

**LAST TRAIN
TO THE MIDNIGHT MARKET**

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The Last Intimate Moment

He holds the snowglobe of filament and air
to the bathroom's fluorescent light, afraid
there are not enough of him to change it:
Three to squint through the fingerprints on rounded glass,
tracing the tangle of hairs inside for the moment of unravel.
Two to search for the spare folded like a newborn
into the satin perfume of his wife's linen closet.
One to peer into the bedroom
where the smooth roundness of his wife's white thigh
melts into the sheets and the darkness.

He tells her they are out of bulbs. She does not know
a different wattage only makes the light dimmer,
has already shored up her desire with a scatter of books,
their spines frayed along the duvet like the ribcages of fish.
She curls her tongue to answer,
but her eyes have already swallowed every word.
She closes her mouth and opens another book,
asks him to push the bathroom door a little wider
to flood the bed with a thread count of infinite light.

He flicks off the bathroom light, sets the burnt-out idea
on the slick marble sink, tugs off his bathrobe
and crawls between his wife's closed thighs
just as the bulb rolls to the sink's curled edge,
tips in her favor, and shatters on the black and white tile.

1990
for Father

When He was a Tender Age

he traded a girl for a uniform.
He licked promises into the seals of envelopes
and forgot to send them, forgot to write them.
Uncle Sam stationed him in Korea, and dreams of easy
chestnut eyes faded into black eyes black eyes black
eyes. His mind tinged yellow after months
of rice cakes and noodles, clams
with the grit of sand still in their flesh.
He forgot his rosy-fleshed lover
in the whirl of soldiers, the red-light district
where a good time is displayed behind glass cages
and cradled in the arms of money.
He was not a virgin the night he saw her
brushing her blue wig and offering quick love
behind a veil of mascara and silk, and became
intoxicated by her soft skin and soft voice.
He was not a virgin but he was a fool,
his sober conscience gnawing at his stomach
the way his sperm gnawed at hers.
When he was a tender age, he married a whore
for guilt and only began to love her years later
the night she didn't come home.

Rumors

She has heard a client is looking for a real woman
to make love to, love longer than a single night.
She has heard his eye caught in the tangle of her blue wig,
Now he stands outside her door, his voice deep and desperate,
drowning out the money-panderings of Old Aunt.
She has heard he believes in foreplay, in the woman
rather than the eye-lined, rouged sex shop.
She has heard he kisses like a butterfly,
dry and close-lipped innocence light as the head of a pin.

She once heard her father whisper sweet syllables
through the keyhole of her mother's door.
More than once she heard him yell and beat her
brother, who came home in the darkness
smelling of heavy metal and heavy drinking.
Heard her father call Korea a bloody war zone
of technology and overpopulation
where even the food was belligerent to his bowels.
She once heard her mother crave the city
for days and nights, heard her father give in
for a chance to slip through the keyhole.
She once heard a hundred buses pass
before she decided to stay in the city to make it big
at something, though she wasn't sure what.
She once heard of a way to earn a roof and a bite
in a cheap part of town on the wrong side of the river.

She has heard of escape from escape.
The other girls sit and smile, their lips thin and hard
from too many cigarettes and cocks.
Green card. It's whispered like a dream,
coveted sweet syllables for which they paint their eyes
and dance for the uniformed patrons.
She has heard from the girls that the white soldier's seed
is as virile as his virtue. She has heard that this lover of hers
has learned how to shiver a fearful, joyous arch down her back.
She has heard that heaven breaks between the thighs

at the moment of conception.

Now she hears that the blue cross on the stick
is the key to the lock of luck.

She hears how easy it is to slip
a bribe through the keyhole at night, to thief her way
through brick and shadow toward the Army gate,
barefoot and naked beneath her red-lit coat.

The Night They Got Drunk in His Apartment on Base

He must have been a fool to invite her in,
but he had already offered her space under his
umbrella against the monsoon gods.
He must have been happy to see her
if he opened a bottle of wine to warm her skin,
drenched from hours spent in vigil at his gate.
She must have been drunk to sit on his coffee table
sucking on a bong made from a water bottle,
bare feet and rain pooling under her red raincoat.
He chewed the scabs from her knees while she unbuckled his belt,
proclaiming that God's belly must be full of wisdom. He replied
that God wears sunglasses because He sees only neon wavelengths.
He must have been afraid afterward, when
she placed his hand on her belly, throbbing with a different heartbeat,
and told him of her escape from Old Aunt, who would have beaten
his new son out of her. He must have been angry to find himself fooled.
He must have been a fool to think and pace in shame
while she sat at the table calmly, sipping tea steeped in sunlight,
tracing a finger through leftover cereal dust.
She must have wanted America. He must have wanted his virtue.
He must have been a fool to say, *You'll need a ring.*

2009
for Mother

She Asked Her Husband to Listen

as he slammed the door
as he stepped off the porch
as she held a cup of coffee gone cold.
Her guilt still gritted under her fingernails,
couldn't be scrubbed away with lye or perfume
or blood. He asked her why she wanted to come back
and though she had no answer, she wanted to say

she had long since chopped her hair,
unknotting the black strands that bound her to men
looking for blood and nails and womb, hips full of lust.
Endless days of bamboo mats full of little girls
threaded through the fingers of men, lined
against walls that seal out sunlight and city.

Reader, listen for the sake of the husband
wed for nineteen years and still afraid of her secrets.
Ask her whether she was ever younger than a woman,
where she left her memories, perforated by the burnt fingers
of twilight shadows stretching across faces she forgot.
Ask her where she ate the tangy buds of begonias,
whether her mother's hair smelled like honey and mint.
Ask if she knew her mother's palms were rubbery
and cold like the membrane of a boiled egg
after clutching the linen curtains to hide her face
from the absence of her daughter's shadow.

Listen, as she sips the coffee that is colder than air
and asks an empty house,
empty save for the khaki bat in the attic
with transparent wings hiding sunspecked eyes
from the dawn streaming through the cracks
between the fuzzy insulation and windowsill,
afraid to squeak until the sky burns itself into darkness.

Please Leave a Message Before the Beep

Hey, friend. Don't pick up the phone.
My father came home drunk tonight,
sat me down at the smudged white kitchen table,
poured us both a shot of whiskey
that turned into four or five.
My mother hasn't come home since last night
and my father looked like he could
squeeze bullets of whiskey from his glass.
I thought he would shoot them at me
through his teeth, thought his hands
would melt into fists, thought I would run and run
and here I'd be, looking at the red neon crosses
of all the red-lit churches that never helped my mother
or me, my hand sliced open by a whiskey shot.
I thought my father's hairy red fists would lift
above the skyline, above the crosses,
but all he lifted across the table was a glass
and a long hard look that asked, *where did she go?*
I thought the whiskey would burn silence
into words, but here I am. I don't know where to look.
I have no compass but the lines of blood in my veins,
and they're silent.

The Number of Lovers

A wrinkled man cries *clementines* by the curb
 juggles them with arthritic hands.
 I stop to squeeze the orange globes in his cart.

I have been loved by so many men.
 They came in the night, bringing rings,
 carnations, fruit, their hearts
 cracked open for me to drink in their love.
 Adorations were almost –almost!– payment enough
 and I became for them the wife, the mother,
 maid and mistress, any fetish their gifts could buy.
 How they loved me, promised me sweetness
 out of life and into another.

