

Breathe:
A Collection of Poems

Christina Lamano
Senior Honors Thesis

Advisor: Terrance Hayes

Lullaby of Regret
for my mother

You asked me once
where the light goes when the darkness
settles across it like a groaning emptiness.
I laughed and called you ridiculous,
or maybe it was confused,
I don't remember now,
it's been so long since I've seen
your pale skin
offered up at wrist and neck,
sacrifices to water and stone
and wind through your hair.

I do not know what I would say now.
Maybe, the light goes into a house made of clay,
full of children who eat new-baked bread
and lick honey from sunburnt fingers
the way I imagine we would do
if we were young and lived in Italy.

Or, it goes into the breath of the homeless man
who lives outside the store
where I bought you Camels,
his hands red and raw from rubbing,
the air around him fragrant with coffee grinds,
dying leaves.

Or, perhaps, I would say nothing,
simply touch your hand, your face,
heat from my body bleeding
across your skin. . .

Willow tree, lullaby, dark window
where the moon shines while you sleep.

Your face is silence.

Without Music

after Marie Howe

A girl singing in a hallway
outside a classroom at dusk.
A language I can't understand,
vibrato, sustain, release.
Her vowels are endless,
wrapped in rolled r's
chasing themselves out of her mouth.

My fingers brush against each other. I listen
to the sorrow tied around her voice
like ribbons on a gift,
shining in muted light.

My life moves without music:
the clack of heels against pavement,
scratch of pen on paper.
His voice when it says,
I can't love you anymore.
The scrape of words
pushed slowly out of a mouth,
the silence before a voice,

the silence after.

Mermaid Princess

Lacey has blue eyes,
like my mother,
like my grandmother.

My eyes are hazel,
the muddy green of my father's.
I hated her constantly.

We were in my grandmother's pool once.
I was eight, Lacey was six,
pudgy in her shiny suit.

We were mermaids, swimming
with our legs together.
We were mermaid princesses

and we held our noses as we dove
into still water, kicked our fins
out behind us.

Lacey dove too quickly, breathed
in water like a fish.
She came up coughing, spitting

water, rubbing the chlorine in her eyes.
You spit in the pool, I scream-whispered,
I'll tell grandma.

Lacey opened her eyes, wide, cloudy-red
from the chemicals. *I didn't mean*
it, she whined. It was an accident.

I don't care, I'm telling.
And then, *Don't, Chrissy. I didn't*
mean it. Don't. Please.

It went on like that for awhile.
My mouth tasted like bitterness
and rust as Lacey cried,

the pleasure of blue eyes clouding over,
tears sparkling like crystal,
washing over me in waves,

her round hand reaching
for me, pleading.
I took her hand, said, *Don't worry.*

I won't tell. Her tears stung
my fingers as I wiped her face,
held her like doll.

At that moment, I was her sister
and not my father's daughter.
At that moment, I forgot

my grandmother's voice,
deep as a man's, telling me
I was just like him.

The Last Night

My sister and I fought
for the chair beside the hospital bed,

pressed the button that moved it
up and down. My aunt watched us,

purple marks under her eyes, inside her elbows,
more tubes than flesh. My mother

brought ham sandwiches, Chinese food,
chocolate ice cream. My aunt held the plastic fork

in skeleton fingers weighed down with gold rings.
She was skinny, even before chemo

ate away her breasts and eyebrows. She told us
she didn't have to shave her legs anymore.

My mother was jealous. I think she knew
my aunt had decided to die. They gave her morphine

instead of chemo and she spoke to me
of strange things, video tapes and caterpillars

and my father. I cried and I was ashamed
that I was afraid of her. We left her that night,

not knowing it was the end. My mother
went back later, held her hand, talked slowly

so my aunt could hear all of her words.
I went to a slumber party, thought of my aunt,

rolling restless, wrapped in blankets, her fingers
tugging at them, frantic to be free.

