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THE PLACE OF PANIC AND OTHER WRITINGS


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JULIA PENNINGTON

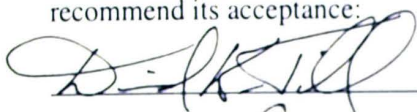



To the Graduate Council:


I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Julia Marie Pennington entitled "The Place of Panic and Other Writings." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English Literature.

  
Barry Kitterman, Major Advisor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

Acceptance for the Council:

  
Dean of Graduate Studies

The Place of Panic  
and Other Writings

A Thesis Presented for the Master of Arts Degree,  
Austin Peay State University

Julia Pennington  
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## FOREWORD

I began this piece in the spring of 2002 as the outline of a story that I have felt the need to tell for many years. Over the next eight months, the bones of the story developed more and more flesh, but I must say that it is nowhere near completion. It was written in less than a year, but it took twenty-two years to live through. I imagine the work itself will take just as long to develop on paper as it did in life, for I still consider this a fifty-five page outline. This is the story of me, painful, but honest, and it is a truth that I only came to meet once I saw it in writing.



## The Place of Panic

Meredith clamped the hot iron onto a piece of hair and rolled it around the barrel. The air in the room was a shade of pink, leftover atmosphere from when she was younger, when she was pulling dolls out from under the bed and making them kiss. Meredith was sixteen, though she looked a bit older, ready to pass on to college. She was still forming inside and was not yet ripe for the world. She pulled her hair back behind her ears and smiled wide into the mirror. The smile was awful, twisted up and showed fear. Meredith's teeth were straight from four years of braces and a retainer she only wore twice. She reached into her top dresser drawer and found the small plastic case. Meredith opened her mouth wide, squeezing the plastic onto the roof of her mouth, making small cuts on her gums in the process. As metal pinched her teeth together, Meredith panicked and yanked the plastic device out of her mouth.

Meredith was a junior in high school. She had survived the first two years with some ease, not having any other siblings to give her a bar to reach. She pushed herself up off of the carpeted floor and gathered her empty folders into her bag. Downstairs Meredith had one last chance to look at what others would see today. The mirror was a large, wooden-framed antique. Her mother collected such things. The reflection echoed a short girl with reddish bangs that flinched when she blinked. Meredith had colored the clump of hair with a permanent, red marker, stretching the pieces tight as if she were about to weave a blanket and running the felt tip back and forth across the strings. Her mother would have stopped her by force if she had seen the colored hair. Meredith

straightened the rest of her honey-colored hair, pleased with her creation, and started off again to the bus stop.

She left the house knowing that her mother was not yet awake. For the past few days, Meredith had noticed her mother walking down to the kitchen at night, sitting at the table. She had watched her mother the past night absorbed in thoughts not spoken, thoughts that flickered fast across her visual screen. Her mother was lost and could not find her way back to a night of sleep. Meredith would not wake her to ask for lunch money, only take what she could from the car ashtray that would provide a decent meal, fries and a soda.

The walk to the bus stop was short, only a small distance from her house on the hill. Meredith and her mother had lived there since she was eight. The move jarred Meredith and her mother. Sometimes she could still hear her mother whispering fragments of thoughts about her father, about how this place was a punishment for both of them. Meredith reached the end of the street and set her book bag down on the pavement next to the stop sign. Usually she stood alone in her wait, though this morning a boy was standing a few feet off in the tall grass near the ditch, smoking a cigarette, pleading for notice with every exhale of smoke. Meredith noticed that his clothes were a bit out of season, worn to fading. He wore shorts, though the morning was in the fifties.

“What are you, a freshman?” He asked this with a patient expression, holding his left hand under his right elbow.

“Yes.” What did it matter, Meredith thought. She hated talking to new people. She didn’t like being nice about things that made her uncomfortable. The boy’s left eye was red and veined like pink eye. She never knew why his eye was this way. It

continued to be disgusting throughout her knowledge of him as a passenger on her bus. Meredith didn't care about him, though he continued to ask her what classes she was taking, who she was friends with, what music she listened to. It got to be as though she was answering a curious, distant relative who was trying to capture the last year of her life in one conversation.

The boy sat in the seat behind her and continued to ask questions sporadically during the entire drive to the school. The trip took an hour. Meredith continually tried to hint at disinterest so he would lean back in his seat and leave her alone. Unless Meredith felt a special attachment to people, she wanted nothing to do with them. If she were normal she would have asked about his eye, but she liked the mystery of it, that it could be some disease she should avoid. She liked his role in her life: the abnormal, yet normal, boy who pestered her to exhaustion.

"So, do you go downtown ever? Like, to see shows?" As he asked this they arrived at school. Meredith left the seat with a quick 'no' and was down the stairs of the bus and on to the sidewalk. Meredith's mother would never let her go downtown to see a band play or eat dinner or see a movie. Her mother feared Meredith's impending abduction. Recently Meredith had noticed her mother's worries had worsened to a point where she pleaded with Meredith to keep her company most of Meredith's waking moments. Meredith ventured out when she could, lying to her mother whenever she felt she must.

At 12:30 her math class was interrupted by an office worker. He came up to the teacher and whispered some message. Meredith had seen him in the mass of students at times. She believed his name was Mark. Meredith never understood how some students



got the lucky job of office worker when they dressed like he did. His pants were much too large, held up by a rope tied to the first two belt loops. Mark's eyes were barely visible behind his long, white bangs. He held a pass with his long fingers, his nails painted a shock red. Meredith would have loved to have a free period to fetch students from their classes and bring them back to the office. Her teacher smiled at Meredith and signaled for her to leave with the office worker. In the hall Mark, probably seventeen, told Meredith she had a phone call. Meredith felt as if the hall contained pressure and was pushing her body in on itself. Only one person would call her at school, feeling it acceptable to disturb her small teenage world. She walked three feet behind the office worker, matching his steps, staring at his heels. The floor was a pattern of cream, green, and aqua squares that ran quickly past her feet, crossing thin x's under her heels.

Picking up the phone, Meredith felt blood rush down from her hand into her forearm, collecting there and causing her nerves to fire and sting her skin.

"Hello?" Meredith felt like something was about to begin that she could not control. Though she did not control much of her life presently.

"Meredith, I need you to come home." It was her mother. Her voice hinted a tremble. She had been crying.

"What? How am I going to leave? What are you talking about? What happened?" Meredith knew her mother was in the kitchen, the center of the house, able to see the front door and the back entrance.

