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## Else

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

ELSE

By

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## ABSTRACT

The poems in *Else* are lyric explorations of paradox. Specifically, they meditate on the idea that what gives comfort also has the potential to cause great harm. The central focus of the collection is a troubled relationship, but regional history, religion, and personal narrative are also important subjects.

...To rest would be  
A privilege of Hurricane  
To Memory--and Me.

---Emily Dickinson

I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is  
evil from his youth...  
Genesis 8:21

## That He Also Is Flesh

*I touched my little sister when I was a kid*, he said after the second time that night he couldn't come. His mother went out to buy new blinds for her bedroom window. *You were a child*, I said. He showed her a new game, one he played with neighbor girls in their must-sweet basement. He said, *I was twelve*.

Two years earlier his father explained how to finger a girl & he couldn't stop trying. *I wasn't even a virgin*, he said. The narrative changed over time: *I was only ten, I didn't know the difference, who knew what I was doing?* But when his mother came home and caught him in her room, he counted slats on the new blinds as dad paced: *I'll kill you, I'll kill you*.

Autumn light flooded the bare window, let the pane throb. Should they have scrubbed under his fingernails and said *It's OK, you're too young to know*, even if it wasn't true?

Fifteen years later I faked that hot wash of compassion, saying *You're not a monster* to sink nausea that still floats up like broken condoms and sealed bottles of piss after heavy rain.



# THE FLOOD

## Naming the Flood

*after Richard Siken*

Memorial names, historic names, names  
of heroes & dictators & drones. Names I could never  
call him, names I lobbed at his back, blunt

& dangerous, loaded & impotent, names  
of bees that can sting only once, hidden  
in long coats, hidden in underwear, or

brandished in the garden, or flourished  
in the street. I want to, I do. I do, I do.  
An ending? Sure enough—*Hello monster,*

*I'm through.* I'll call him monster, then let him  
go. I'm not complicit but he comes home.  
It's raining. *Baby, are you hungry?* There is no

disgust, no slow poison in the pierogies.  
A pan slicked with butter & onion, little  
dumplings, their winged edges sputtering

across hot teflon, potato centers softening  
as they brown. His hand on the table, his knee  
against my chair, boiling sound of him

telling me what he's done. Details hardly  
make a difference: his hand on his sister's  
body, fluid as a hairless body, every body something

to touch, blotting out his own flesh &  
his own unclottable blood. I stay up  
all night peeling & boiling potatoes for pugach,

letting dough rise & then punching it  
down again. Makes a sighing sound, air pockets  
bursting in sticking mounds, my knuckles

floury white, & yes, I don't believe in rain  
or what it could mean historically, biblically,  
only this kneaded skin stretching over

this prepared pan. Names of temperature

& names of degree, names of chemical  
reactions, of chemical attacks, of canisters

spraying gas spinning, burning hands  
& faces & eyes that until now stayed dry.  
Names like wailing words, names like

kneelers, names kicked up or under foot,  
names worried over or cursed. Its name like  
a flat siren, its name like wrong words

struck twice, its name like pop songs  
I keep in my head on repeat to cancel out  
thoughts of him—O now we're not thinking!

Its name like swept up strays. Its name like  
houses drifting like pontoons, like news montages  
of water lines two stories high, a dark wash

to mark the spot, to show just how much  
it can take. Here is the map with new  
canyons carved out, here is the key

that explains the symbols: we sleep  
& we're imprisoned, we stay together  
& we've got nothing but each other

& we drink muddy water & we flush  
our stomachs out. It's a rush of bacteria, baby.  
I'll come to redo what I said to him, say let his gut cramp,

dry the river with his rabid tongue. Our body  
broken, & sounds of our breaking, & dry land  
so far away. I'll use its path like a memo, follow it

back to a time when his storyline was safe,  
locked away in Greek tragedies & movies about  
murderers, when I thought I'd know someone

like him when I saw him. Names of viruses, names  
of blights, names of infections we've passed  
between us, names called out in the height

of a fever. Names of antibodies, names  
of vaccines, blood cell names & mucus names  
& names of viruses no one's caught.

I'm mouthing its name in mirrors,  
I'm mouthing its name in bed beside him.  
Its name like a car shot with mud, its name

like a burnt pan, a sulphur slick, a coat  
of moss, a hiding place, a money shot,  
door closed & rooms lit by lamps

washing out details of his compulsion  
or movements of our misdirected  
hands. He's waiting for me to say it's all

right. But I say not right now, say  
maybe tomorrow, say in three Sundays maybe  
I'll be ready if I imagine myself saying it

every night before I fall asleep. & debris  
in cellars & moldy lawns suddenly  
will be fallout from a different storm

& suddenly I'll look at him in the dark  
& see the person I want to see, the man I wanted  
singularly & breathlessly & with such clarity

instead of who he was then & are now,  
that person I can't forget now, that boy who can't  
be uncaught. So imagine this: I'm frying

pierogies when he comes home. It's raining  
so hard when I ask if he's hungry I have  
to shout. It's raining when we sit down

to eat, buttery dumplings almost sliding  
off our plates & it rains when he asks if I can live  
with him now, knowing now, & in this version

of the myth I say *No, It's not Ok* & the rain  
slows but it still doesn't stop.