She must have finally stilled, drifted off. My mother
must have spent long hours at the hospital,

filling out papers, calling people who'd want to know.
She must have finally tiptoed out,

found her car, driven home slowly, mouthing
the words, practicing the sounds she'd use

when she found my sister and me,

At night, when I can't sleep,

sometimes I imagine her, a dark shadow
in a car, flashes of streetlights pulsing behind her,

mouth moving in silence, driving
through darkness and, always,

always saying the words to herself, *Your aunt is dead,*
my sister is dead.

I am the only one left.

Cadence for my father

You're just like your father
--my grandmother

Early in the afternoon

I am waiting for my father.

1.

He is late and I am not surprised.
I clomp through the Orlando airport,
looking for the bathroom.

This place surrounds me,
humid air, palm trees,
clinical smell, vastness
I had almost forgotten.

Early in the afternoon

I am waiting for my father.

2.

I like the idea
that he won't recognize me,
that I will see him first,
watch his walk, his eyes, his regret.
If I do not like them, I will leave,
climb back on a plane, let my ears pop
all the way home.

The thought scrapes my brain –
bitter, blue as tequila shots
I wish I'd taken.

Early in the afternoon

I am waiting for my father.

3.

He walks toward me,
smaller, softer,
as if my long silence had melted
his hard lines,
left his aura bare and smoking.

I let him embrace me,
say my name, squeeze my hand,
the air pressing down
with seven years between us.

4.

He carries my luggage
the way I imagine fathers do.
My shoulders are almost equal with his;
I am surprised
I was ever afraid of him.

He wears expensive shoes –
all leather and shine –
and I am afraid
he doesn't know how old I am.

5.
We walk to his car like old friends
and I hope he will not notice
my broken sandal, glue scraping my toes.

Next to me, paper skin and starched shirt,
hands shaking with relief.
He squints into sunlight,
wetness in hazel eyes,
more delicate than I had imagined,
no monster in this sad man.

I would like to comfort him,
touch my hand to his face
the way I imagine daughters do.

I do not know if this would please him
or if he would blush, pull away –

Late in the afternoon
I am waiting for my father.

6.
My father coughs beside me.
The sun is bright here. I turn away,
slide sunglasses over my own hazel eyes.
I press my palms together,
stare through the window.
I notice the palm trees, the dead leaves
surrounding the green.

Lunch with my grandmother

I know you by your hands,
even here, with cracked walls,
the stink of urine, disinfectant, decay.
Your blackened fingers ache with the smell
of nicotine. You smoked
your first at twelve.

Back then you were Gump and punched
anyone who called you Mary.
I try to imagine you like that,
hair cut short as a boy's,
always chasing your brothers,
wait for me, wait for me,
always running just behind.

I think you told me once
that you played baseball. I picture
you, black asphalt, blonde hair,
wooden bat that left splinters
in your palms. I think you must have held
it so tightly, afraid that you couldn't keep it.

And once you and a friend (the only girl
I remember from your stories) taped tissues
to your heads so that you could go to church.
I hope you snuck out back afterwards,
smoked cigarettes quickly,
ran off to meet the boys
and left that silly girl
kneeling in a pew,
praying for redemption.

I hope you ran quickly
so that you wouldn't miss the first pitch.
I hope the wind dragged
itself across your face,
your fingers flung wide
to catch every breeze.

I clutch your fingers today,
those same fingers, shaking
always now. Such small bones,
I think as your brain paces,
searching for a name to match my face.
I bend down to tie your shoe for you.
The laces are dirty. I cannot imagine
you running now, barely walking. You laugh

as I straighten up, like wind through dry leaves
and slow.

I've got it, you whisper, rough hands
grazing my cheeks, pulling me near you.
You speak my name. I see the wind
blow back your hair
as you run, hands stretched wide,
into sunlight.