"I've seen things today. I've seen things before, but not like this. I need you here. I need to tell you about what I saw." Her mother's voice ended high, swooping up in urgency. Her mother had tried to pull Meredith out of class before, worried about

some story on the news. She was afraid the school's air was poisoned with mold, that they would all die that day if the building wasn't evacuated.

"Mom, this can wait until four. I have class. Nothing has happened. I'll be home at four." Meredith rarely confronted her mother. Her mother had an ability with anger and authority, though this time her mother was pleading and vulnerable. Meredith thought she sounded like a child.

"Fine," said her mother. She was angry. She hung up the phone with a heavy bang. Meredith kept the black receiver pressed against her head. Her eyes followed the secretary's black heels to the file cabinets and then to the computer. Meredith placed the receiver back onto the cradle and noticed the gathering of grease and dust in the cracks of the square buttons. She was still, noting that no one in the office realized that she had been at the desk for more than three minutes without asking a question or leaving. The secretary looked up at her and smiled. "Do you need anything?" Meredith needed several things. For one, to know what had taken her mother.

"No, thanks." Meredith let these words escape and left the office. She went to the cafeteria and sat at a table knowing that her teacher would assume that Meredith had left for the day. The room was a light blue, almost white, with a colorless light from the outside sliding in from high windows. Meredith rubbed her finger along her shoe sole and thought about her mother. She had felt her mother approaching this, or this thing approaching her mother, ever since her father left four years before. It was as if a being, something that needed a host, had taken her mother's body as residence. This being, red and soft, like clay, lumped at the back of her skull without permission from the owner of the body. The clay ball had added more to itself, feeding from sadness and separation.

The soft material soon surrounded most of her mother's mind, forcing itself through the woman's natural ways of thinking, changing the arrangement of memories and mannerisms.

It did not take long for a girl to approach Meredith. She was a thin girl, sick-looking but graceful, with elbows and collarbones pushing out like thorns.

"Meredith." The girl breathed Meredith's name like it was a reassurance, a guarantee. "I called you last night, but your mom said that you were asleep or something so I just wrote you this note. I guess I'll just tell you what I wrote. I said that I hated that boy that I thought I liked and that I wanted to go see a movie this weekend. You can still have the note, though." Drawings of cities and vines covered the note in blue pen. Callie was always this full of speech. She sat down and then stood several times when she talked, unsure of her position at any time.

"Hey, look up. What are you doing out of algebra? I thought you had that class now." Meredith believed that Callie wanted to be close to her. Meredith always seemed dissatisfied with everything, which she knew confused Callie, possibly pushing her away.

"I got called to the office. My mom called."

"Why would your mom call? That's weird. She's works, right?" Meredith's mother, Beth, did work at a small company, but had taken a week of vacation. During this day Meredith knew that Beth had kept the television off; she was too busy with rapid thoughts to focus on a thirty-minute program. It was like her mind was processing every moment to the extreme. Everything had to be checked and checked again. The stove, the iron, the microwave, the washing machine and dryer all had to be off and made sure they



were off a second time. Meredith could understand the feeling. She had started to acquire the habit, walking back through the yard to check the front door a second time.

“Callie, can I stay at your house tonight?” Meredith knew that she was unable to deal with her mother’s problems tonight. It would be better to avoid contact with her, let her calm down and call her from Callie’s later that night.

“Yeah, you can stay.” Callie’s face lightened and her mouth pulled up into a smile. She was afraid of being alone, especially at night. Once Callie had called Meredith and asked her to come over, stay the night. Meredith’s mother wouldn’t let her leave, afraid herself. Meredith stayed on the phone with Callie until she noticed her friend’s sentences began to lose logical flow. That night Meredith noticed how much her friend depended on another female just as her mother did. Callie had just gotten a car and was the only person approved by Meredith’s mother to drive her daughter anywhere.

Meredith went to the rest of her classes that day, but did not hear anything coming out of anyone’s mouth. A boy next to her asked her if she believed that the dissection of animals for scientific study was morally valid, but it came out garbled and sounding like a foreign language. Meredith looked up at his face and squinted. He asked her again, looking frustrated with this stupid girl sitting across from him. Meredith said ‘yes’ and looked down, not knowing what she had agreed to. She did not look up again.

When the bus pulled her up to her stop, Meredith felt nauseous. The trees on the side of the street were a black-green, hiding the lake behind them. Meredith stepped down onto the street, thinking of what she would say to her mother. She assumed Beth was sitting at the kitchen table, as she had most of the day, thinking thoughts not spoken, thoughts that swelled to unmanageable sizes.

As she entered the house, Meredith closed her eyes and mouth, hoping this silence would spread to her mother. She could pass Beth, holding in all breath and words, until she closed the door to her room. Beth would also hold in breath and word, waiting for Meredith to say she could inhale and speak. This did not work. Beth sprang into movement as the front door shut.

“Merry, I have to tell you. I have to tell somebody. This place isn’t safe. I can’t even think.” Her mother was scattered amongst the kitchen things, thoughts on every appliance: stove, microwave, oven. “I can’t go back to work. They know. They have plans.” Meredith could not follow her mother. Beth was leaving out too much. She stared into Meredith’s eyes, angry but pleading all at once.

“Mom, don’t call me Merry. Will you slow down?” Meredith sat in a chair and stared at the scarred tabletop, feeling that this time she could not sit silently and watch her mother fly around the ceiling in a spastic panic. She thought of a moth, flicking its wings, unable to gain a grasp on a light bulb, burning itself. Beth sat beside Meredith, shaking her head as she studied her daughter’s light brown hair.

“Will you look at me?” Meredith could see her mother was angry, full of a frustration from the task of sorting out the world. Meredith knew that to Beth, now that

she had been changed by the thing inside her, the world was dangerous with a desire to end itself.

Meredith could not stand to look at her mother at that moment. Looking up at Beth's face, smeared and frustrated, could cause Meredith to lose what was good and collected in her mind about her mother. The room shook from her mother's electric presence. Meredith mouthed small words to her mother, causing her mother to lean in toward her.

"What?" Beth said. "What are you saying?" Her mother pressed her palms into the table, her eyes wet.

Meredith slowly raised her words as her mother tried to steady her shaking hands. "You need to calm down. I can't talk to you when you're like this."

"How am I like, Meredith? This is my life, this is the way I am. You know that." With this Beth sprang up again into the air on a wave or current invisible to anyone else. Her mother followed some other vehicle now. Meredith could only watch from a distance. "Meredith, people aren't who they say they are, or used to be. I was talking to Jerry and he knew I could tell that it really wasn't him. It was just someone else pretending to be him. I don't know why."

