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Ash Back Into Fire

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Ash Back into Fire

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communicating Arts
Creative Writing

by

Roxanne “Roxy” Seay

B.A. Florida State University, 2010

May 2015

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Acknowledgements and Dedications

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I want to thank my parents, Eileen Prince and Kenneth Seay, for always having my back no matter what decision I make. Thanks to them for helping me through the rough times and being there for the good ones as well. Words cannot express how lucky I am to have parents who support me in my creative aspirations.

I also want to thank David Kirby at Florida State University, for convincing me, in my last year of undergraduate studies, that I have a voice as a poet in this vast world of literature. Without Professor Kirby, I wouldn't be the poet I am today, and I would've never motivated myself to tackle poetry as a genre at a graduate level.

I dedicate this thesis to those who have been through hell and back, but have embraced life for what it is: a chance to learn, to grow, to touch the lives of other people in ways that cannot be expressed through art.

And to the lovers I've had, and those yet to come.

Ash Back into Fire: An Exploration of Poetic Intimacy

“This! This right here! This is your poetic voice, Roxy. Now use it,” Professor Kirby told me, pointing to a stanza in my poem, “The Love-Sick Tango.” That was the moment I decided I was a poet. I had been a fiction writer for years but always admired poets. I read poems I wish I had written but I never thought I had a poet’s voice. It seemed daunting to me at that time. Back then, if I tried to write a rhyming poem, it sounded like a nursery rhyme. I barely understood what meter was. In my undergraduate studies, I was lucky enough to have a professor who changed this. It was the push I needed to hear my voice as a young poet. It was the turning point in my academic career, changing me from a fiction writer to a self-identified poet.

When I started reading poetry, I enjoyed Charles Bukowski because of his poetic voice: raw and honest, speaking directly to the reader. I strive for that raw emotion in my work. I wouldn’t say his influence is always present in my poetry, but I can say that it inspired me to be honest with myself as a writer and take risks. I wanted to talk about taboos, social issues, and the reality of love not seen in movies, as well as other topics most people didn’t want to discuss. I remember reading confessional poets before I knew they belonged to a movement. Sylvia Plath came to me by chance in my high school debate club when I performed “Lady Lazarus” as part of a spoken word performance. Anne Sexton came to me by way of Plath. I looked up to these writers and wanted to be as bold as they were: female poets unashamed of how they saw the world through their experiences, unafraid to bare their emotions.

Once I started writing poetry more steadily, I began to consider myself a free verse writer. Being afforded the freedom of non-metered lines in free verse was uplifting, but eventually I felt a need to give more structure to my poetry. In the last few years, I have been drawn to experiment with different forms of poetry. For instance, the pantoum is a form I have

always enjoyed, as it cycles the rhythm of the lines through repetition of the language. This repetitive form can also create a certain tone in a poem, such as in the poems “I Am Rain” and “Ruination Ritual” where the repetition becomes a sort of ritual of desperation and obsession where the speaker circles around the subject but doesn’t seem to make much personal progress by the end. This reminds me some of the pantoum, “Another Lullaby for Insomniacs” by A.E. Stallings, which also cycles around the ritual of the night being untamed by the insomniac because he will never get sleep. Repetition is present in much of my work, whether it is repeated images, lines (such as the refrain in “The Girls You’ve Been In Love With”), or specific words that I enjoy using, sometimes simply because they feel nice rolling off the tongue when spoken. I often play with the pantoum form, occasionally experimenting with syllabic forms and acrostics. The more I use poetic forms, the better I understand my own poetry and see where my strength as a poet derives.

The theme of intimacy has always intrigued me. Writing my thesis has allowed me to explore the multitudes of what intimacy entails through different human experiences. I tend to draw inspiration predominantly from my personal life. Relationships, specifically romantic relationships, come to my work almost subconsciously, but I try to stray from my inner romantic to find a middle ground with a voice that looks at love realistically. In “A Sort of Loss,” Bukowski writes, “people are not good to each other,” and this has been true in my personal experience, even in the most well-intentioned circumstances. People in love are not good to each other, but they should be. This section explores a realistic, ugly side of relationships where one partner’s action (or lack of action) does harm to the other. This is especially present in the poem, “Unclothed, Honest” where the speaker is vying for intimacy with a lover who is comforted more by the speaker’s absence than her attempts at physical connection. Thematically, these

experiences circle around the loss of something for the speaker, whether it is a part of the self, the partner, or the relationship as a whole. In “The Indian Mandala,” the speaker tries to cope with losing the affection of her lover to his obsession over a past relationship, while in “Abyss” the speaker reflects on wanting to lose herself in order to further the destructive relationship. These poems, among others in this section, also call into question how the speaker deals with these experiences moving forward, as seen in the end poem of the section, “Uncoupling,” where the speaker accepts the extinction of the relationship.

