a salt bagel  
in his backyard while his blue-striped boxers finger the breeze that fingers us.

Whitney uproots a 16-inch radish from the middle of the lawn,  
and it's so long and carrot-like Tony assures us they'll use it later in bed,  
and Whitney responds by buttering, cubing and serving it up  
in a porcelain bowl. *There's evidence*, she says, *that in the end science*  
*will meet Nature head on at the far side of something like a field.*

Everything wants to make a connection, and Nature's hard, but given  
the chance Whitney prefers to be eaten alive by dinosaurs.

Frank and Cherie's son claws his way around croquet brackets catching lizards.

His little sister confesses he sometimes kills them and Joe  
suggests making lizard soup, laughs aloud at himself and I'm surprised  
by how obvious it is that he's childless; Tony hands out  
post-brunch dental floss and we begin flossing in our lawn chairs  
while the kids bring picked blossom after blossom to Cherie,  
who looks lovely in flora. But the flossing makes us pensive, and Tony recalls  
a dead armadillo in his driveway that resembled a dinosaur  
which he found repulsive and which he refused to touch or bury,  
making Whitney double-bag it. He then ran, I mean ran *blocks*  
to dump it in the park trash can where it stunk up a hell of a radius waiting  
for the sanitation man. It makes sense Tony will have no part helping  
Joe dispose of the drowned raccoon. *You're such a pussy*, Joe tells him,  
and Tony immediately cops to it. *Look at it as Karmic opportunity*,  
Frank says, and his son nearly clocks him with a croquet ball on accident  
while his daughter impales her stuffed bunny on one of the rainbow  
shafted stakes. Later, at home, Joe smokes a hunk of turkey pastrami,

wearing thick rubber gloves. He handles it as he would a woman,  
sliding his fingers over its curves, licking the spice rub, nibbling a piece here  
and there, and I think, if it weren't for killing and eating, he'd kiss it.  
Behind the house, in private, I shovel a square of earth, slicing through  
marbled roots and centipedes. Fishing the raccoon from the pool  
with a foil baking pan, I'm struck by the weight of it in my pink arms.  
A thin smell of rot diffuses through my painter's mask but only one  
hind paw shows decay and it's eyes are so cataracted they're baby blue.  
When it rains at night Tony calls and says he hopes that raccoon  
doesn't unearth itself and come washing back into our lives like the undead,  
which is to say, the living.

## **Digesting Divorce**

Remember our last days?  
The air sagging with flies.  
Think about autumn instead,

how nirvana blows smoke,  
waits on the other end to pump life  
back into our shrunken heads.

Habits sear like electric burners.  
My ovaries turn over  
and tell me we're not done.

Outside, trees skinny-up like forks,  
and the sky is sickeningly  
clear. All of the good

days accumulate like grief—  
a throng of Samaritans  
threatening to march on me,

so you trash all the light bulbs  
and hang blackout curtains,  
but light still gets in.

Goodbye, baby. Goodbye.  
Your intact umbilical cord  
has become an endless depression,  
  
a stinking conduit for dead skin,



a means for you to keep  
being born—you and your infinite

seconds. Really, keep dumbing down  
your palate. I'll keep forgetting you  
like teeth that crack on bone.

## How We Love

Sunny capital of oversexed flies  
and *homeless motherfuckers*,  
depression of porn shops

and pine, gulf-hugging armpit—baby,  
this is where you built a bridge  
to your assassin,

determined as the moth stuck  
between two screens,  
willing as pink hibiscus

flowering every day in a burnt yard,  
I have been in this house  
where, you say,

you have coddled him, where light,  
like cockroaches,  
shifts and scurries,

I imagine you in his kitchen, stuffing  
yourself on grits and drop  
biscuits, a desperate

Gretel loving him more each time  
he stews your heart.  
I have overeaten

at love's table, scraped against boarded

up windows and locksmithed  
locks. I know

the shape of your puncture and I can  
show you how  
to celebrate grief:

think how all the teeth in a little girl's  
mouth will leave her,  
how the woman

on Monroe slackens her jaw every day  
below birds who sit fat  
and buzzing

on power-lines, how mothers rarely abandon  
their children—here  
the closest river

will always be the Mississippi. These nights  
are nothing. The moon's  
a smart beggar,

but collapsible as a salt-lick on fire.  
Tomorrow may come  
without him,

but after that, I swear, it'll just keep coming.

## **So Many Fish in the Sea**

I'm thinking of you. I made a mistake  
in conversation, put the heart before  
the course, like a whale who forgets the shore  
for the thrill of the current and wakes  
into the nightmare, the way blubber takes  
too many muscles to move it, and more.  
None of this is bloodless. Your eyes are whores,  
slits and tricks, our whole orgasm a fake.