"Mom, why would someone want to be Jerry? What did he do that was different?" Meredith now looked at her mother, focused on bringing her mother back from nervous worry. Jerry was the neighbor across the street they had known since the Fennelly's small house fire a few years ago. They were all out of their houses in their yards and in the street, talking and feeling guilty or lucky that it wasn't their house. At the time, her mother was open to strangers, accepting their hospitality. Jerry offered to



help with yard work or any other thing around the house that Meredith's mother needed help with. Beth was a ridiculous flirt before retreating into her mind. She knew how men liked to be talked to.

Jerry felt important to Meredith's mother. He mowed the lawn, cleaned the carport, and talked about calling a roofer once to patch a leak. He wanted to protect Beth from feeling alone. Meredith knew that her mother needed this companion and always talked Jerry up to her mother, noting that he wasn't unattractive. Actually, Meredith felt that if she were her mother's age, she would have already begun a relationship with Jerry. He was tanned from work in the sun, and prematurely gray. His eyes were kind and he smiled when he talked to Beth, not as though he were trying to sell her something, but as though he was enjoying every moment that he spoke with her.

"He did nothing. He did everything perfectly. A great performance. But I knew and he could see it. He got nervous when I confronted him about it. Told me that I was acting strange." Beth stared down at Meredith with her proof, her evidence of a world others were unable to see because they didn't pay attention. Her mother was intelligent. She had finished a degree in business and was now working at a small office. She worked well with people, able to extend pleasant conversation into a business deal that would connect the client to the company for years. She was valuable to her company and she was losing her grip.

Meredith wished that she could explain to her mother the reality of others. Her mother had been changed, developing a belief that she was doing a service by observing the world and pointing out the deception of others.

“Mom, Jerry is Jerry. The same guy that gave you a pumpkin for Halloween, already carved. The exact same person who has lived across the street for four years.”

“How do you know that? How do you know anybody is who they say they are?” Beth truly wanted an answer. She wasn’t just pointing out that Meredith was naïve. She wanted to know how to believe.

“Why aren’t you worried that I’m not me? Wouldn’t I be one of the first people to be changed, or whatever?”

“I don’t know. You are the same. It’s like you’re a part of me so I could tell if a part of myself had been taken or lost. Others I have to guess at, but I am gathering proof every day. This week alone half the people calling have changed or are in the process.”

“Mom, can you talk to someone else about this? Like a doctor.” All at once Meredith noticed she was counseling her mother. She knew this was not her job. Meredith wasn’t capable of breaking down her mother’s mental processes.

“I’m telling you there are few people in the world that you can trust. You can’t trust a person willing to drug you into submission. No, I’m staying here.”

“What, here? Here at this kitchen table for the rest of your life? How will you eat? How will you keep the lights on? Mom, look at this house. It isn’t yours, you’re still paying for it. You know I won’t be here forever.”

“So you’re leaving.”

“Yes. I’m leaving tonight to go to Callie’s. And I’m leaving when I’m eighteen.” Meredith said this even though her mother knew this information. Beth finally sat down at the table, sliding into one of the yellow chairs, wrapping her left hand around her right, pulling at the fingers. Meredith hated seeing her mother cry. It made her cry, not out of

sympathy, but out of anger and fear. Beth's chin-length brown hair was against her face, covering her eyes. Meredith listened to her mother cry. The short, little gasps, then the long breath pressed through a small opening in the lips. Meredith's own throat swelled and shorted her breath, though she did not cry. She wanted to make her mother stop crying, to stop her sadness, her worry. Meredith couldn't reach a hand over to offer her mother. Beth cupped a palm over Meredith's shoulder, pulling her toward her mother. Meredith wanted to love her mother, wanted to laugh with her mother. She wondered if she began to laugh, would that start a reaction in her mother, something biological, that would cause her to laugh, stretching her face upward, making her younger and easier. Meredith didn't try it. She only scraped up a memory of her mother laughing at a story Meredith told when she was ten, of a girl she knew that drowned a grasshopper in her mother's koi fish pond. They both agreed never to invite her over again.

The knock at the door signaled both Meredith and Beth to collect themselves. Meredith hoped that the awkwardness was over, that Beth's mind was clearing. She broke from her mother's touch and opened the door. Callie was standing with her back turned, staring across the street.

"Hey, thanks for coming."

Callie turned with the first sound of Meredith's voice. "Hey." Her voice stretched into a stream, calm and absorbing. "You ready?" Meredith looked back at her mother who was still sitting at the table, now reading a magazine.

"Not really. Just give me a second." Meredith left Callie at the door and walked back to her mother. "Mom, I'm leaving with Callie now. Are you going to be okay?" She didn't want to ask this of her mother. Meredith knew that her mother would be up



until four, trying to find ways to keep herself and Meredith safe from people who had changed, like Jerry. She could not protect her mother from her own mind. Meredith kissed her mother on her cheek, which was wet and heated from her tears. Her mother only nodded, not looking up at her daughter. Meredith thought she was trying to appear together, able to face an evening at home.

“Be sure to call. I want you to call me when you get to Callie’s.” Her mother, still picking at the pages of the magazine, said this as Meredith straightened from her kiss.

### *Meredith*

“Put in something loud.” Callie pointed to her lunch box of cassettes on the floorboard of the passenger side of her used, but newly purchased, 1986 Pontiac. It was a present from her mother for her sixteenth birthday. Meredith flipped through the small collection of music and decided on Van Morrison. Both Callie and Meredith believed that Van Morrison in his youth had created a world they were meant to exist in, one where you could buy pot from Joe Harper, smell T.B. sheets, and have an all night gathering with Madame George. As Callie began to sing along, lifting up from her seat and pressing her chest into the steering wheel, Meredith leaned back and watched herself in the car door mirror. The sky was pink with dying light and framed with the black silhouettes of houses and trees. Meredith stared into her own eyes, pushing away all

thoughts of her mother. She focused on herself, this growing being with large brown eyes and pale cheeks. Lawns and patches of grass and flowers passed outside of the frame of herself. Meredith sang along with Callie, still watching herself, now forming sound from a mouth she had always tried to know. Meredith studied her own face, struggling to understand who she was.

*And it stoned me to my soul. Stoned me just like Jellyroll, and it stoned me.*

For a moment Callie broke her song. “We should go see a band tonight at Mary’s.” When she went with Callie once before to see a band play, Meredith watched Callie as she pressed up against the stage, bending and twisting differently for each song. Mary’s was a small venue that attracted a young crowd because of its all-ages shows. Most every other club in town served liquor so their shows were usually for eighteen and over.