While I have spent much time in the past years writing about my relationships, not all of my work is based on my personal life. The inspiration for the “Grave Dwellers” series came to me while watching a show called Taboo. This particular episode included the story of a community living in the graveyards of the Philippines. I became fascinated by these people who thrived in this community. Most people might cringe at the thought of sleeping on a grave, but in this area among the very poor, it was something they were grateful for.

I developed a series of poems that explore what it might be like to live in these people's shoes, even fantasizing about communicating with ghosts. I did extensive research on this community before attempting this, looking up everything from the types of food and insects of the region to the religious rituals of the citizens. I tried to remain as truthful to their experiences as I could. I wanted to show respect for the grave dwellers and cast a spotlight on their own special place in the world. The series was also a way for me to exercise my interest in using different poetic forms to show different moods or speakers, such as the sestina, “Cohabitation,” written from the perspective of the community, and the epistolary pantoum, “To Malaya Lawas”, written from a specific character in the Philippines. Taking on these fabricated personas helped me feel close to the people of this community, although it was not something taken directly from

personal experience. The excerpt from Laura Riding Jackson's poem, "Incarnations" spoke to me in developing the story line of these different characters, as the speaker of "Incarnations" finds reconciliation with death by accepting its connection to life. Similarly, my main character of the series, Malaya Lawas, tries to reconcile her own connection with the dead and how it fits into her life. I plan to continue this series, possibly intertwined with longer segments from "Incarnations," to further its poetic story arc.

In my poetry, I want the speaker to be on relatable with the reader, allowing me, as the poet, to share an intimate experience with my audience. In Sexton's poems, "Wanting to Die" and "Live," the speaker examines her own intimacy with death: sometimes, death is a lover or friend while other times it is an enemy. Similarly, the intimacy I strive to make sense of in my own life—intimacy in romantic relationships, intimacy with the natural world, and intimacy with death—is reflected in my writing. Writing out my emotions is beneficial to me on a therapeutic and artistic level. I see my poetry as an extension of self, much as confessionalist poets such as Plath and Sexton blur the line between the poet and the speaker. Like much of Plath and Sexton's body of work, I also use the first person "I" or the second person "you" in my poems to create closeness with the subject matter. This kind of exposure on the part of the poet brings intimacy to the poem as a formal element. That said, I specifically choose to use the first and second person to help the reader connect more fluidly and emotionally with a poem.

When I first read "Lady Lazarus," I connected with the power of the speaker: her direct address to the audience from the first person, the vindictive and confident tone, her possible omnipotence still allowing room for the reader to see human flaws. In my writing, I want to invoke this power of a speaker that walks on the edge of confidence and humanity. I find this

prevalent in “Serotinal” and “Muse,” as the speaker exudes control and confidence even while showing their weaknesses to the audience.

I incorporate poetic devices such as imagery, metaphors, and similes to bring the speaker’s personal problems to light. For example, in “The Evolution of Self-Preservation,” I use figurative language to show the speaker’s desire to end the relationship by relating it to the defensive way lizards evolved to lose their tails. I have a strong tie to nature, on both a terrestrial and universal level. I ground my poetry in images that use parts of the body to reveal the consciousness of the speaker, such as the way the lunar terrain of the lover’s body in “Celestial” reflects the speaker’s distance from emotional comfort with her lover. Many of my poems use images derived from the natural world (trees, wildlife, the moon) while invoking the human body to emphasize a connection between the two, even if at times, the humans are destroying the natural world. This is most present in the final section of my thesis, “Ash Back into Fire.” This final section finds the speaker trying to cope with creating a new world after the natural world (Earth) has been destroyed by humans. Nevertheless, she remains nurturing throughout the onslaught of damage she experiences. In the end, the speaker reverts back to a primal state, looking to nature for comfort when all else has failed.