## Staying the Flood

*after the Johnstown Flood of 1889*

Stay the stone arch bridge burning its debris  
blockade when the dam breaks, sends a rush  
of northern lights straight south. Stay

split trout and black bass, uprooted cattle  
thrashing the deluge foamy. Like steel workers

plumbing each bend, stay depths unlit and low.  
Stay on the wide street until a wave lifts your feet,  
then boot your foot curbside, an impounded tree.

The sturdy bridge collects fallout, like that,  
throw up your arms. Promise to let go. Irrigate

your memory of a backyard just dewy and sprung.  
Stay painted clay Madonna, unblown  
bridesmaid upright through the flood. Forget

water gathers energy, force of hammers  
breaking apart at the head. Stay ordered

rubble of metal mines, the root cellar  
overflowing its extra winter hoard,  
each of its slow cooking beets. Stay

through three alarm runoff piles, the flame  
at the bridge-dump that lasts. Stay. Lie down

across the gorged path. Stay like the abscessed  
house stays, landed on its side, maple tree  
slipped through its center. Split open.

## Singing Submissive

When we fuck, he sends a river—  
no small sprinkle-down

could drown a fountain.  
Today no one is him & next

drops may not sink but echo  
a dragonfly skid across dew.

Dear Reader how soon do you  
crust up? When bruised creek veins

threaten to burst, life  
blasts three dimensions

along my hips. No doubt  
between new & used flesh.

Make me forget all hairless  
girls he's slid & press

against teased seagrass. Touch  
me so hard I overflow my bones.

## Hydrophobia/Virion

Together we're believable  
liars, thieves at dawn

stealing sieves before  
anyone suspects they're clean.

I wade through water  
with iodine drinking

until I'm dry, wanting to move  
into a new morning because

I have no choice.

His secret  
keeps turning into water and

it's never water I can drink.  
So what should we do?

Write a memo to everyone  
we know? Staple fliers to telephone

poles REGARDING: the most  
basic taboo?

His secret

becomes my secret becomes  
water and it's toxic. Stomach

cramps a parasitic tug,  
pain in the gut, nothing

specific about it. I test  
pools and decide it's not

worth it, water stirs and  
dirt rises up. Nausea

blossoms up. Is it worth it?

## System of Strains

If I could show him how mechanical cranes dive,  
what depth they plumb, turning steady tarmac to shake,

he'd see silence means something. Driftwood in wheelbarrows,  
metal scrapings, watermarked houses: even light weight

accumulates. The first time this town flooded,  
a tree lodged through a half-burnt house turned on its side,

and the picture has been on billboards ever since.  
Gouged steel mills still rattle around junked cars and

jagger bushes, orange run-off streaks down river  
walls carve grooves in concrete, erosion quickened by waste.



## If the Flood

If the flood is history then we are  
punchlines dropped too soon. If the flood is  
history then we are measures that can't

contain it. If the flood is history  
then we are early response systems  
before they interrupt someone's train

of thought, & we are neighbors who go  
to bed unwarned. On an otherwise slow-  
cooking night, who could tell the difference

between teenagers breaking knuckles  
on bedsprings & a freight of water full  
as the Mississippi steaming south? If

the flood is history then we are  
headboards clung to, floating toward  
the stone arch bridge & debris fire

it keeps aflame for days. If the flood is  
history then we are shallow  
river walls & half-filled sandbags &

the pine grove. We are not Red Cross if  
the flood is history; we are the mayor  
who doesn't know yet what it is. We are

bandages on route to the wrong town.  
If the flood is history then we can't  
know what will collect at street

corners & on steps of brick houses  
that stay. If the flood is history then  
what is it we feel the need to define?

If the flood is history then we  
can't know how the dam will fail  
the water it was promised to hold.



If the flood is myth then we are more complex than we'd hoped. If the flood is myth then we are open to other relationships.

If the flood is myth then we can fly over Mount Ararat but we will never discover the wrecked ark drying into

outline in melting snow. If the flood is myth then we can still live for hundreds of years & spend each slow hour trying to decode

the one just passed. Purifying & violent, the flood didn't wash away smut of fowl & flesh, & we are masochists who survived

though we lay down in rain gut. If the flood is myth then we are sinners of the body still trying to shove ourselves into

unwilling narrative. If the flood is myth then drunken Noah was never sodomized by his own son. If the flood

is myth then we've all agreed on what is & isn't punishable & the number of offenses required for the degree.

If the flood is myth then everyone is fair game. If the flood is myth then we will never understand the lesson & our

mistakes will stick like pimples in our face & chest & we will never know what we did to raise each one.



If the flood is narrative then we are out of order. If the flood is narrative then we are anachronistic &

offensive to the original. & we are Lifetime movies scrambled by satellite into speeding Tetris cubes.

& we are the inverse narrative  
multiplied by two. & we are the theorem  
that says the parts will never reflect

the whole. & we are parts & the  
narrative will never be finished. If  
the flood is narrative then in

beginning there was only the end  
& the end & snoring. If the flood is  
narrative then we are the word, baby,

we are the hardest syllable to spit out.