I don't miss it now: The flashing red lights
 and cold silver poles, the glassed-in rooms
 in which to eat, sleep, shower, pace
 like a specimen on a wheel waiting for judgment.
 I don't miss it because of the one
 dressed in the fresh-pressed khakis of an angel
 whose promises were full as magnolia in spring.
 He must have loved me; and I,
 I learned to love him back and to leave his love
 in the beautiful cracks of his little open heart.

I listen now to the cry of the old men:
 clementines, darling, clementines!
 but I knew them twenty years younger
 and how they cried in bed from the weight
 of true love. I knew them twenty years younger
 when the clementine flesh became an overripe fire
 burning sweetness into fear and fear into my tastebuds.
 The clementines fall from fingers
 stiffened by age and dish soap and baby powder.
 I turn away, afraid to remember, afraid to forget
 and when the old man cries, *clementines*,
 I hear my heart crack open, if only for a moment.

My Husband Asked Why I Wanted to Return

My husband plays racquetball
because it keeps him young.
He eats carrots to improve night vision,
studies sudoku in the subway
to keep his brain sharp as a hound's tooth.
The first night we arrived back in Korea,
he took our son to play racquetball
where, according to our son, he reached
for a ball sliding along the wall and slammed
into the pitted concrete, cracking two ribs.
Lying wide awake in bed, breaths shallow, pained,
he asked whether I was comfortable being back.
I am not, but I said yes because he was smiling.
I asked if hitting the ball was worth a cracked rib or two.
If not, then I am not happy coming back
seeing the red neon crosses judge me,
smelling the spice of the sauces
I could never quite get right,
hearing the roar of the subway that rumbled
beneath my feet when walking to you
twenty years ago in the monsoon.
But, I said, if the ball is always worth hitting,
then yes. I am happy bringing you back
to show you how the monsoon season
washes even the most suffocating city clean.

Graveless Daughter

Daughter whom I loved
whose bloody heartbeat
bloody face
still follow the shadow
of my waking steps –
I can feel your laughter
in my torso,
my hoard of limbs,
my shame for your entrails,
twisted like DNA
round your white-washed yellow skin
the color of a burnt-out mirage.
Daughter whom I loved
but didn't love enough,
whom I wanted
but didn't want enough,
I wish I had wanted
I wish I had loved.
I'm not asking
for guiltlessness. I'm asking
that through torment and torment
if you strip me of love
strip me of men
strip me of the color of my skin
to hang on the corners of your soul,
at least leave me with shame
to clothe my naked apology.

Reasons She Stopped Talking to Me

My to-do list has grown like a lizard tail:

- 1: Mow the bamboo garden that is our front lawn
- 2: Pick up a couple light bulbs for my nightstand
- 3: Bury all the forks and knives somewhere
- 4: Sleep with your back to my back

Our conversations are minefields, syllables
checking off the silence we have to talk about.

Her answers grow smaller each time I ask why
she serves rice at every meal

& replaced forks with chopsticks because Confucius said something

& wears pink latex gloves to wash dishes or scrub seafood or touch me

& undercooks squid so the suction pull the inside web of my cheeks

& won't tell me why she won't look at me with her black, black eyes

& still believes in the birth control I found in her purse

& pretends we can't uncross the hot white wires of our words from the yellow.

What I Couldn't Tell My Son about His Mother

I don't remember what words I threw across the table
but I know he doesn't know that the night I met her,
I smiled, standing before the red-lit glass room,
when she pressed her breasts to the glass between us
so I could count the bumps circling her nipples. I smiled
when half my weekly captain's salary bought me an hour
between her round white thighs.

She came to the base three months later and stood barefoot
for three days in the monsoon, naked except for a raincoat
and a small silk umbrella melting in the rain.
She unscrewed my last whiskey bottle
and wooed me with her tongue,
she the pigeon full of disease and fear,
pink toes splayed with infection from pacing in the rain.
She, with her flat eyes pulled wide to look less exotic,
her breast at my knee, her tongue on my thigh.
She told me there was a man throbbing in her belly
asked me to honor the American virtue
of tying up loose ends and umbilical cords.

I learned to love her Korean lisp much as she loved
the obscene stress of American syllables I pressed to her ear.
The night I guided her through her vows,
my saber slicing through the silken ruffles of cake,
I worried her corset would damage the fetus,
but she insisted, and I alone knew our son
was bound in the faded yellow buttons of her dress.

She still remembers her yellowing youth in the wedding photo
hanging above the fake fireplace, in the lightness of our son's hair,
in the way we don't make love to each other anymore.
I still taste the sour whiskey burn of the empty apartment
that echoes with the footsteps of our son gone looking for her.

Alimentum

I have multiple stomachs that grumbled
as I wait for the beef to thaw.

I do not believe in the pale, goosebumped flesh of chickens.
My blood calls for Io, bovine mistress of the gods.

I have already eaten toast doused in rich maple blood,
spiced and sliced and offered to my swarm of taste buds.
My other stomachs still sizzle and moisten their lips
for the pink, half-frozen beef dripping over my gullet.

Goya must have had voracious appetites
gnawing the walls of his Black Paintings.
Saturn was unable to swallow Zeus

but I have swallowed my children whole, all except one.

Conversation in Three Voices

Posterity will ask them one day
why they fell in love
or whether it was really love at all
between the patron and the prostitute.

he smelled of sandalwood and
his shoulders filled the space of her vision
and runner's sinews beneath pale ghost skin
he pretended to be Casanova to the girl,
pressed against the glass, who was caged –
him tripping over his tongue to teach hers,
to piece together a childish obsession
despite the rain melting
the girlish straight-cut blue-wig bangs
and the old man with sagging heart
who somehow believed she was

she was painted like a china doll
with soft hands
stroking the khaki uniform from his limbs.
her nipples the color of winter leaves,
a red bird or a white tiger?
her tearing out photographs of eyes, jawlines,
and picking locks with hairpins, running.
animals threaded on umbrellas shielded
the bird who flew
who became the white tiger,
making love, not money.

Please Leave a Message After the Beep

Kenny, it's your friend Charley.

I'm not calling to say that your father called me an hour ago,

his colonel's inflection shuddering through my synapses.

He's concerned because you forgot your coat

and gave him a black eye for being drunk tonight of all nights.

I'm calling to say that even though I remember all your secret places –

the only convenience store that sells your favorite ice cream,

the yellow platform stripe on the 4-4 subway car,

veins of muscle branching from the groove of your spine –

I don't know where you are.

Meet me at the midnight market tonight.

Mother Deserted the American Boys in South Korea

The midnight market vendors sizzle seafood and spicy rice cakes
while metal chopsticks bang against plastic blue tables.
He squints against the blur of his brain, his tongue thick
with soju and secrets. He is looking for his mother,
doesn't know where else to look, doesn't remember
where he's already been. The click of chopsticks prying open
brittle clamshells reminds him of the clack of subways
packed so tightly people steady themselves against each other.
After one bottle of soju, his brain melts into snapshots of his mother.