I’ve designed my thesis as a progression towards a new outlook on intimacy and human relations, starting with the loss of romantic relationships (“A Sort of Loss”), progressing to a persona sequence examining relations between life and death (“Grave Dwellers”), and ending in the possibility of completely reinventing a world to live in after loss (“Ash Back into Fire”). As I continue to work on my writing, I know there will be different goals and different topics I explore. I will experiment with different points of view; I will find ways to include broader

topics such as social issues. I will make use of the poetic voice I have been gifted and hopefully find a way to inspire other young writers to turn their own ash back into fire.

A SORT OF LOSS

*people are not good to each other.
perhaps if they were
our deaths would not be so sad.*

- Charles Bukowski in "The Crunch"

The Love-Sick Tango

We joke about going on dates I blamed
on birthdays for an excuse to pay the tab
and buy you red tulips, not roses.

But it's Singles Awareness Day
and all you wanted was a Hippy boy
to bring you a solitary daisy.

You could pick the petals off
one by one, determine if he loved
you more than I made you feel

the night we held hands below the bar:
the Specials pumped through box speakers
and you bought me a beer...or three.

In the corner on a burlap couch, we chain-
smoked cigarettes in secrecy but your fingers
waltzed across my thighs; 1, 2, 3,

1, 2, 3,

so alluring I almost mistake it for a love
-sick tango. So, I tell you *I want you*.
Honesty lingers on my tongue,

longer than the bitter bite of cheap
whiskey we spiked our coffee with.
Head over heels to the ground, we missed

lips: our failed attempt at saying goodbye.
I daydreamed of sleeping with attractive men
who were bad in bed. I found it amusing

when you confessed you loved boys.
What difference would a girl make?
Only half our truth exposed, we left

but could not love each other for fear
the world would give us a title we weren't
safe in, knowing safety has nothing to do with love.

Consumption

I want to eat your words voraciously
until I have consumed a dictionary
of excuses why I can't touch you.

Lust, the most wretched emotion,
chews up Monogamy, spits out Sin.
It gnaws at me with the fervor

of a paper shredder until, I am weak
enough to confess I want to let you in,
only she is luckier than I to go

home to you. I want to taste
your salt when I lick skin, say *yes*
while *no* recedes to the back of my throat.

But your words never come
as often as I do, thinking of you,
touching myself because I can't feel

us together—too dangerous.
Separately, we can ache, crave
this hunger unsatisfied by poetry.

So here I lay my vulnerability
before you, rolled on the ground
like a red carpet to guide you inside.

The Girls You've Been in Love With

The girls you've been in love with
are traveling on trains across country,
or waiting for subways in New York.
Although states separate you, their painted
pedestals remain pristine, while I dream
of the stories you will never tell about me.

You still uncover the caustic smile
you can't stop catching, reminiscing over
naked mornings spent smoking hash in their beds,
or wearing florescent orange sunglasses
as you dined with them at Indian restaurants
you will never take me to.

I tried to tame your wanderlust. But,
as a staggering traveler, your toes found paths
to their doorsteps at dawn, holding your heart
out to them, offering what fare had left to spare
for the girls you've been in love with.

In my wonderment at your fascination,
I imagine them as ghosts of who you were
before their stories were written on your lips.
But perhaps you spoke too loosely then,
traveling across state lines on metal rails,
as they do now, telling their own sad stories
to make other girls not fall in love with you.

The Indian Mandala

It hung in your room, tacks piercing
the crumbling drywall under each corner:
painted brown filigree on cotton, burnt
orange. The musky smell of cloves, mold,
and smudges of incense ash ground into its fibers.

You said, *Sit and stare. Look at the center
and everything in your peripheral starts moving.*
All I saw was an elephant, a gift from a girl
you fucked who doesn't take your calls anymore.

New paint replaced old. Your bedroom walls
changed color as often as your taste
in women went from sorority girls
to tattooed, punk chicks. But you couldn't stop
comparing me to your fantasy of her: a breathing girl
competing with the ghost in your wet dreams.

The fabric faded as the past tried to cling to the present,
as you clung to anything that wouldn't drag you down with it.
When I asked if its repeated tear-drop shape made you dizzy
you said, *It can never be the same if the design is marred
because everything is connected. You can't remove a single line,*

until you ruined that fragment of her you'd held onto;
white paint accidentally splattered on the Indian mandala.
Still, you refused to trash it or dab its weave with turpentine.
Instead, I pulled it down, then scrubbed, and scraped
her fabric until that elephant bled through.