Red Dreams

One night, I opened my window
to smoke a cigarette

and when I finished,
I saw a ladybug on the ceiling

and one halfway up the wall,
their hard, red bodies glinting

in the brightness. I found four
that night, and then one, dead

on the windowsill. I learned
somewhere, ladybugs mean good luck

and I want to believe it. Good luck
is flying into my apartment, leaving red spots

across my ceiling and walls. The next night
I found three more, then two,

so much redness, so much luck. I tried
to catch them with paper towels,

cup them in my hand and toss
them back outside, afraid

to open a window after dark,
afraid of cupping my luck in a paper towel,

throwing it back to the night. Mostly, though,
I was afraid of more ladybugs

flying from darkness into the bright
light of my apartment, filling it

until it bent outward and its seams split
and it crashed under a red heaviness. I was afraid

to be trapped underneath, too lucky to want
to climb out, too heavy to even try. Last night,

my dreams were only in red. Red bodies
moved through crimson streets. The air

smelled of cardamom. People touched
my shoulders, pressed my skin, left

trails of heat down my arms. I woke
to red emptiness, the darkness

across my bed like a red sheet. I closed
my eyes, waited for dawn.

Last Rites

My grandmother is dying.
She is surprised
when we mention a priest, last rites.
Her breathing shallows, eyes
grow wider than blue lakes.

I look away from her body –
hollowed out from hunger. The bones
jut out, angles where I remember
soft curves holding me.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

Tonight she pulls herself farther away.
Her eyes glaze over, her hands
loosen in ours. Five dark shadows –
four surrounding the pale bed,
one in it.

My mother, my sister, my cousin,
my grandmother,
years since we were all together.

*Blessed art thou among women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

Calm faces, death's coppery taste
in my mouth. These women
are my blood, my bones,
my history.

Five sets of hands tangled
together, clutching each other,
paler than bedsheets.
Our hands are all the same –
long fingers, brittle nails,
palms cold as darkness.

*Holy Mary, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.*

We whisper wishes in turn,
some to my grandmother, some
to God, some to darkness,
Her breathing slows,
stops.

My mother closes my grandmother's eyes,
the most gentle touch
I remember between them.
My cousin's tears trace black rivers
down her cheeks; my sister
will not let herself be touched.

We leave together,
heels clacking against linoleum,
pause before the doorway,
breathe out my grandmother's spirit.

Amen.

Lament in Five Parts

I.

The psychic tells my mother that I will always
be far from her, from my home.
Her voice is a shadow when she tells me
and somehow this is a betrayal.

I think of the times I go home,
long Greyhound hours, darkness outside
windows, sleeping noises from the woman
beside me and a waiting I cannot stand.

Then, bright tiles of the bus station,
the softness of my mother's hair, her voice
against my ear, *Missed you, missed you,*
her hand cool in mine. *Missed.*

II.

The last time I called my father,
he told me my sister needs surgery, something
about her spine and a cyst growing there;
the doctor wants to cut it out, leave metal rods.

I want to pray for my sister.
She called me when she got her period,
asked me what it's like to kiss a boy.
I thought of men kissing me.

I let them bite my lips hard enough to draw blood,
until their teeth slice through.
The release of power, surrender. Beneath it,
fear behind my teeth, salty sting.

III.

The air in my apartment is cold, dry
against my face, my arms. The sun sets
behind my window, pink death throes
and another day over.

I watched a sunset in a church once;
I was on one side of the stained glass
and the sun was on the other. The colors
bled across my skin, red and blue.

Before me, saints were sacrificed to gods
I had no name for, women wept at tombs,
and still the colors poured themselves
over my skin. No tears came.

IV.

A man gave up on me months ago –
my lips were too red, my bones stuck out
too far. I remember dark hair against skin,
easy movements, blue eyes paler than sky.

Another man is always leaving me know –
business trips, rugby games – they are all
planes roaring through twilight air
and an empty apartment with too much wine.

He doesn't shave when he is away.
The blonde stubble on his face is rough
when he comes home, kisses me.
My hair catches on it when I sleep.