I'm lying again. There are two boys here,  
two girls, and all the sand inside my mouth,  
sugared quartz-grit grinding my teeth each day,  
comes from her Appalachia. Love me, her,  
he, and backwards. We've already gone south.  
It's just a spoonerism, anyway.

## **Appetite**

You bite my back  
between neck and shoulder,  
teasing the blood  
with the idea of air—  
simmering-hickey,  
appetizer,  
the in between half-wound  
that doesn't know  
what to make of itself.

*Dichotomy is reductive,*  
you say—  
*we can't be all or nothing.*

But light is always present  
I remind you,  
roasting us—  
just turn over the spit.

I arrange your bones  
and hair and teeth  
on my plate—  
a feast of skin  
darker than mine,  
but just as veiny,  
fingers longer  
than any of my clefts—  
all of the things you don't say  
to make me second-guess you,

a tongue so skilled,  
I second-guess myself—  
owl-lover,  
omnivore,  
grown-up.

I am filling up on you  
because I need t-minus  
urgency,  
the marrow-sucking gravity  
of crises, fat, and love.

## **Begin Here,**

move backwards to find our ending:

*Do you still hear from A?*

You no longer recall  
her Amazon nakedness,

but a man who loves oysters,

*you're certain,* loves the taste of a woman.

\*

I fall down, drunk, in your yard  
(how many times have I asked about A?)

so you remove my stiletto boots  
before asking me to dance  
on the decorative column in your living room.

I spin until your hand strokes nothing  
but a television-lit speck,

(how you like pretty things)  
embarrassed you are not D.

\*

On the drive back from Seaside,  
  
*town measured by the sparkle of tin roofs,*  
where we saw the most beautiful  
baby whose black eyes reflected nothing,

you salt me in the car, dissolve me  
the way little boys shrink slugs,

my stomach is not my uterus.  
D left me for J, whose uterus he plans to fill.

\*

I hate you

when you insist on rubbers.

\*

J before me, J after—I am bracketed by J's.  
Yours sleeps with another man at a party,  
then bakes you a birthday cake.

*Her willowy body* is nothing

like mine,

neither one suitable.

\*

In Chicago,

a comedian

offers me a German cigarette  
(he knows a guy)

and tells me he's died 3 times  
on his birthday. We share  
the same birthday.



Later, in the ice sculpture park I slip  
through the fence to milk  
the udders of a snow cow.

It is Valentine's night.

It is one year since D left me.

Later, you fumble a condom  
and I refuse.

\*

Where the dark ocean sips  
the Forgotten Coast we sculpt genitals

in the sand instead of castles,  
we position them so they're fucking  
and later that night I worry my teeth  
to sharp points  
in the shower,

*am I only this mouth to you?*

Come morning,  
off the pier by the gazebo,  
the sun stamps proper letters  
on the water –

A's, D's, J's, too many J's—  
and we both see it,  
comforted by the conviction of a *sign*.

\*

Even in our bed, you speak so fondly of K,

your first,

the way *she could light up a room*

the way she left you

for a man who would give her children.

You *don't even think of her anymore.*

\*

At E's apartment we meet for the first time.

I am still married to D

when we laugh over pork loin, a joint, Taboo—

(how difficult to avoid the buzz words)

we are without history, or footing—

promise:

how we don't touch each other,

but want to.

## Why You Should Have a Baby with Me

\*

My gene pool is genius, Darwinian gold: I can monkey a man twice my size to the ground.

\*

I have an Uncle Angelo missing a finger who once let me paw the stump.

\*

When my grandmother died I wanted to touch her embalmed forehead, so I did; and my great-grandmother died with her eyes open while her daughter, sleeping next to her, didn't know for hours that she'd slept aside a corpse, and had I been there I would have touched her, too.

\*

My mother's mother pulled a gun on her for being "pg" at seventeen, and I will never own a gun. I will protect our child, instead, with my opposable thumbs.

\*

The first animal I buried was the pet rabbit my neighbor slaughtered in my front yard, and I will always, reverently, bury the dead.

\*

And though I am not a vegetarian, I will never eat lamb or venison or horse or veal, though I've been known to sometimes masticate crow.

\*

The only things I'll willfully kill are Black Widows, ticks, and mosquitos, though mosquitos rarely bite me.

\*

I believe I can beat nature.

\*

An old voodoo queen once told my father he was a warlock and, secretly, I have always hoped he is. This is how I will gift magic to our child, the way I can stop watches and disrupt radio signals simply by being in a room.

\*

According to my parents, we were abducted by aliens during the television premier of *Jaws* and our child might be triangulated by yours, mine, and alien DNA.

\*

I watched *Jaws* and *Aliens* when I was five and swigged my first beer; and even though I look forward to our child's first Hurricane, I will grow extra eyes from every pore of my body to keep that child safe.