Unclothed, Honest

You only kiss me when you're drunk,
as though monogamy were a crime, afraid you might need
more than chemical reactions between hormones and liquor.

Last night, as we lay in bed, chuckling mouths open wide,
I allowed sleep to vanquish me; you wrapped me in blankets,
my mother's old leather boots still stuck on my feet.

Oh, my drunken beloved, we fantasize of fucking
but I wake up crying, finding us on opposite ends,
our backs face-to-face, ready to duel.

I studied your jagged shoulder blades, cradled my chin
where your neck and shoulders met, expected you to need me.
Lucky it was not cold when fabric couldn't keep me warm—

not as you did nights before, when I wanted
you to grasp my soft breasts, leave blossoming
bruises for me to discover the next time I showered.

When I rose from the sheets, unclothed, honest,
you rolled over, faced the ghost of my sleeping body,
caressed its stagnant memory, then waited for me to leave.

Abyss

I wake up counting freckles on your back think of songs wish someone wrote one
about me I start my own while those freckles taunt me frustrate me when I count
too many want to kiss them all the thought of me touching your jawline your arms
sculpt milky marble around shoulders hunched mountains over me as my hands run
down your spine's dip the cavern of your collarbone we kiss caress blonde hair
I feel foul breath on my neck hefty hands cup mine nested as antique spoons
pretend we don't fight closed fists with open hearts all along we have been
in our stares doing this so I try to look

away

no one stares holds touches studies kisses me through morning
breath reminiscent of longing moans whiskey shots cheap cigarettes chain-
smoked bad poems we found comfort in the night before when you held me
in a choke hold like a wrestler on TV but not fake made me feel —closer—
secure—the tightening grip love pulls me into your elbow's crook my throat
closes you knew it was what I needed I lose count I fall into your abyss

don't want to

stop

The Phantom of Past Wars

Each night, restless in bedlam, you resurrect ghosts
of soldiers between the silence of inhales and exhales.

With open armaments, your tongue licks
at danger with its impending threat of bombs:

shrapnel cast as broken words. A battlefield
camouflaged in sonnets and rusted debris.

Your words linger with me as personal mantras
I used to know: *Hold fast, my love*. But I let go.

Once, we were allies, and twice, you called a truce
hoping we could resolve with a peace treaty.

I sought severance, but you wanted full command.
So, I began to find comfort in my ritual of retreating:

the sacred breath of death, the smell of burning
paper, your radiating lips that curl and taunt me.

I want to believe you aren't with me, washing away
the stench of our afternoon fallout from my skin. Yet

as day ends, you are mapping out tactics, still summoning
the phantom of past wars for duty. I find you everywhere.

The Evolution of Self-Preservation

You come as you are: whole and limber,
fighting for the scent of honey from the comb
of my skin. You empty me, but ignore
how I've wanted to release you
as a lizard loses its tail in defense.
I, too, will rid a limb to run rampant:
the part of me that once contained you.
My deception saves me after you
see my freshly bled nub of a wound.
I am phantom-limbed: I remember
when we clawed at each other,
rolling around like dogs, and the sand
swallowed our heels into the Earth,
as the tar pits once swallowed mammoths,
regurgitating them into fossils. Our love
thrives on the debilitating constant of comfort
and quarrels at 2 a.m. when we should scrap
what's left and safely exit, shed our callous skin
to bare an unmarked coat: some transformation
better than my tail between my legs.

Tethered

Bound as knotted rope, we made
promises as fickle lovers, secured ourselves
to objects we assumed would last forever.

But once we are removed,
they become relics, false idols:
copies of keys, vacation trinkets,
leftover bottles of bargain wine,
your grandmother's sapphire necklace,
my stray hairs you still find in your sheets.

Nothing held can't be lost because
memories will remain: how I can't forget
sleeping-in on your futon, the cats between us,
the sun on our skin washing us in warmth.
Something better than now, at 4 a.m.

when you still call to say, *Good to hear your voice*,
but it keeps me tethered to the other end with little
choice but admitting I can no longer untangle
myself from the fibers of our fleece. Stifled
in your weave: nothing left to do but cut
this cord loose.

Uncoupling

I.