“Can we go to your house first so I can call my mom? She’s going to freak if I don’t let her hear my voice. She needs to know I’m not dead.” Meredith said this while smiling, though she knew that it was true. Beth depended on Meredith to confirm her own existence.

“Whatever. I have raviolies in the frigerator if you want something to eat.”

Callie said, while turning onto a side street.

*Julie baby, it ain't natural for you to cry way in the midnight.*

Callie pulled into her driveway while finishing a song. The song ended right as the car rolled to a stop. Both Callie and Meredith loved this kind of event. They believed it meant that they had just listened to the perfect song for that movie in their lives and whatever followed after the car ride would fit, would be in the correct order. Callie

unlocked the door to her parent's small duplex and led the way for Meredith. They both walked straight back to Callie's bedroom. The room was plain: a bed, some pictures ripped out of magazines hung on the wall, a dresser. Meredith noticed Callie spent most of her time in her room cleaning or listening to music. Callie was a good dancer. It made Meredith jealous of the freedom Callie displayed when she moved. She belonged on a stage.

Inside Callie's house, Meredith dialed her own house, hoping for a quick answer. She began to feel guilty for leaving her mother at that table alone. Her mother's only possible companion was her daughter.

"Hello?" The voice was weary, barely enough energy left to be suspicious.

"Mom, I'm at Callie's. We're going to the mall to see a movie. Are you going to be okay with me staying here tonight?" Meredith waited for a response. Her mother let out the large breath she had been holding since Meredith said hello.

"Meredith, I'm tired. I don't want to go to sleep though." Beth paused, waiting for Meredith to respond. "Why don't you and Callie stay here tonight?" Meredith remembered the last time Callie stayed the night at her house. Beth stayed with them all night in the den, talking about God and angels, spirits. Meredith knew that it had scared Callie. Callie was afraid of any kind of religion, fearing it was true and that she had damned herself with her mortal actions.



"Mom, I think I'm just going to stay here. I'll be home tomorrow morning. I just need to go out." Meredith pushed these words out with her hands, pressing her palms through the air, pressing out her point. She felt that it helped because her mother was not quick to respond with anger. Something in her voice caused Beth to settle into a static mood. Her mother was without comment, only sighing quietly after a moment.

### *Beth*

She knew her daughter would not come this time. She had felt the frustration rising inside of the girl she had made. Meredith would not be home tonight. She heard the phone ring and was so weak from crying and thinking that she let it go to the third ring for once.

"Hello?" She knew Meredith would hate her for sounding so pathetic, so dependent. Beth had raised her to care for herself, know herself. Beth thought herself a poor example.

"Mom, I'm at Callie's. We're going to the mall to see a movie. Are you going to be okay with me staying here tonight?" Beth wanted to push herself back into a time when Meredith would not have to call her, reassuring her that the world had not fallen in on itself, that there was at least one person still alive, her daughter.

"Meredith, I'm tired. I don't want to go to sleep, though." Beth paused, waiting for Meredith to respond. "Why don't you and Callie stay here tonight?" She knew she

would be rejected. She did not hate her daughter for this. Beth wished that she could stay alone, face the night with a calm mind instead of constant anxiety.

“Mom, I think I’m just going to stay here. I’ll be home tomorrow morning. I just need to go out.” Her daughter was pushing her away with both fists and feet. She couldn’t argue any longer. She let it pass, allowing Meredith to do as she pleased, though letting her know that her mother was still broken and unable to fix herself.

“Fine. Call me if you can later. Please don’t forget. I’m not sure what to do with myself.” With that, they said good-bye. After she set the phone back in the cradle, she held on to it, wanting to pick it back up and call her daughter she had just let go. But she couldn’t. She knew Meredith would already be gone.

\*

### *Meredith*

The night wasn’t turning out like Meredith predicted. She felt as if she were causing all these things to occur because she wasn’t with her mother, holding her hand. Callie had gone into the gas station to buy cigarettes. After Callie got back in the car she suggested they go pick up Jill, her friend who was a year older than they were. Meredith went along. That was her plan for the night, to not make any decisions. She wanted to know what abandon felt like.

It was a short drive to Jill’s, twenty minutes. Meredith rolled down her window to the passenger side, hanging her arm over the door. The air was warm, coated with cricket chatter and leaves brushing in the wind.

When they pulled up to Jill's house, Meredith saw a boy sitting on the porch swing kicking his feet out, hindering his rocking and causing the chains on the swing to gather in the air and quickly catch hold of his weight again.

"That's Jill's brother, Jason. He's pretty, but he doesn't really talk to anyone but Jill and a few other people." Meredith did think the boy was *pretty*. The word fit well on him, his chest narrow and stretched, his thin, auburn hair longer than Meredith's. He scared Meredith with his beauty and his knowledge of it. They walked up the porch stairs and knocked on the door. Callie said hello to Jason and he smiled without looking up. Meredith stared at his hand that was holding a cigarette. His nails were lengthy, elongating his fingers, causing them to resemble spider legs.

Jill answered the door and invited both girls inside. "Hi, I'm Jill." She stuck out her hand, which seemed tiny and frail; though when Meredith held it, she felt Jill's grip to be like a clamp, the force of mostly skeleton and muscle. The house was dark, though it was still light outside. No lamps were on inside. Meredith thought it looked as if Jill had just come home to an empty house. Jill's room was nearly opposite from Callie's. Several posters of bands hung on the walls, so many that the purple color of the walls acted only as a boarder to these pictures. The music in Jill's room was both comforting and empty, piano and violin, somber and distant. Jill left it playing while putting on her boots. Meredith was shocked at Jill's beauty. Callie was graceful, though still girlish and innocent. Jill put on her lipstick with a confidence, smiling into the mirror then turning to smile at both Callie and Meredith.

"So, what's the plan?" She sat next to Callie on the bed. Callie was glowing and told Jill that she wanted to go to Mary's to see 'the band.' It seemed to be the only band



that Jill and Callie ever went to see. Callie and Jill laughed and squirmed around on the bed. Jill acted like Callie's older sister, playing to Callie's innocent charm.

The three girls entered Jill's living room to see Jason and a friend playing a video game. The screen was the only light in the room. The sun had set past the trees, though still casting a blue shade on the sky that contained a memory of yellow. The two boys did not look up from their game. And the girls walked past the small kitchen and out the back door.