If he is the flood then we are  
the story that couldn't reach its falling  
action. Then the flood is the sound of spit

on the back of our tongues & dread. & we  
are piss & shit heating lake beds.  
If he is the flood then we are its failure

to make or mimic meaning. If he is  
the flood then overflow buckets  
reflect us in their difficult roux—

toothpaste, honey, menstrual blood. Then we  
are a soft tooth dissolved in stomach  
spit up. When we hear river rush, we know

it's just part of what our dreams  
won't represent, an asymptote  
infinitely approaching

narrative. If he is the flood then we are  
logic that defies the sentence. If  
he is the flood then we are ceramic

toilets trying to recreate the most  
important parts, water still as  
drains slurp it slowly down.

# EVERY FOWL AFTER HIS KIND

## The Case Against Memory

Wouldn't you go back to the minute before you fell  
asleep and catch your smoke in the ashtray? Its burning

head could worry itself safe against corrugated glass  
before you realize your favorite room is easiest

aflame. There's no comfort without damage. Even  
the TV that once bathed you to bed in grey light goes up,

the hiss of holding out oddly silent. Would you return to  
seconds before, when transcendence wasn't found unraveling

fire-proof blankets and thickest winter underwear?  
Like the day before the neighbor girl and her little

sister went missing, or the week after when you believed  
their father went looking for a place to stay below

state searchlights, or the breath before you saw the news:  
he took them to a thicket of telephone poles and shot them

right away, long before he fell between them. Did you know  
before then a father could love his children so much

he didn't want them to live without him? Did you  
know about that kind of affection, or that it smells like

young armpits, burnt dermis, that it smells like rotting wood  
under skins of wet leaves? Wouldn't you go back

to the forest where forgetting was the easiest ditch to dig?

## Should He Prefer Devotion

While he's gone I watch the flamingo  
in the front yard decide on which leg  
to stand: same steady shake every day, flick

of the thickest layer of dusk. Then,  
the murkiest of hours. It's not so much  
this full-on night that insults me

as the way the moon reflects no more  
light than a clipped nail. I want it  
undone. That's my devotional

hurled at the closed door  
like something just winged, pages  
fanning a plume of dust and hair.

If I could, I'd call to tell him  
I broke the glass teapot  
his mother left in the cupboard.

*Think of it: your only bell!*  
The hardwood floors waxed  
and the night so long the pieces

splayed and kept splaying. Is this  
restlessness just the boot print  
I left on the bedroom wall that time

he didn't bother to remove  
my shoes, its reluctant fade as I,  
bare-breasted, scour and scald

and bleach? And all night  
the crucified Jesus hangs  
his head. Quiet morning,

an endless halo of gnats takes turns  
sticking to my lips, and then the faucet  
leaks, building to a beginning: *Don't worry.*

*I'm still waiting—come heavy,  
come high. I know you can't rest  
until you rest in me.*

It's Purely Physical

We'll paint carpets & cloud mirrors,  
sing cold baths back to health. We'll

have to drain our shoes, pad windows but  
consider our reactive parts.

We'll pass sirens between our mouths & after  
we've pressed our skin to dust we'll start

again from tooth & bone  
& nail ourselves right again.

Fire at the Coal Mine

*in Centralia, PA*

We stop the truck where highway ends, where pavement  
pushes up speed bumps and vents spout

rotten steam. He wants only to be smuggled in.

He looks tired, a hardware store lawn-

ornament Madonna, ceramic billows  
sculpted stiff. Here, ash disguises

even burs that wait in sour morning.

There's a mine here under the ravine:

a deep anthracite pit's quiet  
burning under constant

humid fog that never quits trying to  
dampen it, the way having him doesn't,

though wanting him is not just constant silence,

but a coal fire that hoards its burn underground.

Here's where the river bed, bursting from nothing

visible, breaks into breath;

nothing but the smell of it. Here, I'm the other

woman. I ask to be turned upside down  
and examined—waiting for it, I say *Make me wait*.

There's a river nearby, already cored.

Acid mine drainage—sulfuric orange

drip like the slick he leaves on my stomach when we're through.

Instead he pushes inside, pushes until  
he cools what he can't put out.



## After Another Failed Attempt

It ends with confession, always  
a *thinking about something from my past*  
excuse, forcing legs back into pants,  
scouring scalps with fingernails, sighing,  
a stranger escaping from his most  
unfinished act. I'm following him  
from our bedroom to the winter garden  
to the sound of someone saying *I knew you*  
*couldn't do it*, which is the smell of shriveling  
leaves. This is the corn maze chapter  
of the story: slow walk through tall stalks  
to redemption where I know nothing, where  
I think I'm made to wander. I'm crying,  
& he's punching bent reeds over again.  
We're acting out scripts while fate,  
like a director, pans back to the horizon  
as everyone waits & neither of us  
knows there's a sinkhole or IED  
just ahead. Where is the trip line, sharp  
flash, Earth collapsing to dust? A man, still  
half-limp, yelling *You still do it for me, baby,*  
*you do!* But extras run out of the wings,  
extras swing down on wires, extras,  
with their safety-pinned feathers, legs dangling,  
sweaty faces shining, signal the end  
of the story. *But where is it*, they keep  
saying, *the moral...* They want me to learn  
from every damn sign but I can't, I don't  
want it all shaved down to a flaccid man  
in a room who can't bring himself to do  
anything with his hands. This should teach us,  
I know this, we just can't fake it anymore,  
but he still can't tell me what he has to  
& they're trying to hurl us forward  
to see when we choose to stop.