V.

This city cannot contain me – I press myself
against its edges, claw at its seams. It is too small,
yet the vastness of my apartment is confusing.
I lose earrings, keys, money in its corners.

I cannot keep it clean. I find cobwebs everywhere
no matter how much I dust. The tree outside
my window has started dropping dead leaves
.They turn muddy brown with rain and winter.

The heat doesn't work right. I am always cold.
Three blankets on my bed mean nothing.
At night I dream of men touching me
and I can't scream or run away.

Seeds Falling

Today I'm thinking of trees
sprouting from seeds –
willows, oaks, the others
I have no names for.
I'm thinking of my mother.
Car rides up the East Coast,
bottles of wine and dancing,
the light against her hair
as she sits at the kitchen table,
crying when she thinks she's alone.
The lemon of her perfume. The way
her hand is smaller than mine.
Earrings she borrowed
and never returned. Books she bought
me when I had chicken pox. Cool hands
placed on new skin,
the quiet breaths she takes.

So small, these images,
these moments.
Seeds falling
into moist earth,
settling deep in soil.

Color Scheme

My grandmother played
the lottery every week.
She'd wrap bony fingers around pink
and white tickets, hoping
we'd be the big winner.
Lacey and I watched white balls
on the television, waiting
for them to predict the future
we wanted.

Lacey thought the lady
catching the balls was beautiful –
dark hair like night sky,
long nails, a strange accent
and her name – Yolanda Vega –
and the way she stretched it
as she said it, until it contained her life
and mine too, held gently
between blood red lips.

Now, my grandmother is dead,
buried, and gone, although
sometimes I see her in my dreams.
She never speaks, only watches me
with pale eyes. Once
she touched me and her skin
felt the way I remember it.

Now, Lacey plays different games.
She misses too much school,
sits alone on a green couch,
wonders why no one will love her.
She paints angry pictures,
red slashes against canvas, bright purple
lines cutting through darkness.

I want to ask her if she remembers
playing the lottery, holding breaths
as each number was called. I think
she would laugh – brief, high –
walk away. I wonder if she still sees
the tickets in her dreams, pale pink,
bright white. I wonder
when she will paint those colors.

Fortune Teller

I do not know this woman –
small and dark, like a falling leaf.
She came to read cards for my mother,

pale and hungry-lean like me.
She takes my hand,
says, You come from gypsies,

her voice sliding into every corner
of the living room, titling pictures on the walls,
lingering trails of silver breath on white sofas.

I can imagine myself, some wild, dark thing,
following constellations across the earth's tilt,
dancing to night-grown music,

the pounding beat pulsing
through veins, pouring from sky,
ancient symbols burned across my forehead.

My mother smiles at me,
anxious for my absence, waiting
for this scarf-clad woman to find her future.

She speaks spells, premonitions. I imagine
the names I will give my children –
great hope, bitterness, bright fire.

We will never speak of this visit,
this black-eyes woman's rusty voice.
It is our secret.

Green hills and stone-edged mountains,
sea-salt scraping skin,
the ancient language I dream in.

My mother's eyes meet mine.
She does not blink. The front door slams,
leaves silence,
and light.

Waking up the morning before I leave

Last night I dreamed you left me
alone in a rocky desert,
sand scattered like broken glass around me.

I dreamed of a tall horse
covered in gold and diamond chains.
It spoke words in foreign whispers,
like your hands moving,
soft flutters and velvet lines.

(I already miss your eyes,
sun on snow. It must be beautiful
in your home – white ice
like sparkles over everything.)

I am afraid I will forget your voice,
deeper than mine, silver streaks
running through like wires.)

I dreamed you stood before me
and the sun behind you was too bright
and I turned away.
I felt you like a stone behind me.

(You brought me gifts –
plastic cups and long-sleeved shirts,
Greek food that tasted strange
and familiar.)

I turned back to where you had stood
and there was stillness there.
Where your face had been,
bright sunlight, wind.