"Callie, are you driving?" Jill asked this as though she were expecting it. Her long brown hair was thin and hung in the center of her narrow back. Jill wore a light tank top with a flowing black skirt and fur trimmed boots. Meredith envied her style, her gypsy-like appearance that was beautiful as well as something to fear, or at least be wary of.

Jill pulled out a small pipe from her purse. She lit it and passed it to Callie. Meredith didn't let on that she had never smoked. She only refused with a smile. Meredith truly did not care if Callie was stoned and driving. She felt unreal, transparent. If the car was smashed, if they too were smashed against a tree or pavement, she felt it would be nice to watch. At the time she was indifferent to the situation. These bodies of three girls thrown with the metal of the car, she thought it would be interesting. But also unlikely.

The car moved its mass into a curve. They were pulling into a shop downtown that Meredith had only been to once. She knew that Jill and Callie frequented the trendy store because of the strange gothic and punk clothes.

"I want to get pierced." Callie said. She put the car in park but let the song continue until its finish. Jill and Callie talked with animated limbs as they all walked around the corner of the brick building. The building had been painted over several times. It currently advertised a local radio station and its morning dj's. Inside the store was dark, smelling of incense. The woman behind the counter nodded toward the girls as they browsed through the overpriced imported goods. The woman was older, though still attractive. Her hair was a whitish blonde and her eye makeup dark. Meredith was quietly looking at some stationary while Jill and Callie made their way back to the piercer. As Meredith walked among the racks she found a large black cat sitting on a stool. Its body was curled under itself as it blinked at Meredith. The eyes were gold crescents. Meredith placed her hand on top of the creature's head and pulled it down the length of its body. The cat patiently waited for each stroke of Meredith's hand. A rumbling began in its throat as the cat closed its eyes and bowed its head.

"Meredith." Callie called from the back of the store, waking the cat from its doze. Meredith walked to the back of the store, passing racks of zippered plaid pants and black tattered slippers.

"Jill's getting pierced. I'm going after her." Callie did not propose that Meredith go after her. Meredith assumed Callie knew of her avoidance of any unnecessary pain. Jill was already leaning backward in a sort of dentist's chair. The piercer prepared to puncture the skin at the beginning of the nose, between the eyes. He pinched the skin with two fingers and marked the skin with a purple marker. Meredith watched the man pull a long, thick needle out of a paper package. He clamped the skin with metal prongs and told Jill to close her eyes and relax. Callie was holding Jill's hand as she breathed

out slowly. The needle slid quickly through Jill's skin. He left the needle in her skin as he grabbed for the small metal bar to replace it. The replacement was just as quick. Jill opened her eyes and tears hurried down her face.

Callie traded places with Jill and received a small bar in her naval. Both left the store laughing and discussing the past hour of pain. Meredith joined the conversation whenever she heard her name or pulled herself out of thought.

\*

*Beth*

The television brightened the walls with a blue glow. Beth curled into the corner of her bed, the farthest she could get from the door. Her blankets formed a lumped fortress around her body as she tried to focus on the comedy playing in front of her. No one had called. Her friends had stopped calling her after she became more and more afraid or nervous. Beth's best friend from high school had told her she needed a break. Beth could not afford to go on a vacation and the thought of airplanes made her feel her body was spinning off the ground into the sky to meet terrible disasters.

On TV a man was reading the paper. The doorbell rang. And rang. And then a knock. He didn't even look up. Beth was afraid. Was this even happening. Beth looked up from the t.v. as the knocking persisted. It was her own door. She felt embarrassed and angry at her mind. She pushed the covers away and picked up a kitchen knife from her nightstand. The plastic handle was difficult to keep hold of and slipped out of her hand and hit the carpeted floor tip first, then landed on its side near Beth's bare foot.



Beth mouthed 'fuck' and picked up the knife again. She walked out of her bedroom and down to the living room on the balls of her feet, afraid of making any noise. Beth was sure someone had come to harm her; someone had rung the doorbell in hopes that she would answer so that they could kill her or rape her and then kill her. Beth had always thought it was possible that a person, deranged and just out of prison, would kill her. Recently, the thought of her own demise or her daughter's was the main course of thought her mind took.

Night covered the living room with a dark smoke, a static that made everything a copy of its original, not to be trusted. The carpet was now gray instead of white. The couch and coffee table cast long shadows, stretching their forms. The bell had stopped ringing but the soft knock came again. Beth focused her eyes on the wood grain at the exact spot the knock came from. The door had a small, square window, the size of a slice of bread. Beth could see the top of the person's head, a grayish mass of hair parted in the middle. It was still, but then bobbed and moved away. Beth took a breath. What kind of person was behind that door, she could only imagine, too afraid of the result of her curiosity.

"Beth? Are you in there? Hey?" It was Jerry, she could tell by the 'hey,' as it swooped upward into a question. Beth thought of what her daughter had said. No one wanted to be Jerry. Jerry was only a guy, not a monster, a killer out of prison. She touched the knob with her fingers, sliding them into a grip, and then slowly turned it. Pulling the large door to herself, she closed her eyes as if to prepare for the end. She felt the breeze push through the opening, smelled the fresh grass and honeysuckle.

“Hey? You okay?” Jerry squatted to stare Beth directly into her closed eyes. He smiled as Beth opened her eyes and looked into his. Beth’s eyes were light brown, some would say almost orange or amber. She searched for his presence inside of Jerry’s clean, blue eyes. Through her life Beth had envied people with blue eyes. To her they seemed more alert, focused and respected. She believed that brown eyes were just muddy, boring objects to see through. Her eyes were purely functional.

“Jerry.” Beth said his name to see his response, to make sure he was who he claimed. Jerry straightened from his stoop and looked at Beth’s feet and back into her eyes.

“Beth, I just wanted to talk to you. I know you feel bad. Could you use some company?”

Beth for a moment thought of telling Jerry to leave, telling him he had no place in her or her daughter’s life. Instead she backed away from the door. “Come on in.”

\*

### *Meredith*

She knew the two girls had gone into the other room of the record store where the band was playing. Meredith still had a sick feeling about the darkness of the club they were in. The part that functioned as a record store was bright, blue and packed with records and cd’s. As she flipped through the local band albums, a dog slowly walked by, clicking its nails on the floor as it passed. The animal was a smooth gray being, with a bobbed tail. Meredith reached out and touched its smooth back as it passed her. The

animal continued without notice. Its arrogance only made the being more attractive. Beth was used to dogs that desperately craved human attention and affection. Her own last dog, a Siberian Husky, was full of love and desperation, like a child always wanting to play. The record shop owner's dog was possibly loved by so many people throughout the day that it finally saw the stupidity of humans and realized it didn't need them.