## At the Days Inn

We sleep this way, then that, unconscious  
masters of avoidance. Before dawn,  
I get up for water and a rat scares itself

into the cabinet under the sink, buries  
its head when I see it in the bathroom  
light. In the morning we find it suffocated

in a trash bag, though we'd left  
the drawers open to lead it out.

## The Incompleteness Theorems Can't Prove that I'm Not Pregnant

or that I am. What was that thing

you once said about Gödel? He yawned  
a gap between provability

again & truth. Explain it to me  
with visuals: I want to see

your inconstant the hiccup, heartbeat,  
because  
only the simplest answers

are certain. Rutabagas

planted by the Monongahela  
are not a sign

& I will never accidentally dig up  
a lungfish. You said something  
about Gödel once—  
what was it? Who cares  
if he was thinking about God.



Recently I saw a photograph of a video installation of a tree. A spruce sectioned into six panels, filmed & displayed horizontally. I wondered if the artist intentionally left spaces between screens, why they were large enough to fit someone's hand. Though it wasn't mine



I nailed cowhide to walls  
of the little house he found  
by the river  
then cleared furniture.

I emptied rooms.

I sterilized the kitchen  
to a simple meat locker  
after he carried home a paper bag

of avocados & dates & olives.  
Sulfuric acid in the flower pots,  
cockroaches in the sewing tin:

I have wished for the blank sky,  
a new ruthlessness, though I am determined  
not to make a sound.



In the photograph I find him squeezing a fake smile, gap in his front teeth wide enough for the handle of a spoon. XL flannel shirt deflates his small frame. His sister looks out of context, left side of her face darkened by the shadow of his greasy hair. The space between them isn't suspicious unless I remember I'm looking for clues.



Though I wear a heavy coat  
it has a swelling line,  
the hammock I sleep in  
full of red onions and rocks.

I make it a point to look very directly  
at all the men who speak to me.

Preserve the navel cord  
in a little bag around the baby's neck,  
burn dried lavender flowers in a dust pan—

*We know nothing.*

Absurd thing!

I'd spent days and days painting the baby carriage white.

## The Veil

It's just the same old canonical hours  
kept. The same name

whispered seven times a day  
to prove his specific gift of memory.

The rush to find that pinch of extra flesh,  
pin it to the ground. The life so precious

it's smuggled out of prison, and so small,  
as the simple prayer he is slips in translation—

He was sitting on the lip of the bathtub  
plucking his pubic hairs, wire

by wire. He could think of no other  
way to please me. I didn't want him to

say something fucked up, like: *Look at what I've done  
for you*, a flash of lightning drawn

by the muted curtain, but he went there,  
back to the pillar from which he had just come.

*Look at what I've done*—the Madonna  
forever pregnant, her eyes knocked uneven

by our plump Jesus, that immaculate blow.  
It's just someone else's semantic blind date.

It's just the vaporized mystery.  
The direct address. Insincere *ex voto*.

It's the simplicity of what's most faithful:  
the way the cardinal jumps through

the litany, verse to verse, day to day.  
The moths flutter against the lit

window, water weight of the moon.  
His not-so-recent break-up, his little

sister's carefully bundled needs

still tied in red ribbon on his lowest shelf.

What's so uncertain is the content  
of this gold-plated cup. That I'm this confused,

and over something so neatly packaged.  
Wanting everything rarefied, stained

and undone: the parallax, the object spotted  
like the confessionalist's patch-worked face.

It's our masks, we should be bending down to grab  
our masks from behind the hymnals because

what's more honest than an obvious lie?  
What's safer than the spectacle, as steady

and bridal as our covered faces, our broken neck?

& If We Are In Prison He's My Only Choice

Off-roading after midnight, the car  
kicks up dust so thick we think we've reached

a new altitude, a sudden wrong turn  
sending us scaling Appalachians.

The car skitters over sharp rocks & worn  
shocks whine each time I can't avoid

a crater, each time the same graveled whine.  
We don't listen to the radio, only

discuss Descartes, my fumbling attempts  
to explain what I only half understand,

landing hard on each unstable stone. When  
I turn to look at him, I keep my foot

on the gas like they do in movies, &  
tell him God is the way things are

& I don't understand the way things are.  
He thinks it an epiphany, or the end

of a long question, because when I pull  
over to let dirt clear he gets out &

stands in high-beams, thrilled by what he can't  
know, fogged plume settling, attracted

by his soft turquoise sweatshirt. His lighted  
sphere steady, he's caught: horn blaring, straight on.



# TWO OF EVERY SORT



After the Last Draft of *War and Peace*

The girls copy his manuscripts now. I write  
my own steeds, hide them from him,

golden saxifrage tucked between leaves

where I know his mistresses can't see.  
Now I breed, that common rut, pickle hens.

I worry my two rotten teeth, gnashing

knapweed as he says *delicacy means*  
*unexpected change*. Standing, my head down,

I imagine my own diagnosis, a chewing

disease. My lips stiffen, jaw grinds, though  
I grow round again, carry low toward him.

My conscious pasture, counter-gait, I balk,

kick up trampled stakes and chips of spring.  
The girls scribble, his only beasts of draught.

I think knapweed, knapweed, and birth sturdy

and continue to chew. I was the first  
grazer, original on his table,

I'll eat thistle tumble, he won't know

me. I am opposite equine, try it—  
tag me, publish my diary. Roll up

my pages, dictate my marginalia.