She patters to the window every morning to watch the soldiers
leave their patches of front yard for the Army base three miles away.
She fingers the whitening threads of the paisley couch,
presses her nose to the kimchi fermented into the curtains
while he fries spam and dumplings for breakfast.
How much is enough, not enough, too much?
She scrapes her nail along the raw white paint of the windowsill,
displeased with her square of government-issued America.
She curls like a vine of smoke over the ginger jars lining the porch,
laughs at the hollow cupboards filled with broken webs.
His father keeps her in the bedroom when old friends stop by,
but he can hear her laugh to herself through the yellowing wallpaper
as mosquitoes raise poisonous welts on her skin.

He fears she has forgotten the number of subway stops homeward,
that she will count the bridges along the Han River,
each with a different pattern of light refracting in the darkness,
that she will lean too far to stroke their watery reflections,
that he will look through her face and not recognize her.
So he drinks. One more bottle. Two more shots.
Three more trains to catch. Each moment burns like water.

Soju and Clams

I got to the midnight market first. Kenny was late, so I began to fidget. I studied the side street already alive with color and light. Vendors had set up samples of blankets and paisley silks in cardboard boxes beneath paper lanterns in the middle of the street. Umbrellas hung from every doorway, designer Burberry and cute Japanese characters spread across their canvases. The smell of fresh, fried seafood mingled with roasted sweet red bean paste. An ancient little man, whose arms hung at his sides like a monkey, had positioned his produce truck at the mouth of the alleyway to entice college students and businessmen with his freshly picked yellow watermelons.

Fidgeting with the bow on my striped shirtdress, I straddled a blue plastic stool near my favorite grandmother's food cart. She was washing clams in a bucket.

"Charley." She crouched on her heels, scrubbing the clams vigorously, her arms encased in thick pink rubber gloves. "One bottle soju?"

"I'm waiting for someone today, Gran." I ran my nail along the seams of my leggings absently, feeling it catch; I still chewed my nails even though I hadn't touched a violin in a year.

Gran shook her hands out of the rubber gloves, and brought over two shotglasses and a green bottle of the weak potato wine. She clicked her tongue. "Kenny back? Why he not here yet?"

I shrugged and poured myself a shot. "He just flew over last week. He's been busy. Don't judge, Gran."

Gran clicked her tongue. "You should bring other boys here. No wait for Kenny. Here in old country –"

"Gran," I warned as I caught sight of Kenny and waved. He was a round white kid who stood nearly a foot taller than most Asians, even Korean-American kids like me who grew up on

Wheaties and milk in Maryland. More correctly, he was half-white. I didn't know much about his mother besides the fact that she used to drink soju next to my Gran's vending cart before she disappeared, only to show up as the mother of my best friend in my Maryland high school. And now, we were meeting in Korea for the first time.

"Kenny, Kenny, come sit," Gran fussed over the newcomer as he dropped onto a stool.

"Kenny, I'm really glad to see you," I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt.

Kenny's eyes wandered over the colorful textiles overflowing into the street. His eyes lit on the green liquor bottle. "Fuck it." He grabbed a shotglass and gulped it down.

"Well, fuck you, too." My eyes narrowed as I jammed my fists into the pockets of my shirtdress. "I'm glad I'm meeting you here on your first ever visit to Korea."

"Language!" Gran pinched both our ears and twisted. "Here in old country –"

"Aw, Gran," I gave her a meaningful look.

"Here in old country, young girls mind elder," she muttered before shuffling back to her seafood buckets.

My eyes shifted back to Kenny. Only then did I notice the smudges of tears under his left eye. "Yo..."

He deflected my hand. "It's nothing." He poured me a shot. "I mean, it's good to see you. What's it been, like, a couple months. I saw you on the last day of classes."

"Yeah, something like that. Yo, what the hell happened to you?"

"I said it's nothing," Kenny said testily. "Dad got pissed about my mom leaving – I'm looking for my mom. Have you seen her? I thought maybe she'd stop by here, you know, because of Gran."

I looked around. A group of businessmen clustered a little ways off, faces red from liquor. One had loosened his tie enough and was wearing it like a bandana. I didn't see anyone remotely close to Kenny's mother, who looks distinctive; her nose is almost too sharp to be Korean, and her eyes are cartoonishly huge. She is beautiful, but she's also very dark, like she could either cry or cut you if you don't duck your head in respect to her. Gran said she had dropped out of high school and come to Seoul to make her fortune but fell into some trouble. Gran had also told me the secret places she used to hide.

"I don't know where she would be," I lied. "Gran never talks about her." Kenny snapped his fingers and tilted his head down the street. He has a very handsome profile, with his mother's same sharp nose and slanted jaw. His hair is thick and brown like his father's, though. I wondered if it would feel smooth like mine if I ran my hands through it. I grabbed the cuff of his button-down. "Hey."

"Sorry, Charley, I have to go. I'm really worried about her." His eyes told me he was already mapping out a new subway route. I admired the way he adapted to new environments so easily.

"One bowl of clams," I offered desperately. I wanted him to stay, to tell me how life in America had been. "Remember how mad I was that my dad didn't renew his professorship at Johns Hopkins?"

Kenny reached across the table and flicked me on the forehead. "Punk," he muttered. "I gotta find my mom. We can catch up tomorrow night."

I wanted to tell him that I'd been waiting for years to bring him to the midnight market to eat clams and drink. I knew I wouldn't be able to tell him. He never listened very well. Or maybe I was just really good at being a guy friend and nothing more. "I'll come with you."

“Aw Charchar, you don’t have to.” He used my nickname. I’d missed that.

“Kenny, it’s midnight, and I know these streets a hell of a lot better than you ever will. I live here ever summer, remember?” I tucked some money under the empty soju bottle and stood. “Come on. The subway’s faster than the bus.” I tugged on his arm. I could tell through the fabric that he’d been working out. I let go, wondering if he’d noticed I was lingering too long. He didn’t.

He followed me to the subway station a block away. I’d never seen him look so preoccupied, so I tried to distract him by pointing out the Embassy’s Washington Monument replica, the red L·O·V·E block that every couple included in their engagement photographs, N-Seoul Tower stabbed into the mountain from which you could see all of Seoul at once. Once I took his hand and skipped along the green brick sidewalk, but he couldn’t keep up and pulled away with an awkward grin.

The subway was colder than the street. I slipped through the turnstile and turned to watch him fumble with his Traincard like I was fumbling for words. I looked at the clock on the wall: 12:03. The hour of last trains. I clasped my hands behind my back on the platform. Yellow bumps lined the edge, and people were already crowding toward the line. “Remember the clementine trucks?”

“That was ages ago,” Despite his mood, Kenny couldn’t stop a small smile from spreading. His dimple came out. He had straight white teeth. He looked up and down the platform. People were openly avoiding his brown-eyed stare. He was so tall. “You know,” he began rolling up the cuffs of his shirt. It was really warm in the station. “I really hate this place.” He looked down at the numbers painted on the platform to mark the doors of the trains. 4-4.

The lights from a train refracted through the tunnel. 12:12. Repeated numbers. I pinched the piece of paper in my pocket, the back of a business card on which I had scribbled all the places his mother could be.

“My mom’s been really weird since we got here. It’s like she’s a completely different person.” Kenny watched the train roll to a halt, and the doors open. People began dashing out. He didn’t move to crowd onto the train.

I didn’t either. “What do you mean, she’s different?”

“I don’t know. She’s really sad and quiet all the time. It’s weird.”