The dog was headed for the room where the band was playing. Meredith could hear the band clearly through the open doorway between the two rooms. Even though she didn't care for the band, she followed the route of the dog into the room. The only light was from the amber glow of the stage. She could still make out faces in the dim reflections of skin. Callie and Jill were up front near the stage, swaying and dancing. The lead singer was waving a flute above his head while he sang into the microphone. His hair was a clutter of thin ropes, dreadlocks that were mostly pulled back into a clump. Some strands were free and swinging with his movement. Meredith thought that the singer was attractive. She didn't know how to control that feeling she had when she wanted to touch someone. It felt as though her body was changing the chemicals around inside of her heart and her stomach. She felt she had power, when she had none. Usually, as at that moment, the feeling was mild; though other times, she being sixteen, the power of want was overwhelming. If the boy she desired wanted her in exchange, she had to be careful. She had only recently had her first real kiss. It seemed a gateway to a flood of possible good feelings that she would later regret.

The show lasted for an hour. The club had to close at twelve since most of its shows let in all ages. When the band began to pack up, Meredith noticed that Callie and Jill were gone. She became a bit nervous. She knew no one else in the club. The lights



in the room came on, instantly changing everyone back into their boring selves, when before they were dramatic, serious beings. The few people against the walls passed through to the record shop and out into the street. Meredith looked for the two girls. She could see they weren't in the room as before. All that was left of the scene before were the walls, covered with dull blue paint and groups of posters of bands that once played on the stage. The bottom of the stage was papered with homemade bumper stickers of local bands, most no longer in existence.

Meredith walked to the bathroom, a small opening behind the stage with a plywood door. It too was empty. Just then a man approached her.

"Hey, you need to leave. We're closing."

"I lost my ride. They left without me." Meredith felt pathetic and embarrassed. She hated depending on others for basic things, like getting home.

"Do you want to call someone to come and get you?" The guy was nice about the situation. He was an older man, strong, probably there to make sure people paid and to breakup fights. Some bands that played there were punk. The audience, stupid younger guys, usually ended up swarming around in a circle hitting each other.

Meredith didn't want to call her mom. She wasn't supposed to be downtown at night. Another rule made by Beth after she saw something on the news about girls getting raped. Beth thought in generalizations. She didn't understand that the girls getting raped were drunk and on the other side of downtown with their college boyfriends. No one was ever hurt at Mary's that she ever knew.

"Yeah, can I use your phone?" Meredith walked with the man to the counter. She dialed Jerry's number. It was the only person she could trust to come get her. She

let it ring until the machine picked up, and then called him again. She didn't leave a message. Meredith thought it would be pointless.

"We can call you a cab." The guy said this as the woman who owned the shop came up to the counter. Meredith nodded, not knowing any other way home. She knew her mother would have passed out if she knew her daughter had ridden in a cab with some strange man, possibly a killer, but most definitely a rapist.

When the cab arrived, Meredith stepped outside of the club and waved a good-bye to the guy in the club. He raised a hand and then turned away, counting the money from the door. Meredith thought this must happen often if he didn't care if she even made it into the cab. Meredith opened the backdoor and slid inside. She was still wearing what she had on at school, brown pants and a pink sweater. Meredith hoped she would not attract too much attention. The driver asked where she needed to go and he began to drive. Most of the ride was silent, except for the driver's momentary coughs or grunts. He was aging, around sixty, and wore an old baseball hat. The back of his head was either wet or greasy, Meredith couldn't tell. He began to hum but then stopped to explain his radio had been stolen.

"All I have is my own voice." Meredith listened to the old man hum, thinking of ways which she could escape if he acted any stranger than he already was.

\*

*Beth*

Jerry sat at the kitchen table with Beth. She had pored them some soda, a liquid that she subsisted on. They both sat quietly, sipping on their drinks from coffee cups. She gave Jerry the one with dancing cows. She had the one of Marilyn Monroe smiling over a steam grate. The cups clinked on the glass table top. Beth sniffed and pulled her hair out of her face, behind her ears.

“How are you doing? With Meredith and all?” Jerry asked this with a cautious face. Beth could see he loved her but was also afraid of her.

“Merry’s great. She went off with a friend tonight. I haven’t called her once. I think this Callie girl is alright.” Beth’s hands were trembling, just enough to notice, as if she were crying, but she wasn’t. She couldn’t make them stop, so she grabbed the right hand with the left, and without drawing attention to herself, pushed them both into her lap.

“I was wondering if I might cook you something. You can’t just go on eating peanut butter and cold cuts.” Jerry smiled at Beth, then looked down at his cup, half full of soda.

Beth forced a smile. “What did you have in mind, Jerry?”

“Oh, some chicken and vegetables. Maybe a desert, too.” Beth could feel him trying to pull her out of the feelings that kept her from smiling a true smile. She knew he wanted her back to the way she was before, when he met her, calm and hopeful.

"That sounds fine." Beth let these words tumble out of her mouth, past her lips and onto the glass tabletop. She didn't want to be vulnerable. Beth knew she had already opened the door, allowed this man a say in what occurred. All that was to come was danger. She knew it was going to be an ending she dreaded.

Jerry hovered around the kitchen like a wasp, landing on the refrigerator, then the stove, then the sink. His shoulders were hunched over as he prepared their dinner. His back was to Beth. Her heart began to flicker in her chest. A huge pressure lay against her. She could hardly breathe. She could hear him cutting the meat, stirring the vegetables in the pot, but she could not see his face, or what was in his hands. She thought of his desires, possibly to make her trust him so that he could poison her food. The noises he was making, kitchen noises, just a distraction. She knew no one this kind.

"How's it going over there?" She tried to sound casual, or simply not crazy. She felt like asking, What are you putting in the goddamn food? But she knew he would become defensive, accuse her of being crazy. She thought of her ex-husband, his anger at her nervousness. He finally became too tired of dealing with her paranoid thoughts. He was just gone, out of their lives without any remorse or loss. He was done.