I make my carriage and pair—Countess  
Creation, no dull genius. I prefer my incurable

ideal, my morning sickness, our scourge of sheep.

## The Rogue Taxidermist

Down the root cellar ladder

I see his cat's eyes pickled  
in vinegar, tight knit of proteins unraveling

in the brine. He tells me once  
he saw a beauty queen's stained underwear,  
a deflated cloud clogging the sink.

*That's when I got the idea*, he says,  
private preserves, praying for keeps.

He keeps his best work in the cellar—

his winged monkeys, miniature unicorn,  
three-beaked crow.

I see the two-headed  
stuffed lamb on a rotating stool  
powered by a weed-eater motor,  
blue raccoon on the wood stove.

I watch him fake hide, stitch together  
squirrel skins over a plastic bobcat skull.

A man devoted to suspending the impossible  
moment: stretching deer skin

over a dress form, a carburetor,  
binding it to an Iron Maiden t-shirt,  
wrapping a canteen, two bars of soap.

## 12 Labors of the Sword Swallower, Our Good Submissive

### I. Nemean Lion

I shave my face  
with a shiv scraped

from a nail file, so

sharp I can't bleed,  
take a deep breath

or it'll take clogged

pores & speed bump  
scars with hair on

my upper lip & an imperceptible

sheath of skin. He wants  
the thickest hide, auburn mane

tangled by long thorns & flies.

I'm out after sundown  
to search for lost claws, graze

the sharpest edge of night.

I make wild dogs call—  
I press the blade to

my neck, lay it flat against

my Adam's apple & hum.

### II. Lernean Hydra

We met outside a dive  
in Uniontown. I should have  
known then what he

would make me & what he  
would undo. The alleyway

he followed me to  
flooded sewage every night,  
so impenetrable by moonlight

& fresh air: we could have met  
anywhere. I did

my deepest trick & he found

a broken bottle beside a dumpster  
& asked me to swallow that, too.

If I had nine heads he would

pierce each gullet, pin me  
to the bottom of sewage gut,

rust me in his shallow.

### III. Hind of Artemis

He keeps his prizes  
in the bedroom—

bears jaw smooth from misuse,

ostrich beak, shark tooth  
buried in sharpened bone.

I gag on golden horn

every night he pulls it,  
refined sheath too precious

against my grizzled throat,

but sharp steel goes so deep,  
if it could, it would push out

my monthly due: a red fawn.

#### IV. Erymanthian Boar

*O blade glommer, tusk  
tonguer, I imagine him*

saying one night

when the room is so dark  
we can't tell who should

be on top, *brute me, slobber*

*me shiny*. The bed will be  
a tightrope at his back,

my spit hot nails

in his mouth. *No one  
can hear you*, I'll whisper

into his ear, but even

in the dream I listen closer  
& realize he's faking

my squeal: *Rut me, yoke me,*

*push against me your steeliest snout.*

#### V. Augean Stables

Didn't he pour hydrogen  
peroxide down my throat

one night when I accidentally

bit down on the blade? Didn't  
he hold my face in his hands

like the incontinent Labrador

he had, the way he shamed her  
for pissing all over the couch, two rivers

all over his pillows & bed? He thought

I'd heave so he stood back,  
but I just clenched my eyes shut.

He didn't know how stretched  
my esophagus, how easily

he slides inside.

## VI. Stymphalian Birds

Rough-sized, oversexed swallows  
beat their wings against the road

on my roof. I slip the sword  
between my lungs, nudge aside

my heart. Prehistoric herons  
wreck weblike bones against

my rubber shingles. I hang  
castanets on the tip of the blade,

clapping like wings wired together  
& leave them in my chest to rattle

pigeons & gulping gulls from below.

## VII. Cretan Bull

Who am I today?  
I'm so dry I



clown, bull-leap, grab  
bucks by the ears—

no penetration this show.  
Tusks hard, though, still

upturned. *Throw a phony  
cape like me over your*

*back, sir, & regard your  
haunches. Flank my mask—*

*don't whisper through  
eye holes. Whistle me*

*unsound & snort  
each second up.*

#### VIII. Horses of Diomedes

*How I rotted your teeth!  
Tell me again.*

#### IX. Girdle of Hippolyta

I hold lop-sided, my holster  
hasn't posture. Though I'd never

cut off fat for movement,  
I'm no limp-waist

marionette. My girdle  
smacks rib to rib,

novelty gut wired  
concave. I offered him

what he wanted but he  
wanted to take it or—

I can't remember—

I wanted him to  
take it.

#### X. Cattle of Geryon

He stole me easy, threaded  
my three mouths, gathered me

as barns connected by  
razor wire. Like I said

no trespassing he made me  
swallow his burning

cigarette head & my skin  
tastes like ash & drowned

beef. When he looked at me  
he saw two swords between

the gap in my teeth & he  
palmed my stretched throat

until my face hardened  
to sandpaper red hide.

#### XI. Apples of the Hesperides

Once he found me  
snorting coke off a strong man's  
shoulder it was the first act  
of my performance.

#### XII. Cerberus

He slipped past entrances  
manned by unmade

decisions, collected from  
brutes. Especially my head.

He needed a bow  
dipped in sting & I couldn't

glow. Long gone his three  
heads still bark below.

I push down wild dogs but  
they rear, they froth.