The next train beeped and growled. 12:21. Palindrome of words. I like you. You like me? I’d like you to like me.

“She needs me.” Kenny pursed his lips and twitched his nose against an itch or a thought. His eyes focused on my pink scarf. “She’s never needed me before,” he mumbled.

I gripped the corded muscle of his forearms and leaned forward – the subway wind rocked me onto my toes toward him. He looked at me. I need you too, I wanted to say, but what a terrible time to say it. “Your mom always needs you.”

“No, it’s different... You know how we’re still friends even though we don’t really talk anymore? It’s like that, like she needs me even though she hasn’t needed me in a long time.”

I swallowed the lump in his throat and put my arms around him awkwardly. He was warm. He patted my head uncomfortably as I pressed my ear to his lungs. His heart beat into my eardrums.

“And my dad – my dad’s a whole other story. He’s really mad because Mom keeps doing all these weird things and drifting off. Sometimes I don’t think she knows what she’s saying, and she lapses into Korean. And you know how he can’t understand any of it.”

With my face pressed against the buttons of his pinstripe shirt, I could feel the reverberations of the 12:36 train worrying his whole body. “Kenny—” my hand dropped from his forearms, and he stepped back. Stay with me, I wanted to say. Let’s be more than friends. You’re the only guy I’ve ever met at the midnight market. I’m sad we never call or write to each other when you’re in America. The same thoughts kept clicking against my teeth faster and faster. I dug my nails into the folds of my skin, wanting to rub my fingertips over the indentation so I wouldn’t say anything. “We’ll find her.”

He dropped a heavy hand on my head. He smiled at me. “Punk.” I would have punched anyone else who called me that. 12:42.

Another train was coming, clicking over all the words I would never be able to add up and fit together properly. I pulled Kenny toward the edge of the nearly-empty platform, slipping into his jean pocket the square of paper I hoped he wouldn’t but would let bleed through the laundry. “Don’t worry,” I said, wishing he would see someday that I wanted him as much as his mother wanted him. “Your mom is probably on the river,” I whispered as I pushed him into the subway car. The doors slid shut behind him, cutting off the echo of the station.

Mime in Kangnam Station

For a price, he says he'll tell her fortune
from the white-chalked creases of his palm
and the embroidery of his suspenders sewn
into mosaics by the three blind fates.
Three times a day he sways and jerks
in an imagined space so airtight words can't get out,
in a concrete subway station beneath the green line.
He paints one black band for each year
he has begged with illusionary-striped limbs.

This is not his fortune, but his story is tangled
inside a box with hers, banging against the air,
clawing at the wisps of hair that escape his knit cap,
stroking the tear-shaped scar beneath his eye.
In three minutes between trains, he tells his own story
or fragments of somebody else's,
swallowing stares with his ancient geisha face,
his fingers, worthy of a violin,
palming from behind her ear the coin
he swallowed three breaths before.

Old Woman Selling Umbrellas in Sadang Station

She sits cross-legged on a tarp spread over concrete,
rows of paper and embroidered silk bundled like babies at her feet.
Her fingers, wrinkled with saliva, deftly flick
open the cone of pleated paper with a snap.
My umbrellas will take you anywhere,
she warns, *except into the rain.*

Once, her jaw was worn at the hinges from complaining
that she sold no umbrellas in the sunlight.
But the calligraphic tiger crouching above her bed
in a field of ink-stroked green taught her in a dream
to lick rice paper and press it to caterpillars
of glue strung along whittled bamboo stalks.

Once, she fell in love with silk red birds
flashing across a canopy of turquoise.
Now, sunlit spider veins crack through the seams
of a rice paper ceiling, orange against the black shields
of shadow cast over the porcelain skin of other girls,
the ones clicking in heels to their husbands at home,
and the one dabbing tears in the glassed-in red-lit district.

Lying on the Riverbank that Reminds Me of My Unborn Fetus While Waiting for My Husband to Find Me

Darling, I lie on the grass that prickles my skin with memory. Once, I dangled above this earth on monkeybars, believing I would stay a girl forever.

I am sure a dog has pissed here.

I am sorry that again I could not make love to you last night. My hands are afraid of the geographies of your skin. This homeland away from homeland feels so vast and empty.

Here, the shadows of birds chase each other across my abdomen from all the wrong angles of light.

Our son turned eighteen last year, three months before the monsoon season began and the wet leaves browned.

You wanted a girl. A girl that we made but that I wasn't ready to give to you.

Last summer you were sure a tumor was eating at my womb. It was only a pill dissolving your daughter into blood-stained sheets. And while you worried cancer, I whispered miscarriage.

Last summer you told me how you had wanted another child. Last summer I didn't tell you how I couldn't look at our son's half-white skin. Are you angry now that you know?

So angry you send our son to search for me in the midnight markets and bridges while you stay?

I cannot bear the worrisome quirk of your mouth.

Our son has brown hair that is not black. You wanted a girl, but I wanted only us. The shame of my homeland rests upon me.

Darling, I am afraid of you. You knew about our son because I wanted him. So here I am, lying on the great river, waiting for the crocodiles.

I am sorry that I cannot share with you the birds, and the sunlight and darkness.

The vintage grass prickles my skin with waiting. I know you will not come. It is the face of my shame I will see first.

Letter that My Son Will Never Read

for Kenny

My bones are hollow with dread at choosing the wrong words.
My skin is fearful that you will find me on the river
and I will not know what else to say.

Remember, my son, that I love you
even though once I threatened to beat your dog,
serve his haunches in a stew,
lay his eyes on your pillow
because you wouldn't learn
to tuck your tongue behind your teeth
and roll your Korean r's.
At night you pressed your ear to the floorboards,
listening for the crunch of bones in the garage.

Kenny, you are all the sons of my womb,
and all the daughters too.
The body of a woman is old and dangerous,
the space between her thighs a war zone.
Do you know what a sperm looks like?
A tiny atomic bomb with the fuse still attached.
I cannot love another half-white child, but
I cannot help loving her too.

If I hanged myself from the bridges of red-lit steel,
would you stand on the patterns of light in the waves,
and beat me with a stick until I was tender?

Last summer I took your dog out to the garage
and struck it until dust rose from its coat.
I knew no other way to keep my tongue from curling
in on itself telling you a truth that would hurt
more than the lie. My son, I love you,
but I cannot live another taboo.
You are enough of a son for me.

The Last Maternal Moment Along the Han River

Don't look at me with those gangrene eyes,
he said, slipping his legs over the edge of the red-lit bridge.
The water here laps beautiful and full of infection, is what he meant.
Her toes pirouetted toward the river's scalloped surface.
If you dip your toes in, you will get leukemia, she said, meaning,
Are you afraid of the bridges of Seoul?
Good joke, he said. He meant to say
come back. Father's worried.
She asked if someone on the other side
might also be absorbing the Korean bridge lights
of red, blue, green geometric patterns breaking on the waves.
We have already managed without a girl,
he offered his coat against the wind's sea salt breath.
I cannot manage without her,
is what she meant by slowly refusing.