"Chicken's almost done. Beans look good. Wish you had some mushrooms to put in here. They give such a good flavor." He turned toward her and smiled. Who was he? Was this an act? Was he not a human or a living thing, rather in her mind all together? Beth couldn't understand what was happening. She didn't want Jerry there. He didn't calm her like before, only made her nervous and sick with her own thoughts of doom. She looked at the clock. It was very late. He must have come over about ten o'clock. They must have had that painfully distant conversation for a half an hour before



he started cooking. He truly knew his way around the place. If this were another time or if Beth had another mind, one more healthy, more relaxed, Jerry would have found himself a place to rest, a place to lie down and be calm. At this time, this kitchen and this woman were not going to make that wonderful equation work. Beth still thought of him as a threat.

Beth could easily enough have gotten out of her chair and spied on his cooking, made sure no white powder made it into her chicken or beans. Instead, she knew what was done had been done. He had probably poisoned it in the beginning. If she got up now, she would only see him taking the chicken out of the skillet, or piling beans onto the side of a plate.

Jerry brought the plates to the table, smiling, truly happy, Beth thought. He gave her a napkin and filled one of her nice glasses with sweet tea. The dinner looked good, chicken hot with juices, beans a deep green. Beth lifted her fork and Jerry did and began to pull apart the chicken. Her hands were shaking, being out of their hold. She managed to cut off a piece and pierce it with her fork. Jerry was already eating, very pleased with his efforts.

"It's pretty good. Could have used some more salt. I don't know." Jerry smiled and drank some of his water. He looked at her hand shaking, "Are you cold? I could go get you a sweater."

"No. I'm alright. Fine. Just feel a little strange." With that she pulled her lips back into a smile that stopped Jerry from smiling. He looked back down at his plate. Beth tried to place the chicken to her mouth, to resist the thought that he wanted her to die. The chicken was steaming on the fork, fibers of the meat pulled apart. The chicken

was almost to her lips. Her eyes closed. She looked as if she was praying right before her first bite. "I can't do this," she whispered.

"Can't do what? What?" Jerry seemed worried and at the same time offended.

"You must think I'm stupid." She shook her head. Beth looked away from the dinner and Jerry, out the window and into the night.

"I really don't know what you mean." Jerry got up from his chair and wiped his mouth. His timid nature was leaving his face. His expression was one of frustration and hurt. "Beth, I like you. Well, I did. After the other day, I thought you might need someone around more often, someone more than just Meredith. But I can't be around you if you're going to be like this."

"Like how? Like I realize finally what's going on. You want me gone. I'm not leaving. I'm not eating whatever that is. I'm not falling for it. You can leave. I don't believe you." Beth was pushing out every word faster and higher. Tears came down as she began to yell. "Don't make me force you." She was crying and screaming. Jerry was backing up from the kitchen, into the living room.

"I'm gone, okay?" Jerry raised his voice to meet Beth's then left the house, pulling the door hard as he left. The clap of the door made Beth's ears ring. She screamed out at the empty room. She had survived and was alone.

\*

*Meredith*

"I was going to say you look like my granddaughter." Meredith regretted that she thought the old man wanted to kill or hurt her. She thought of how she was acting just like her mother, afraid that everyone had ill intentions. It wasn't true. This man just

drove a cab for a living. Meredith thought she should probably be more worried for him than of him. He had to accept anyone getting into his car that had money. He had probably been robbed before and would be again.

When Meredith arrived at her house the windows were dark, even the kitchen. She paid the old man and walked across the lawn. She wondered if her mother was okay, if she had finally learned to sleep at night. She unlocked the front door and entered the house. As she walked through the dark, she saw her mother sitting on the stairs, arms across her chest staring out the picture window. The street was wet with rain that had just begun to fall. The yellow street lights made swirling patterns in the water. Her mother stared hard at those stripes of yellow and black.

"Mom," she couldn't say anything else. She knew that something had happened. Something she could have caused, but knew it was inevitable. Meredith walked into the dark kitchen. The two plates, food mostly untouched still lay on the table. The counter tops covered with the preparations to the meal. Meredith came back to her mother, sat behind her on the stairs and waited for it to pass.

For the next hour Meredith curled up behind her mother, watching her. Beth didn't move, only whispered some small fragments to herself. After a time, Meredith fell asleep. When she woke, she was in her bed, her mother sitting on the foot of the mattress, her face still without focus. Her mother had put her to bed, something Meredith had done for her mother more than once. Watching through narrowed eyes, Meredith saw Beth place a hand on her leg and hold it there, then smile. The smile turned into a mess of emotion that Beth tried to contain. The daughter knew the mother was going to

make an attempt at living, though it meant becoming vulnerable. As she felt her mother's touch, she fell back into sleep, into a calm and a comfort.

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Poems for thesis  
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## Crossing

We drove home,  
her anger stirred with thin streams of laughter.  
Before we left I saw him just as before in his room.  
He smiled, curled upside down on the couch,  
his head hanging off the cushion, legs  
springing in opposite ways.  
The boy, black hair and tired eyes,  
lay on the surface. She sat in the foreground,  
slouched with disinterest, though  
ready to crowd his chest with her features.  
That night, she left untouched by him,  
her skin popping with static.

The ride was smooth, an uncomfortable sliding,  
resembling the rub of a finger against nylon.  
It was fall, though I could not see the leaves  
because of all the blackness.  
The scent of tobacco drying above embers  
filled the woods with a brown paste,  
a spice that sparked a unity in our centers.  
We both knew that smell of burning leaves,  
knew it promised a clear sight.  
The smoke waved up through the limbs of trees  
and spread thin, descending.  
This girl and I, gliding across the yellow lines, made the space ours.  
  
Pushing fast through the night,  
she crossed lines and closed eyes.  
I held the wheel, not willing to lift  
out of the calm belief that I belonged.

## Departure

The beginning was soft, a wet soil clinging to itself,  
giving an attempt at elevation.

Though later, there was the pressure from underneath,  
a tongue rolled back dirt, exposing  
the naked skin, pale and awful green.

I stand, long leg extended toward the house,  
wet from hours of healthy talk. Angry  
at my cold arms and bleached skin.

It was so quiet when you told me.  
Insects blocked time with chatter, and you  
pulled away,  
flew into the sky,  
and declared a vision.  
You were the vision.

I crawled backward  
inside the house.  
You were pulled backward  
toward the street,  
into a car. I never saw you restrained.  
Though I knew you were held, with hands forming  
crescents around your arms.  
I knew you would fear for me,  
possibly pray for me.

I sank back into sleep,  
saw you angry,

face full of red,  
calling for me to love you.  
I hid in the back seat of the car.  
Through the window, I watched you pass either way,  
tasting my silence, a rotting scent.