Exotic Animal Farmer Shoots Himself in Zanesville, Ohio, Home of the “Y” Bridge

Sometimes it takes a lion

    prowling the ditch on I-70, baboon  
                            blood drying in its mane,  
    to remind us: we have something

                            to cage. A man opens gates  
    to his grizzly pits, his lion pens,  
then shoots himself in the head.

    It's a local holiday. Herpetetic monkey  
                            on the loose! Board up your doggie  
                            doors! Police find him dragged  
    across his field, teeth marks crown

his bellybutton. They shoot anything  
                            clawed and foamy-mouthed in dark,  
                            surround the farm, circle like flies  
    on its howl. Maybe no one should  
see the damage we can do: what

                            happens when we open metal rigs  
    and let scatter and wolf. Beside  
                            the highway, an older man strips  
    a tigers hide with his pocket knife

and gathers around him his hazard,  
    his hoard. Construction signs  
    flash *caution: exotic animals*. Children  
                            stay home from school.

## Ways To Find Me In The Snow

What does silence do but balloon us? I can't  
remember how to read the time of day after

I've seen so many, the shorter hand directing  
my eyes in opposite directions. I never

know if it's going to snow, only the neighbor girl's  
screams remind me to look outside, look at the clouds

florid & springing slowly down. I don't remember  
what it feels like to be a smudge on the white

afternoon, to be mere, to be shoveled over  
by the big blank, the stubborn clear. A blizzard

couldn't do it. What is there to know but  
this secret, these monstrous tracks through the snow?

# BOW IN THE CLOUD

## Last Night of Questioning

Did she touch him, did he dream of her wearing  
only his stained t-shirt, an invitation

that her skin is his finger is his sister  
anyway so why not play the role? He sets

the scene again while I hide, trying to see  
it clearer through breaks in the story. There's

the time he told me about: new blinds, candy  
wrappers, slip-on shoes on the floor, and

in some versions I think he's just fucking up,  
turning into her room in a fog of cologne,

but then he says *it was my cologne*, his  
adolescent stench soaking into a thin

knot of chest hair. Too many costume choices  
and no sexless sage to put pins in his growth

chart, hang his musty banner above the stage.  
In version seven his memory glares

so hot the bed, blinds, dresser drawers and the girl  
slip into their own outlines, and the only

thing left loud and opaque and sweating in  
the attention is him. We're at the end again

and he's supposed to explain the lesson.  
The audience waits for the lesson and

it crawls into his mouth. The chorus whispers  
the lesson, but I want to know what happens

next, baby. What happens next?

## Why It Still Matters

Because he punched our porch railing and threw  
a foaming 40-ounce Mickey's at a bat

when he decided to tell me. We were living  
in an abandoned barn in backwoods

Pennsylvania, and he couldn't stay hard  
no matter how I tightened my grip.

Because there were geese in the meadow  
and there are always geese in that meadow.

Rotted shingle siding, the ground grazed  
and shedding that night made me think of the smell

of burnt leg hair when I thought a match would  
make me young again. *You were a kid,*

I told him then, pinching thin parentheses  
into my right hand, but he was twelve.

Because the next day he shaved his beard  
and his head was just as small, and I wished

him a new nose, slighter deviation,  
less aberrant bend. But he was back in

the kitchen just hours later asking  
*why does this affect you?*

Because I catch him again every day,  
hear the empty silo, echo-toned

nocturnal tornado, yet there's no new  
view of the cornfield.

Because I think of him pitched over  
someone freshly slicked and know I'm the last

one who'll know.





In a Typical Gesture of the Period, He Cuts Off His Hair and Sends It to Me

He doesn't recite the rosary,  
a bar of soap between his teeth.

He doesn't note the lye  
as he gargles. No fleck,

no flaying, no lead-based yoke.  
He silences the urge

to lie down below steam  
and whistle, to string himself

between two rusted boats. *Build  
a cage for my bile-mouth, rusted plow,*

*I'm afraid of what might come out.*  
He saves everything after me,

smokes his whitest button-up,  
keeps his nail clippings

in pillowcases, blanches and freezes  
basil waiting for my bell. He sends me

Clydesdales, his mainland, his peach fuzz—  
packages loose tea, gold dust. *Those other women*

*left me unshaken, he says, and suddenly—  
an apple in every mouth but yours.* He bundles

his seaweed, damp root, wet claw, all  
his vain nightmares—concave chest,

wind-roughed neck. No one watches him  
through his bedroom window, so he cuts off

his curtains and mails them, too. *Be my  
every audience, drink from my boyish cup.*

He sends down his anchor light  
because I'm his secret river, his one

deep blush. *My lost balloon, my sturdy*

*canoe, swallow my hair and sink.*

## What We Didn't Talk About At the Buffalo Bar

Because the buffalo head above the door  
doesn't have eyes, because the bartender

tunes in to true crime TV, I'm trying  
to tell you the story has no logic.

In the past I remembered dates that weren't  
important and names of people I met

only once and the wash of beer they wouldn't drink  
and the name of the state they lived in. But now

I can't stop coloring in the watermarks.  
I still do not have self-control, so when

I say *I don't have anything else to talk about*  
I mean I don't want to make it happen again.

I mean I want another beer. I mean I want  
the full picture. Dear Friend, dear memory:

I don't think he knows why he did it anymore.