How to Run Away and Back

Start by walking away
from the bridge over which your mother swings her legs,
crying because she cannot shed her shame.
Don't look back. That's so cliché
and she is probably hoping for that.
Vow that you're done
with your father's silence about your mother,
with your mother's fear of being shut out.
Pull the scarf around your ears, ask yourself
why your mother needs to think by herself
on a bridge about a daughter she lied she couldn't have
and a sister she wouldn't give you
because you know from her sad eyes
that she didn't want it or you until now.
Start running now, lifting your hands to the night
and praying for rain. Damn the open, cloudless sky.
Suck in lungfuls of cold air and tell your ribs
to keep aching. Try not to think
that the sister you never knew felt this suffocation
when she wrapped the cord around her neck.
Feel the shock run up your legs as they pound
against the pavement. Forget where you're going.
Let your tongue slide thickly over your chapped lips,
try to catch the droplets of sweat caressing your temples and cheeks.
Run over and over in your head what you will say to your father
because he asked you to bring your mother home
but you understand why she won't come with you.
Keep running until your ribs feel brittle with each breath.
Swerve down an alley that looks dangerously dark.
Hope you burst forth into citylight on the other side.
Think about what you want to say to your father.
Think about what you will actually say.
Wonder whether your mother will come home tonight
or tomorrow, or whether she's right behind you.
Think about whether the baby that floated in her womb last summer
is the same cramp in your side slowing you down.

Shame to Line My Casket With

after Josh Bell

Come sit on the bridge's steel girders above the water's graveyard.
Hang your feet over the edge and wiggle them in the mud of nostalgia.
While you searched for me in clamshells sucked clean,
I've been lifting my shirt to stare past the curve of my breasts into my navel.
My abdomen is flat, scarred with the heaviness of having cradled you.

I used to feel you kick against the darkness.
I used to think that children are old people with new faces.
I used to think that death comes easier to those who have lived too much.

Your sister curled the umbilical cord in her fist, strangling herself in blood.
How easily she slid out of me, without apology.

I saw you walking down the boardwalk, lifted my hand and you did not see me wave.
If, with each step, you had counted the times you heard your father and me make love,
you would not have walked very far. He doesn't know
how your sister murdered herself last summer,
how I could not keep her inside the darkness of my womb.
I want to tell him, but my heart keeps getting in the way.

Come sit with me over the red-lit reflection of my shame.
Scrape your nails against the rust for the blood of your sister.
The evening shakes with the friction of cicadas.
Death must be like the hurricane of vertigo rippling below
our suspended bodies. We all must desire death.
When I saw you coming, your beautiful face was tilted toward me.
It's nobody's fault, you might say. It's got to be somebody's fault.
Maybe tomorrow. Come back for me tomorrow
when the cicadas have shed their skins.

2011
for Charley

My Father's Version of Parenting

after B.H. Fairchild

The November I turned nine, he could tell no lies,
even when he returned from hunting and, pointing
to the antlers hanging over the back end
of his truckbed, said, *Look, honey, I shot Bambi.*

I am old enough now that I don't cry anymore
when my father tells our dinner guests my mother
first worked as a factory witch cursing Cabbage
Patch Kids before they shipped to toy stores.
I've become used to the guests patting my hand and offering
a second round of gravy in their bobble-headed sympathy.

One guest nearly catches her hair on the candles while leaning
too closely to watch my father's black beard wiggle as he talks.
I look away politely and nibble grooves into my nails,
curling my toes until they crack one by one.
He is not interested, either, thrusting his tarnished silver knife
between the tines of his fork and venison.
My daughter is learning to hunt, he continues.

The man on my father's left reminds me of my principal,
though he's groping under the tablecloth
with the fire-hazard woman while he smiles at me and says
that Aerosmith and grudges are both the devil.
My peas form a crooked line along the edges of my plate,
ready to fling themselves at his priestly collar,
but my father kicks me discreetly. I rub my fingertips
along the edge of the table, curling them as I would

around the wooden curve of my father's hunting bow.
I am also learning to dance, I say, but that is slightly incorrect.
The woman suggests that my father put on a record before dessert
and also teach her to dance, but I interject
that he can only teach the man's part.

Later, I step outside for a smoke, and my father joins me,
tapping the ash through the glow of summer fireflies flying low.

He says, *You know, female fireflies eat their mates after copulation.*
My mother is feeding on their relationship, confined to her bed upstairs.
I didn't know that, I say to the hissing bug zapper.

H O W T O R E V I S E A S H I R T

Hold every shirt

against a naked

light bulb to test

its potential. Toss

it in the laundry when you want it to grip your curves. Use

the hot water setting to shrink the shirt and kill off any germs.

Add bleach if you are tired of the colors hanging from your limbs.

Don't open the lid until it beeps. Forget the fabric softener. You

will develop a false sense of comfort. Put on some old records.

Grab another shirt and dance round the dryer till it stops. Shake
out the wrinkles.

Repeat until you

like how it feels

against your skin.

IM

DungeonMaster_01: Hey charmander. U there?

Charchar150: sup dungeonmaster

DungeonMaster_01: Wut r u doing?

Charchar150: i just woke up to molly grabbing at the carpet screaming she's gonna fly off the earth

DungeonMaster_01: Ur sister? Hows her apt hunting?

Charchar150: i don't think she's been looking very hard. brb forgot to wash makeup off last night

DungeonMaster_01: U wear makeup now?

DungeonMaster_01: Hello?

Charchar150: yea sometimes

DungeonMaster_01: U didn't wear makeup before. Can I c? We could webchat for a few

Charchar150: people notice me when i wear it

DungeonMaster_01: U look fine without makeup

Charchar150: i feel like you're telling me that because you're nice and i'm shaped like a flamingo

Charchar150: what if we're both actually ugly but we think we're pretty? what if we had ugly babies we thought were cute?

DungeonMaster_01: A what? Charley

DungeonMaster_01: U look fine

DungeonMaster_01: Trust me

DungeonMaster_01: How r u doing with Molly's cat?

Charchar150: she keeps it in her room

DungeonMaster_01: Ur allergic

Charchar150: it's ok. the cat's cool

Charchar150: uhhhhhhh i think she just gave it acid

DungeonMaster_01: ...

Charchar150: or something

DungeonMaster_01: O I got ur package today

Charchar150: OMG THIS IS SO COOL!!! the cat's spazzing under the couch

Charchar150: awesome. did you open it?

DungeonMaster_01: Yeah

DungeonMaster_01: Hey

Charchar150: did you like it?

DungeonMaster_01: I have a question

Charchar150: dude this cat is wiggling out

Charchar150: ok

Charchar150: brb molly just vomited n the cat. it ran into a wall

DungeonMaster_01: Love u

Charchar150: dude

DungeonMaster_01: U still love me right?

DungeonMaster_01: Hello?

DungeonMaster_01: Hey Charley

DungeonMaster_01: Is Molly ok now?

DungeonMaster_01: Hello?

Charchar150: sup Kenny

DungeonMaster_01: Hi

Charchar150: she's been ok. it's been like a week. cat's not. keeps randomly freaking

DungeonMaster_01: Wut r u doing?

Charchar150: homework while molly showers. we're going out tonight

DungeonMaster_01: Wut kind of hw?

Charchar150: i was thinking it'd be really cool to have an acid cat. like a cat made out of acid that had to wear special booties so it wouldn't burn holes in the floor

DungeonMaster_01: Lol how does that work?