I woke to sun shining
on my face, warmth against my cheeks,
flashes against glass.
I turned my eyes to the brightness.
I did not blink.

Breathe

My mother calls me, tells me
her doctor is giving her medication,
not Prozac, but something that sounds
like Prozac. She needs to borrow

money again. My sister's car
died in a parking lot somewhere, she can't afford
to fix it; she's thinking of quitting
her job, starting over. This is how it feels

to have a child, I tell myself.
Midnight phone calls, tears
streaked through her voice, please
help me, please, the phone cord twisting

around and around my wrist,
red lines, pale skin. I think of Joe
touching me at night, darkness
across my skin, his fingers drumming

rhythms against my back. My mother's
breath in the phone beats softly
against my ear. My breath matches
hers as we exhale.

My sister teaches me discovery

My mother told me/ my sister
was the pretty one/ golden hair
smooth skin/ sapphire eyes
full of longing I don't understand.

Once she ran away for three hours
until my mother sent me to find her.

I found her drawing once,
hunched over/ canvas/ with light
pouring over her back, onto her hands.

She was crouched in the woods,
in the rain, scratches across her cheeks,
wetness in her face/ rain and tears
together.

I couldn't tell if she was breathing
she was so still, back arched
like a cat or a queen.

Her face was stone/ and silence/
hyacinth in the air/ and fingers
stained gray with pencil lead.

She looked up, saw me/ and her face
was wind/ her arms were trees/

She felt me/ paused/ looked up
eyes sparkling like broken glass,
sun on sea.

and I could not remember her ever smiling
before that moment. I brought her back
to our mother's house/ and her face
was just her face/ her arms/ only arms.

*The light is different this time of day,
like liquid. It touches things differently,
gently, she said.*

I saw the way the light moved
over her, against her, touched
hair/ chin/ curve of neck. I smiled
because she was right.
She smiled back, a cool breeze
against my cheek.

I had no words, no way to tell
her I had seen the way she sees,
no way to thank her.

Dinner's ready, I said, come downstairs.

Not Today

I watch the pulse in your neck,
light hairs on your chest catch in morning sunlight.

I hate you for being more beautiful
than I am, soft arch of nose, golden hair like a flame,

smooth skin, a voice that lands like a stone.
Your love for me is so fragile, like ice half-frozen

on a lake. Every day for two weeks
you've asked me if today is daylight savings,

if this day is the day you let go of time.
You are so anxious for the next hour to arrive.

It makes me nervous. I slip out of bed
to check the calendar before you wake up, I want

to surprise you. I will wake you up and say,
before you can ask, *Not today, it's not daylight savings yet.*

I think it will feel like I am giving you a gift.
I sit at your kitchen table, swing my legs like I am a child again.

I can still feel your breath on my skin,
moist and warm. The way that you love

me is gentle, like rain on soft soil, footsteps
in an empty room. I think of the child that I was, the way wind

somehow meant more than wind to me. I would like to love
a child that way, knowing there is something more, just underneath

the surface. I think it is like the way your lips
sometimes form words that you never say, just movement that proves

your heart beats, that you're alive.

Prayer

after Deirdre O'Connor

For my sister, light flashing
across an ocean, green brightness
blinding her, clay jars filled with paint.

Bubbles of laughter for my mother,
open windows, pale curtains, and a love
that needs neither blood nor air.

Ripe apples for my father,
blue eyes and small hands to hold,
the pulsing of geese in humid air.

For my second sister,
a straight spine and yellow flowers,
gray stones in a seawall.

For all the men I've known,
quiet lakes, violet echoes,
the sturdy smell of linen and cool skin.

For the man I cannot forgive,
coffee bitter as black tears,
yellowed grass in the backyard.

For the man I want to keep,
midnight winds and endless sky,
wine bottles of moonlight.

For myself, all of these,
cool shadows across my body,
ghost voices whispered
to night skies.