I'm sorry I met you for a drink and said  
almost nothing and left you annoyed and confused, you

clueless you. You want me to talk. Who wouldn't? Every  
evening the same shallow and deep sighs and a girl

crying: *O leave me alone, O be with me, me, & etc.*  
What a confused girl. Cry, girl, cry! I can see

already you think I'm the girl, she seems so like me,  
but I'm not. I'm not the girl. I'm just a hot mute.

I don't say much. I daydream while you talk to me  
about rare breeds of beer. Sure, I pay attention,

but that doesn't matter. And the part where your words

slip into the narrative of self I'm tearing  
down and reconstructing in my head, I'm trying to  
tell you---For a while I thought I was the girl.  
I guess I can say that out loud. And, for a while,  
I pretended to be you, all storyline,  
sitting there at the hip bar, on the stage of  
the center of attention, witty and beautiful  
and an ear for a punchline, but you look into  
the polished bar and see only you, while I'm over  
at a table mopping up condensation  
with my sweater sleeve. Okay, so I'm not you. Big deal.  
You still get to be you. You get a perfect pink tongue!  
You get a pair of leopard print statement shoes  
and an inexhaustible patience for compliments.  
What else could you want? I listen to you, I take  
your hand, I nod as if I understand. Do I  
understand, honey? Do I know you? Is this jukebox  
on? Let me say it for once, out loud for once, let me  
make a sentence out of words and good intentions  
that becomes, you know, something interesting.



Instead of the beer in front of you when you wake up  
you see only a little girl's bedroom.  
Say hi to the girl. Instead of her princess lamp  
clicking on, she siphons a whimper  
as something happens and she doesn't know what. *Hi girl,  
you're right. You're right he shouldn't be here,*  
*he should go back to his own room, and I'm sorry  
I can't erase this though I try and try*

*and sorry I made it happen again by remembering it.  
Especially that, but I can't help myself.*

I take details I don't know and put them in a simple  
set to make a scene I don't want to see

but can't stop creating. I do it to try to understand,  
but in every version he plays the part

pocked and porous, sneaking around in empty daylight.  
I can't change it. Here is the blurry

image of the guilty boy. Magnified. And here is  
the pyre repurposed. Here is the part

where he slips himself onto it and his father says  
he's forgiven and he actually believes he is forgiven.



Instead of the glass of beer in front of you,  
when you wake up you see only a boy's  
soft hands, right tracing fingers of left,  
scratching calluses at the base of his

middle finger, scalding under water,  
lathering with lye, with bleach, with turpentine.  
In the shower, on the chipped linoleum,  
in bed beside me as he twitches to sleep.

On our mattresses squeak & groan, stoned in  
darkness as cars flash by, my feet fall away,  
my heart beats too fast or not fast enough.  
And then the dream: scrap metal yard rusting

fall colors into lawn mower motors  
and bike handles. He walks through grass tall enough  
to itch my thighs, fingering the blades in  
a way that makes him look guilty. Around

fences, through garages, across streets to  
a cemetery in the sun where there's  
a picnic blanket, plastic tea cups, and

stuffed deer. I say *I don't want to play with you*,  
because I don't, but then I feel my thumbs  
in his eyes, my nails scratching skin down his face.  
All these stories, all this shade &  
the darkened hand-picked word.



If the beer is in your left hand, you are in the right  
bar. If the beer is in your lap, and it's blown shut,  
then we are singing in the small screen. Build up the bar  
and call it ancient. Rebuild the barstools and call them  
as old as hardwood. We have scaled the liquor display  
where we found only a bent sapling, so try again,  
start from another perspective, the girlfriend this time,  
ten years later, the memory painted over and  
yes, another day between us. An incomplete  
catalog of Greek tragedy takes how long to act  
out? Sadly, we don't have the chops for that. Never mind  
the pins, let the Sphinx out at the door, this has nothing  
to do with fate. Let's skip to the moment of  
disclosure, at screen left, as actors darken  
their make-up, mask-like, and the chorus leans in, still  
too far away to hear me say it. You don't like that  
scene either? More silence in the juiciest acts,  
and I don't like the term *juiciest* in this context,  
but it still doesn't heal, these silences, this passion  
play on repeat. I'm sure there were honest moments,  
all full-frontal and crude, but the motivation is  
never there nor the moral waiting in the wing nor  
under the stage, no fate, fate, & etc. it doesn't work.



I'm at this bar & I want to talk. You're  
eager, too, smiling & holding my hand  
in a way that makes me even more

uncomfortable. You tell me I can say  
anything I want, but I just can't.  
Really, you say *Sweetie, what you're going*

*to tell me can't happen again even*  
*when you say its name.* All right, if you're  
so good at burying things, you try it.

Roll it into the buffalo's eye socket  
where it can gather musk of cautionary  
tales & hope the one who finds it

recognizes the smell.



## Ways to Find Me in the Polish Restaurant

Put your hands in your lap & say your usual  
prayer: *For this food, for my narrative*  
*of self wrapped*  
*in steamed cabbage, spiced & mashed*  
*in kielbasa,*  
*& for sweet bobalki*  
*I will try not to eat with a spoon.*

In a Dream I Finally Understand the Subject

I spot an eight-point buck  
fifty yards away gashing

a white birch tree.  
A rabbit sniffs

a spring-toothed trap  
pried open.