Charchar150: if you add HCl to Na something you get NaCl which creates an explosion

Charchar150: and leaves behind salt

DungeonMaster_01: And u would have an exploding cat

Charchar150: parts of it would explode

DungeonMaster_01: Ur on bio crack again

Charchar150: shut up. i have a test on mon

DungeonMaster_01: But ur still going out

Charchar150: it's fri night

DungeonMaster_01: U never go out. Ur a nerd remember?

DungeonMaster_01: We both r. We play computer games all day

Charchar150: i go out

DungeonMaster_01: Btw

DungeonMaster_01: Can we be facebook friends again?

Charchar150: no

DungeonMaster_01: Can we webchat?

Charchar150: no

DungeonMaster_01: Why not?

Charchar150: we broke up

DungeonMaster_01: But ur ok with not seeing me again?

Charchar150: i gave up the right to have an opinion about that when i broke up with you

DungeonMaster_01: But I miss u

Charchar150: you promised you were gonna try this whole friend thing. are you not trying?

DungeonMaster_01: I just want to c u

Charchar150: sorry

DungeonMaster_01: I think u should know that exes can't usually stay friends

Charchar150: why not?

DungeonMaster_01: too much history

Charchar150: too much history is knowing every time your boyfriend levels up in dnd

Charchar150: i just want to stay friends. is that too much to ask

DungeonMaster_01: It might be.

DungeonMaster_01: But I still like u and I'm here for u when u want to come back

Charchar150: you do realize we haven't seen each other in two years. our relationship was purely internet-based

DungeonMaster_01: Who says cyberlove isn't real?

Charchar150: i do

Charchar150: besides, it's stupid to get back with someone you already broke up with

DungeonMaster_01: We broke up 4 times in a year

Charchar150: so we're both stupid

DungeonMaster_01: But we make such a cute stupid pair

DungeonMaster_01: We were totally official

Charchar150: i told you i don't do official

DungeonMaster_01: U broke up with me over a freaking facebook status

Charchar150: i told you i didn't want to go public!

DungeonMaster_01: It's just FACEBOOK!

Charchar150: it's a GLOBAL networking site!

Charchar150: you stupid gamers

DungeonMaster_01: Ur a freaking POKEMON

Charchar150: it's my nickname asshole

DungeonMaster_01: There's another guy huh

DungeonMaster_01: RIGHT?

DungeonMaster_01: Cmon Charley. Just be upfront about it

DungeonMaster_01: My parents told me there was another guy

DungeonMaster_01: That u wouldn't break up with me unless there was another guy

Charchar150: seriously? you're bringing your parents into this?

Charchar150: i told you. the reason we broke up was the lighter

DungeonMaster_01: Wut

Charchar150: remember the cigarette lighter i gave you for your birthday?

DungeonMaster_01: yea

Charchar150: the way you reacted

DungeonMaster_01: Wtf. I reacted just fine

Charchar150: you were an ass

DungeonMaster_01: Ur face is an ass

DungeonMaster_01: I reacted just fine

Charchar150: check your chat logs then if you're so right

DungeonMaster_01: ...

DungeonMaster_01: I'm sorry I complained about the cursive engraving

DungeonMaster_01: I can't read cursive

DungeonMaster_01: It was a really nice lighter

Charchar150: what if your kid gives you a crappy tie for Christmas and you do the same thing?

DungeonMaster_01: U broke up with me over a lighter!!!

DungeonMaster_01: And who's talking about kids?

Charchar150: you should date other girls

DungeonMaster_01: Maybe I am

Charchar150: psh. real ones. yknow the kind you have to leave your computer to find

DungeonMaster_01: U know

Charchar150: what?

DungeonMaster_01: Nevermind

Charchar150: WHAT

DungeonMaster_01: Ur kinda a bitch

Charchar150: f u

DungeonMaster_01: Sorry

DungeonMaster_01: But I still love u ☺

Charchar150: HI THIS IS MOLLY I THINK CHARLEY STILL LIKES YOUUUUUUUUU

DungeonMaster_01: Wutda

DungeonMaster_01: Hahah hi Molly. Howd u get Charley off the computer?

Charchar150: I KNOW SHE'S ALWAYS ON RIGHT?? SHE'S IN THE BATHROOM. STICK WITH CHARLEY

Charchar150: OH BUT DATE OTHER WOMEN. NOW IS THE TIME FOR DRINKING AND FUCKING WOOOOOO!!!!!!

Charchar150: uhhhhhhhhhh. i'm back. sorry. that's awkward

DungeonMaster_01: welcome back

Charchar150: hold on i'm reading what she wrote

DungeonMaster_01: Just so u know

DungeonMaster_01: I still like u

Charchar150: that bitch

Charchar150: f u. we are NOT getting back together

DungeonMaster_01: Ur cold

DungeonMaster_01: Can we be facebook friends at least?

Charchar150: are you still going to try to get back with me?

DungeonMaster_01: Maybe

Charchar150: no. there's another guy

DungeonMaster_01: Hey

DungeonMaster_01: Do u really still like me?

Charchar150: g2g. acid cat attack

Disease & Divorce

I do's beat
staccato remorse codes
into *f's* and *u's*.

Journal of Powder

Charley Kim did not believe in heaven, which meant that she also did not believe in hell. Her mother was an invalid, and, according to Charley, did not figure into the story. It's her father who was important. And angels. Something about angels.

Charley had a dog named Siegfried. He was a beautiful calico mutt with a slender wolf-like snout and perfectly droopy collie ears. When Charley turned seven in February, her father brought him home for her birthday. The puppy was curled against her father's breast between his coat and his sweater. When Charley's father presented the ball of fur to her, she got yelled at for waking him up by pulling on his tail.

According to Charley, her mother did not affect her at all. She was, after all, an invalid. But the quiet little body slowly disappearing upstairs must have contributed somehow to the sense that she was stuck. Guilty and stuck.

They named the dog Siegfried because Charley was obsessed with Swan Lake. He didn't have a nickname. He followed her everywhere, and when he got fixed, she carried him around so he wouldn't feel ashamed. When her father took her on the carousel in the local park, they begged and bribed the operator to let Siegfried ride in the sleigh with her father. Because he was small, Mr. Kim could hold him very tightly so he wouldn't escape.

Charley began to resent her mother's illness about the end of her second semester at community college. She was starting to think about life after college, and it looked indescribably bleak. Her

father requested information packets from a few schools, but when she saw her father hunched over the colorful brochures spread out on the kitchen table, she went to her room and shut the door. She spent the night doodling birds and bats and researching her mother's disease, imagining her father still flipped through futures, unaware his daughter had come home. Around midnight he slipped each packet through the crack under her door and went to bed. She heard him through the thin walls, moving around upstairs, checking his wife's catheter bag, snapping shut the lids of prescription bottles, tucking her in, kissing her goodnight, his voice an indistinguishable murmur as he flicked off the light.

Charley wasn't a serious gamer, but she was consistent. Every night at ten o' clock, after walking Siegfried around the suburbs, she would sign on as Charchar150, and play. She spent hours playing poker, checkers, WoW, Halo with DungeonMaster_01, who she had decided she was dating online. Siegfried sprawled under her desk, her bare toes curled into his neck fur, her eyes glued to the screen of her PC, whom she called Mack. Her father said nothing about the monthly game membership fees she charged to his credit card. She wondered when he would.