\*

I love fucked-up fairy tales with happy endings and, from behind, I am stamped by the Holy Trinity and you're Jewish, and your parents love me.

\*

My hands are a peasant's, squat and wide enough to never drop a baby.

\*

Whatever spawned my ancestors made a mother who taught me how to love hard,  
with the certainty of death.

\*

And my eyes, when loved the same way, are unimaginably blue.

## The True Nature of Ball Lightning

Oh my God, I hope you are heartily sorry  
for having created this universe. For instance,  
what *is* the fucking point of Jupiter  
but to sit rotating on its axial red  
thumb like an oblate ass? I love an Atheist  
who is dying of cancer. *Think of it*, I told him,

*as a weed pushing at the cracks of omnipotence—*  
confusing and beautiful as ball lightning  
floating down our chimneys, into our kitchens,  
how we've learned where not to stick our forks.  
*Bedding any woman who'll bed you back*  
*is simply the inability to ignore probabilities—*  
Hope is not the same as lying. I request all  
of his sins be collected so I may dissolve  
them 3 ways to Sunday:

\*

he became a doctor to save his father. Morphine  
makes him sleep. And though he's a better cook  
than his mother who died of stomach cancer  
so he could outlive her, he aspirates on his own  
saliva and still gave her a Catholic burial.  
Hell is You as a bully. But more importantly,

\*

I am offended by the mystery of ball lightning,

a phenomenon so deserving of our love,  
but whose spherical kiss would land us  
face-down in Death's lap. Don't you know  
we want to suck on beautiful things? Confess,  
Thy grace, penance is an excuse for poor planning.

\*

Oh my God, I would like to know  
the true nature of ball lightning. Hope bloats  
at the rate of malignant tumors. The Atheist I love  
is most concerned with his inability to perform  
cunnilingus, the new hell limiting his tongue.

How has he offended Thee?  
Random acts of meanness have nothing to do  
with love. Grace decays like antiparticles,  
in a fraction of a second. Ball lightning lingers  
and illuminates the circuitry of guilt.

Oh my God, your balls are made of lightning,  
they hang charged as death on the chin.  
Atheism is neither here nor there. I love a man  
whose grace is the absence of meaning  
and Oh God, I forgive you.

## Dead Armor

*out loud:*

unhappiness is opening  
the attic  
to a perfectly intact  
dead bat,  
the vent, visible,  
slitting blue sky.

*inner monologue*

back-up,  
the toxicity  
of omission.

*truck bed:*

where metal meets  
rapidly cooling sweat or,  
goodbye  
in cliché.

*marriage:*

invented playing field  
still hems things in.



Welcome to the South

where ferns resurrect—

(air-feeders,

spore from spore, etc.)

how we make meaning

of Live Oak-hugging tendrils,

how we make ropes.

Welcome

to the same swamp,

pick your town

where even the mountains

peter out.

You can purchase  
bottled holy water  
on the internet  
for \$3.95 and up,  
set it on top  
of the refrigerator  
or in a drawer with the Saints, rosaries—  
(prayer needs direction)  
dab it behind the ears  
like salvation,  
drink it in times of drought.  
Colorless,  
odorless,  
church.

A host of holes

                    blisters a strong heart,  
how loss rectifies light  
proves life,

                    even capillaries move  
                    blood—  
being too close to the surface,  
                    they keep the cold in.

Mischief:

raw bacon on the intake

valve,

garlic in the toolbox,

a dirty look

at a baby—

how petty

a cloudless sky,

its clarity.

I want to explain everything.

How the bowl you gave me  
                  inscribes the language  
                  of birds  
if they had one  
it would look (apparently)  
                  like claw-prints circling themselves.

I hammered  
apart              a clock,  
                  shattered          an hour glass  
                                  in a towel.

The sand  
shifts daily,  
                  keeps existing in the grout  
                                  of my living room tiles.

I have imagined your child  
without you.

She's beautiful  
as scattered remains.

My line of sight,  
gutted,  
rivulets form—

how do I stop  
your waters flowing?

Too shallow  
for submersion,  
they loop  
like a half-song.

I can't make my bed  
with this many people

in it,  
stinking pheromones.

Olfactory research in rats shows...  
the big-boned cat

remembers  
everything,

drops his jaw  
opens his grainy tongue  
on a sustained howl,

[it echoes]      [and echoes]      [and echoes]

through a web of interstates  
cracked

as an armadillo's  
dead armor—

smells collect  
like counted things.

How many years to forgiveness?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

April Manteris was born in Slidell, Louisiana but spent most of her childhood in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Charlottesville, Virginia. She received her MFA in poetry at Florida State University, where she also received the Ann Durham Creative Writing Thesis Award, and will begin working toward her PhD in the fall of 2010. Her poems have recently appeared in *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact*.