I close

my left eye, open my right.  
It's rutting season

& the deer leaps through  
a ring his sister has set

on fire. From a shift of vision—  
genius, the two-headed

act. She parts a bear's jaw,  
straddles the maw,

pricking her softened  
soles on its teeth. Here, bone  
is closer to flesh—

the way the mind dives

daily, flaming from the nest.  
The accidental arsonist.

She flicks the burnt-out  
bulb as she lowers it

into the bear's mouth  
and it sparks.

I close

my right eye, open my left.  
Now the deer rots, locust

meat, meat of bottom  
dwellers. My trick—

I'm only the audience—  
I can't see both at once.

In one eye, she's dancing on a thin branch,  
bracing it from below. Then

hundreds of beaks  
bearing down. A swarm at the rot.

## Flypaper

It wasn't like rattling clarity, like opening windows  
    on a December morning to heavens  
    of warm air, unwinding stalactites hanging from metal rails  
    in the drop ceiling. It was more  
like cracking starched curtains to catch vultures  
    & spotting only the buzzed-cut yard. What a surprise  
    to look closer at the trap & find only  
    its fragrant spiderweb, that what's hidden  
                                    sometimes isn't toxic, only too delicate to touch.

Look at the blinds, how fruit flies dance on slats  
    closed to keep the light out. Look at my fingers, how  
    I've tried to buff the calluses, pull away  
                                    spackled skin but I'm still afraid  
to hold them under the lamp. Let me tell you again  
    about flypaper,  
    how morning light reveals sweet adhesive sprawling lace-like  
    until buzzing bodies dot spiraling strips.

Lottie Williams, the Only Person Known to Have Been Hit by Space Debris

It was 1997. The neighbor girl and I practiced  
kissing under the picnic table, touching

tips of our tongues, dipping our pointed toes  
in cold water.

You know I thought catastrophe.

I thought Lottie in ashes at the base  
of a 25-foot crater. I thought

years later a teenaged boy pissing into  
the hole. Did she ask for a sign? Like Father

Carlo Vipera eating the 50 year-old  
Host, body of Christ lightly dusted. Someone

had to try it. Besides, that was in 1780.  
Think of what it would taste like now!

That Lebanese girl crying seven crystals  
a day, all those statues of Ganesh sipping

milk from teaspoons. The Virgin weeping blood,  
the Virgin on burnt toast.

When I got high

in his attic last summer, I couldn't  
explain to him the meaning of the word

*embouchure* because he thought I was saying  
*aperture*. We were living by flashlight,

the circle of our world always shifting  
away from us. Like that weekend I spent

alone in my apartment listening  
to the ceiling fan shake all night, listening

for him to let himself in the front door,  
my ear pressed to hardwood. And when someone else

finally came the ground didn't shake and then he—  
does it matter who? Yes, and he turned on the light.

Imagine it: first, Lottie sees something  
flying through morning sky, aflame. She thinks

meteor, shooting star, soda can. Then,  
like a reminder, as if to say: I'm here,

a piece of rocket fuel tank smoking  
in the grass in front of her, but first?

A tap on her shoulder.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

### EDUCATION

MFA, Poetry, Florida State University, expected May 2014  
Thesis: *ELSE*

BA, Literature, Bennington College, 2010  
• Thesis: *How the Cordless Phone Gained Independence Through Hard Work and Determination*

University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown, 2005-2006, 2007

Pratt Institute, 2006

### WORK EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Florida State University English Department, 2011-2014  
• Taught ENC1101: Freshman Composition and Rhetoric; ENC1102: Freshman Writing and Research; and ENC1142: Freshman Imaginative Writing  
• Developed course materials and structures, developed short writing assignments, reading assignments, daily class activities, multi-media assignments, group projects; led class workshops; graded papers; held one-on-one conferences with students

Reading-Writing Center Tutor, Florida State University, 2011-2014  
• Worked one-one-one with undergraduate and graduate students in the Reading-Writing Center to help promote self-efficacy with reading and writing skills

### EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

Poetry Editorial Board, *South East Review*, Florida State University, 2012-2014

Editorial Board, *Interrobang* Literary Magazine, Bennington College, 2008

Member, My Idea of Fun Artist Collective, Johnstown, Pa, 2008-present

Editorial Board, *Backroads* Literary Magazine, University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown, 2007

Editorial Assistant, *South Asian Review*, University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown, 2007  
• Handled incoming submissions; sent them to readers; edited submissions; corresponded with writers; handled payment for subscriptions; mailed copies to subscribers; formatted two issues of the *SAR*

### RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

Student Assistant, Low-Residency MFA Bennington College, January 2010

- Assisted the coordinators of the Writing Program with daily tasks, such as hosting events, meeting guest speakers, handing out programs, preparing rooms for guests and students

## **READINGS**

Senior Thesis Reading, Bennington College, 2010

Satori Gallery, Johnstown, Pa, 2009

Student Reading, Bennington College, 2008

- Nominated by Literature faculty to be one of four student readers

UPJ SPACE, University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown, 2007, 2006

- Student presentation conference, nominated by creative writing faculty to be one of six student readers

Writing Awards Reading, University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown, 2007

## **PUBLICATIONS**

*The Literary Review*, Winter 2014

“In A Typical Gesture of the Period, She Cut Off Her Hair and Sent it to Him”; “At the Biker Bar”; “Response to Your Letter Regarding Lottie Williams, the Only Person Known to Have Been Hit By Space Debris”