Charley's mother had very few lucid conversations. At first, Charley thought they were interesting enough to write in her journal. But as the months wore on, she realized her mother was withdrawing into this scattered persona. "Do you know what's in these pills, Charmander?" Her mother asked affectionately, using the nickname that exasperated her father for the fact that he had never played Pokemon and his wife had. Charley shook her head as she counted out the fish oil pills. "Strength." Her mother smiled, her skin paper thin but elastic. "The ground-up bones of angels, these pills." Charley's head barely lifted, half-tuning out her mother's soft,

thick-tongued voice. “Remember how you didn’t think angels were people?” Charley nodded absently, rattling the prescription bottles to see if she could estimate how many days were left before the next prescription. “You thought angels were things. Maybe they are. But what does that make me when I die?” Charley rubbed lotion on the backs of her mother’s hands, squeezing them affectionately.

Charley didn’t like the way her father watched Siegfried lope through the park. He had this look in his eye, like he was going to have to put him down. She wondered if she should get a tattoo, take his mind off of the dog.

Charley got in a fight with DungeonMaster_01 over a birthday present she had sent him. She had charged an engraved cigarette lighter to her father’s “emergency” credit card, and grew annoyed when her boyfriend didn’t seem to think much of it. He had stopped smoking a few months before. He seemed much less interesting that way, like he was headed for a nine-to-five job now instead of a biker-gang-bamf career. She wondered if their many arguments had something to do with his mommy issues.

One of the afternoons Charley had to tutor late, her father took Siegfried to the vet. She cried and yelled and beat at his chest with her fists, and he yelled back and grabbed her wrists and ordered her to her room, even though she was already nineteen. That was the night she bought her first pack of cigarettes. That was also the first night she slipped a couple of her mother’s pills into her pocket as she counted them out.

Charley stood outside the tattoo parlor, trying to catch an inconspicuous glance through the tinted glass. She saw a white guy with dreads and a sleeve of tattoos, and discovered herself to be close-minded and apparently racist. He was skinny, and she supposed she'd never seen a heavysset white guy in dreads, although she was sure there were some out there. She was afraid to go in, afraid of the fat woman at the counter and the needles she was sure would hurt.

Do it, she told herself.

But what if it hurts, she balked.

Then you'll remember it forever.

What if my dad disowns me, kicks me out of the house?

Like hell he will. He let you smoke in the kitchen.

That's not permanent.

He put down Siegfried. Without telling you. Without letting you say goodbye.

That's pretty permanent, I guess.

You know it. You're nineteen.

Yeah. I'm old enough to be able to handle that sort of thing.

So she convinced herself to go inside.

Charley's online boyfriend couldn't see why she didn't want to get back together. Her parents were concerned that she spent too much time on the computer with friends who might not be who they said they were. She was concerned that she spent too much time aware of the bedroom upstairs where her childhood was atrophying. She told DungeonMaster_01 to fuck off and deleted him from her friend list. Then Mack started grinding his gears, and the screen froze. "Fuck you too, Mack." She smacked the side of his big boxy head and went to bed angry.

Her mother noticed the tattoo before anyone else did. As Charley was counting out pills, Mrs. Kim grabbed her right wrist and yanked her sleeve up, her eyes struggling to focus and decipher the blue script embedded in her forearm. “Siegfried,” her mother sighed dreamily. “Is that the name of your new man?” Charley shivered as her mother smoothed a finger down the raised red skin. It’s an angel, she told her. A thing. A dead thing. “Then it must give you strength,” Mrs. Kim smiled approvingly, loosening her grip to take the little cup of pills. “Angels are good like that.”

Charley missed how Siegfried would lay his head on her pillow and stare down his long nose at her until she woke up. She missed his warm body keeping her feet warm under her computer desk. She missed looking back from her place on the park merry-go-round and seeing his head in her father’s lap, his eyes wide open despite Mr. Kim’s fingers behind his ears.

When Charley broke up with DungeonMaster_01, she was only happy for 37 hours. In the 38th hour, her father noticed the tattoo. He wasn’t sure what to say, so he grounded her, took away her emergency credit card, and password-protected her computer. She discovered she couldn’t play any online games at school, and hadn’t made enough friends to visit other houses. She started chain smoking to piss off Mr. Kim, and refused to count pills for her mother, who didn’t notice and didn’t care and therefore doesn’t matter to the story.

She considered getting back together with DungeonMaster_01. At least then she wouldn't be so lonely. She thought about that skinny guy who had worked on her tattoo. She thought about her PC.

Mack cheated on me, she told her father nonchalantly over a sullen and mushy TV dinner. He lifted his eyebrows over his fork, but didn't say anything. *Yep*, she continued. *Cheated on me with my best friend. Can you believe it? I just found out today.* Is Mack your online boyfriend, Mr. Kim finally grveled. *No, dad, that was ages ago.* Charley flipped her palm upward and rolled her eyes. The blue script of her dead dog's name flexed as the skin tightened over her wrist and forearm. But Mr. Kim didn't say anything, didn't meet her eyes, didn't do anything except eat his food and toss away the container and plastic ware and climb the stairs. Only as he lifted one leg at a time did Charley see all sixty-five of his years in the rounded tension of his shoulders, the loosening skin between his jaw and neck, and the heaviness of his footsteps. She tugged down the sleeves of her sweater and shushed the voice in her head that whispered, *It's ok, Charley. He had it coming.*

Slippage

When the Rat Pack records began to spin,
Mother swung my brother to the scratch of the Rat Pack,
rosemary and cinnamon still pressed into her fingertips.
My father pulled me up on his steel-toed boots
to the whippoorwill cool of Sinatra's baby blues,
and we danced till the night and I grew old, so old
that black became the only forgiving color in our wardrobe.
Now I hear downstairs my husband's fork against my mother's china;
maybe he is dancing with my daughter the way I taught him.
As I pick at the whitening threads of our honeymoon duvet,
as my daughter hands me little paper cups of colored pills,
I still wonder if records age like the rest of us
or if they keep spinning out life lines for the rest of us:

Every night my daughter rests her ear against my chest,
gingerly, as if old age were contagious
as it is to the flowers wilted on the nightstand.
Sometimes I stare at the ceiling through closed lids,
avoiding the dust and ghosts in the corners of my room
one swallowed pill at a time:
green for the names I try to sew back onto faces.
yellow for the unfamiliar voices charting my veins
with needles and prescriptions. red for today,
red-lettered and red-lit because right now I feel—

Cinnamon for My Mother and Her Mother

my future is yours

I stood on the hand-carved stool
at my grandmother's elbow
digging my palms into the flour.
Fingers sticky with butter and sugary cinnamon,
I spread it on thick as I liked
and rolled up the dough to make
the best cinnamon bread time could buy.

My grandfather bent over the kitchen table,
scrawling numbers into ledgers,
gulping scalding water with little pills
from orange plastic bottles.
Specks of warm cinnamon settled in his nose.

I sat at the kitchen table
whose wings unfolded and locked in place
to accommodate cousins, aunts, grandparents,
a board game, plates of toast and apple pie,
and those little bottles of pills.
When my grandfather started to lose,
my grandmother served a second round of pie.