## Fountain

Leaves stuck slick against the girl's calves as she  
breathed the smell of tobacco drying in the tall, rusted building.  
The small thin leaves looked like slugs, slowly pulling their bodies  
along her legs toward a shelter.

She walked around the tower of corrugated metal, aged to breaking.  
Past the corner towards the woods  
water poured from a hose, hung high in a branch of a tree.  
The stream was thick and fast, turning white with foam  
at its landing. The spray reached her as she approached,  
covering her white hands, beading into drops.  
This stream was a ritual, or a needed thing.  
She saw that it fell onto the body of a dead snapping turtle.  
The body was large as a dog or pig,  
eyes gone, sunk into the sockets,  
head tilted backward. He was frozen when calling  
for a mate or crying in pain.  
The skin had baked black into a fixed thing.  
Water sprang up from its shell onto her hands and shirt.

She could never understand the placement of the  
dead animal under the eternal fountain.  
She walked back to the car  
feeling fortunate to have seen it,  
sad that it ever happened.

## Fuse

Whatever words pushed up from our lungs that night  
were forgotten in bed. Or at least  
allowed to diffuse above our heads. And rising  
they were hit with the blades of the ceiling fan,  
causing prefixes and suffixes to scatter and mutter.

While I lay still, holding my hand to my shoulder,  
arm weighted on my chest, I constructed the face beside me.  
After constructing his face in my mind, I turned my face,  
feeling the breath from his body escape in a stream.  
I shrank back, imagining his thoughts under the smooth cloth.  
His closed eyes may have been witnessing  
a car wreck or a woman's approach.

His dreams were still. My body jerked with sudden sleep.  
I woke myself and searched panicked  
for his long, right foot, white and cold.  
We were alone in our bodies. I wanted to fold my flesh  
like dough into his. I wanted to force this joining of cells,  
to share breath and body,  
only to push against one another in hopes to separate.

## Given the Distance

Given the distance,  
I see now that your arms do  
hold out for me a protection  
unable to be applied,  
given the thousand miles between us.

Mothering me from a small state,  
somewhere above New York,  
I laugh at your repetition of worried chants.  
You laugh through your words,  
letting me know that you want me to  
be afraid sometimes.  
That it is okay to be scared.  
Its okay to worry over things  
we cannot control.

I hold the line while you finish your story  
about some disease you saw on the news.  
You are sure that I will get it.  
I don't wear sunscreen or take vitamins.  
I hope that you are well,  
while you hope that I do not  
collapse onto the floor  
from not heeding your advice.

## Grab and release

The only way to protect her  
Is to cause her discomfort.  
She has left again, and soon again  
the boys will be calling from the  
roof for their mother, unaware of any  
crooked fruit tree.

I visit her in this station, as she passes  
and skirts catch limbs.  
The dead wood snapping.  
Above me she will catch up to her voice,  
press it against her stretched skin, pale and bruising.

These leaping young animals  
catch her at the ankles  
She has left her shoes by the table again.  
She has left their father by the table.



## Living with a Sick Working Part

He stirred inside me,  
this small brown mouse pushing  
bunches of fur and trash against  
my stomach, my bladder,  
insulating his home.  
Caring nothing for his host,  
he made those movements  
and I jumped, shuddered, cried,  
forced by a small pulse to live this panic.

I killed him in my sleep,  
an accidental death.  
I turned over under the sheets  
twisting my left leg in black cotton.  
His neck was caught between  
my ribs and the mattress springs.  
His throat closed,  
his eyes closed.

Awake, I felt the space,  
the pink and clotted hole  
where he once worked. The mouse  
still stirred as a thought in my mind,  
his residual body lumped  
in the corner of my abdomen.  
I fear his clawed fingers will once again  
toss refuse against my wet insides.  
He may never leave.

## The Message

I was laughing, my face  
tight from a smile  
when we approached the car.  
Air brushed against our backs,  
slightly pushing us from behind.

Little black birds turned  
in an eddy in the sky  
around the tall chimney of a yellow building.  
Pulling each other with fear and the familiar,  
they would swing this circle  
for hours after sunset,  
each swinging down to touch  
the edge of the brick  
and falling back into flight,  
into the curved band.

You stopped and pointed,  
pushing attention to the ground.  
Without sound we stared  
at a blue jay, stuck into a tail pipe,  
hiding its face from view.  
The legs, bent at the joints, were just twigs,  
brown with ridges. Its claws curled in,  
as if perched on a wire.

You handed me a brown napkin  
left over from our lunch.  
I pinched his soft body,

my fingers pressing into muscle,  
and pulled him out of the gray tube.  
I laid him on the concrete  
next to where four yellow lines  
made an x. In the dusk  
we left him exposed,  
stomach up and head to the side.

I couldn't remember the story  
you told to make me smile.  
We walked at a slow pace,  
and I tried to break the silence  
with a clap of my hands

as I swung my arms.  
The black birds were swimming  
past the chimney  
and onto a wire.

## Request

A sheer wash of anger.

Your face is forced into a serious frame.

You are leaving.

You haven't given me a chance to swing you back this way,

to pull up a few layers,

to expose the new, green and stinging skin,

to show you all I have collected in my hands.

They are spilling over, these seeds,

brown and cracking from sun.

Let me push you back,

force you into the place you once fit.

I can trim your sides,

shave curls of skin like soft wood.

Let me soak you in cold water,

shrink your surface to a tightness.

You could stay silent there, in the halo

of your hole. Blue fists and closed eyes,

you will not hear me.

I can sit on this couch long enough

to say that you should crouch down,

burrow up your being into this fabric,

because I have a soreness, a sorry mind.

I promise not to fly at you again.

Not to ever be the mockingbird

plucking at your slick feathers,

crying at your dark body.



I will rest my nervous self with rapid blood.

I will not pester a crow to gather it closer.

## Saving the Inside

Was I the panic born from you? I came from you  
on a day slow and swollen with heat. I was ready.  
When they pulled me from your stomach,  
unable to pass the natural way,  
you looked at my face, gray and pinched.  
I could not breathe.  
In that moment, did my panic begin,  
my uncertainty of living?

In the car on the way home from the small church,  
I told you while staring at the back of your head. I told you  
I had been saved. It was that simple.  
The being had touched me. You believed me,  
your small daughter. My mind a swamp of child lies,  
I began to believe it was true.

I didn't know you never baptized me. I was lying every time  
I let the hard biscuit dissolve between  
my tongue and the roof of my mouth.  
Every time I drank the thimble of sour juice.