The day my grandfather died of pneumonia,
my cousin from Denver ate an entire half
of the pie our grandmother made for the wake.
When those little bottles of pills disappeared
from the kitchen table, so did the cinnamon.
I cried for the last flakes of cinnamon.
When one year later my grandmother
died in her sleep, I stood at her elbow above her
and the earth I sprinkled on her casket
was as redolent as cinnamon.

Ode to the Bat Living in My (Mother's) Attic

Little winged rodent, vicious snubby face
hanging from rafters fuzzy with dust
tell me the secrets
to your sandpaper wings and cricket-hoarse cries.
what secrets the fireplace whispers downstairs,
stone mouth full of crackling words.
whether you hear fear start in the back my throat,
hear it in your khaki claws of skin and dung.
what my mother didn't say the night she caught you
in the ballooned *whoosh* of her nightgown
the night she crawled through the attic
looking for her mother's tongue in your ears.
tell me what my mother says to the pills she swallows.
tell me what my father doesn't say to the naked countertops.
tell me what you hear ricochet off water and whiskey and blood.
Attic bat, here is my arm.
See the blueness of the veins. Take me
to the inside lining of craziness.

Household of Common Things

Fish

At the end of her second month working the till at McDonald's, Charley discovered a rash on her right ankle. It festered under her skin, a hard, itchy callous. She greeted people and took orders, absently shifting her weight throughout the night to scratch her ankle with the toe of her left sneaker. Her hair smelled like Filet-o-Fish. It reminded her of the pills of fish oil she watched her mother swallow every night. And the fish, broiled with lemon and garlic or rosemary. She wondered how her mother could stomach all that fish. White fish, orange ruff, salmon, tuna, and haddock. Lots of haddock. And Charley was allergic to seafood. The constant rash on her ankle exhausted her.

Nonsmoking

The silver skin of the car does not absorb cigarette smoke the way the skin of Charley's fingers do, sweet cravings of brown, burning paper. The leather of the car seat absorbs the addiction, too, as she sits in the garage, the door open to the neat rows of houses standing silent behind her, the keys still in her lap. She could visit her father at work, but she has to worry about the catheter bag hanging from the bed frame upstairs, adjust the sheet corners and turn off the bedroom light.

She could visit her boyfriend a couple hours away, but she has never met him, He is an online version of her mother. She sticks the keys in the ignition, but lets her hand fall as she blows smoke at the rearview mirror, fogging it up in the cold garage.

Rainbow Brite

Charley's best friend is Mack, a PC she met at a garage sale in an Upstate New York cow town. She's convinced he's gay. Every night she comes to him in sweats and the hoodie of a school she never set foot in. Her fingers zip easily over each letter in his words.

Sometimes he can't keep up with her. Sometimes he crashes before she's finished. Today she's feeling the rhythm of his old mechanics and reaching the climax. All her friends are pixelated. Her mother is pixelated. She even has a pixelated boyfriend. She can't stand it. But she can't stand the bedroom upstairs either.

Text Book

Hey Charley, it's me. *Hey DungeonMaster*. Where are you? *School*. What are you doing? *Bio*.

Do you like it? *It's stupid. I have a test in 20*. Will you be online later? *Duh*. Just checking. It's my birthday in a couple weeks. *I know*. I'm throwing a LAN party. Can you come? *Don't think so. Sorry*. Oh. Maybe sometime next week? It doesn't have to be for the party. *I don't drive*. I don't have a license either. Bus? *Claustrophobic*. Right. Well we'll work something out soon, k? *Sure. Sorry*.

How's your mom? *She's good*. Any changes? *No*. I'm sorry. *I'm not expecting any changes*. I see. Have you thought about transferring here? You could live with me. *Don't you live with your mom?* Yeahhhhh never mind. *Community college would be the same anywhere. Money and all*. I know. *Then don't ask*. Sorry. Geez. *Test now. Bye*. I'll catch you online tonight. *I'm sleeping early*. No you're not. You never do. Spend some time with your boyfriend. *I'm tired. So tired*.

Plastic Animals

Charley's favorite memory with her father is full of colors and the smell of wet, mulchy spring.

She was fifteen. He drove her to the park with their big calico dog, Siegfried, a Frisbee and tennis balls sliding around in the trunk. He asked her about college; he asked her about her future; she didn't answer either. He walked a good ten paces behind as the dog crisscrossed lazily, whitened muzzle grasping for the Frisbee. She wore out her throwing arm, and he took over.

She caught sight of the carousel in the middle of the park, large and beautiful, gold-gilded and blue. She insisted it was worth a dollar, and he agreed. He sat in the sleigh holding the happy old dog by the collar, and she clutched a fierce gray horse with her thighs. As the carousel spun, the lights blurred into a thousand daylit fireflies coding their way through her vision.

Today her vision is blurring with a thousand colored pills and a father whose fingers don't remember that they once rubbed behind a dog's ears.

Placebo

Charley threw her pencil case against the wall, hoping all the lead would break, hoping the pens would explode into inkblots that could Rorschach some sense into her mind. Her pillow embraced her fist, swallowing her hiccups into the feathers. The stressball from community college orientation remained disconcertingly round, no matter how hard she dug her nails into it. She felt guilty taking scissors to it, but the roundness of it bothered her. She killed off her dark elf and an entire carton of orange juice, even though she knew she could easily get more of both. Things just kept coming back. Like her mother's senility, lucidity.

Control Variable

She signed onto Mack. DungeonMaster_01 was online. She needed a new computer. *I don't like you anymore*, she typed and didn't even read his reply. She turned off her computer and went downstairs. You okay, her father asked over TV dinners. *No*, she said. He pointed to a stack of college brochures on the kitchen counter. You're finishing community college this semester, he said. *I know*. He wondered what she wanted to do after that. *I don't know*, she said, pulling a cigarette from a pack in the back pocket of her jeans. He lowered his eyebrows, and didn't ask her when she had started smoking in the house. *I want to get away*, she said, twirling her finger through the colorful brochures. You know we can take care of ourselves, he squeezed her arm. *I'm not sure about that*, she inhaled and exhaled a confusion of smoke.

Blue Skies

She went in to check in on her mother, who was fast asleep. Her father was sitting on the edge of the bed. *You know I feel guilty*, she said, leaning against the doorjamb. He stood up, and glanced down at the catheter bag. Let's get a cup of tea, he said.

I can't just go off and leave you here with Mom, she said. He smiled, Yes you can. *I feel guilty living easy while Mom is upstairs—*

You're not your mother, he said, and you won't turn out like her. *You mean crazy like her*. Yeah. You're not stuck like your mother. You're not far away like your boyfriend. You're you. And I'm so proud of you. It's okay to let go of us for a while. She started crying. It's just for a while, he said. And she smiled through her tears.

Witching Cigarette

Oscar Wilde Warning:

A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure.

It is exquisite, and leaves one unsatisfied.

I'm sore from naming
all your sirens who swallowed my father whole
the brittle hags spitting his bones into ash

but still you burn into the back of my mind
clawing your charred fingernails through my lungs

you whisper me
into your bed of smoke and mirrors
carve the gold from my pockets
into your paper-thin body

with a wispy exhale into my throat
you invite your own sacrifice
even as you suck the marrow from my bones

you wreathe every bathroom wall
with unfiltered gunsmoke
slipping the bullets past my yellowed teeth

when I crush your burnt magic between my fingers
we smell like a match struck in hell