You can read my palm through its wrinkles,
feel my veins as branches beneath thin skin.

We grew like ivy on each other. Our bones,
the lattice of our past, unable to separate vines

from skin, unable to separate now from then.
I think it would be easier to transplant me

as an oak tree, uprooting my trunk, placing my limbs
into an empty bed, extracted from your fertile soil.

II.

You unfurl in my head as tendrils of seaweed
that will choke me. I start sinking into the algae

growing between the rocks on our shore. Slick,
salty brine currents push the waves through your lips.

Small fish pick the plaque of me off rocks and I am
stuck to the reef that flourished with the life of our love.

III.

What our future holds is unclear, as the outline
of leaves or the shoreline in the dark.

We admit to the truth of things we can't ignore:
our instinct not to sleep alone each night.

We are pack animals; as much as we try
to resist the comfort of others, we rely

on knowing how to survive
as a species: evolution at its finest.

We are a dying breed: endangering ourselves with romance,
living in the comfort of our inevitable extinction.

GRAVE DWELLERS

*Do not deny,
Do not deny, thing out of thing.
Do not deny in the new vanity,
The old, original dust.*

- Laura Ridings Jackson in “Incarnations”

In Manila, the capital of the Philippines, the poorest residents live in the graveyards, only requiring the permission of the remaining family members of the deceased. These families agree to take care of the graves, in exchange for being allowed to live within them. Families have grown up, several generations in some cases, in these cemeteries and they form a bond to the cemetery as their home. Several times in the past, the Philippine government has stepped in and forcibly removed the families, offering them low income housing. Yet many of the families ended up coming back to the graves where they had lived before.¹

¹ All information paraphrased from several online sources, as cited in the bibliography. (StrangeRemains) (Sumitra) (Hodal)

Epitaphs

—*Manila North Cemetery, Philippines*

Here lie: remnants
of broken bread, foul soup,
rice sticking to fingers,
never filling bellies.

Here lie: brittle bones
of ancestors under
stone, tucked away
from the living.

Here lie: shells
of ghosts the living
know, whose voices echo,
ringing, singing at night.

Here lies: a village
alive with hope,
growing life next to decay,
thriving in the face of death.

Cohabitation

More than a safe grave
to warm bodies among cold bones,
this mausoleum we call home
subsists in the world of the dead
who walk the earth, but long
to fit with the living.

No one knows the cost of living
when you can't afford a home,
nor how someone can long
for the shelter of a grave
in this world where the dead
don't even own their own bones.

The souls of the dead grieve for bones
evicted to make space for the once living
who can afford their rent. So, the dead
bide their time finding home
in a familiar shared grave,
though they won't stay long.

Restless, they wander at night. They long
for a home, moaning, rattling their bones,
seeking haven among the rubble of a grave.
Instead, they clamor and wake the living
from dreams of places that feel like home,
or a sleep so deep, they mistake the living for the dead.

We who can't pay rent know the dead
will let us stay, if we work hard and long
to keep clean their eternal home.
Gardens arise from sun-bleached bones
but bear no shrubs, no buds, no sign of living
green, just bits of tombstone naming a grave.

Thankful, though our lives are grave,
we pray to the dead:
for giving shelter to the living,
for this sanctuary among their long,
fragile, picked-over bones,
for a dry home.

Though we are not yet dead, we long
for a grave to rest our own bones,
we who have nowhere else to call home.

To Marikit Ilao (1895-1905)

Little ghost girl, your skin
sallow and thin, translucent
almost under your soiled gown,

your eyes in their sockets,
sunken brown orbs nested in
a skull delicate as dried petals,

tender phantom, your hair
matted with dust, tangled
in crushed wildflowers,

I chase you through the graves,
kicking up pebbles. At each turn,
our heels crack against the ground.

We play with cicadas, cupping
their shed shells in our hands,
their skeletons as frail as yours.

We share secrets by the riverbank,
make mud pies, fashion dresses
for dolls with crumpled paper.

I pray for you, young apparition:
*Lamb of God, who takes away,
grant unto this girl eternal rest.*

At night in bed, restless for sleep,
I press my hand on your grave,
until your palm pushes back,

and I know I'm not alone, my ear
pressed against the slab, listening
to the lulling hum of the cicadas.

Coming Home

After they moved us out, my legs walked me
back to the safety of your tomb. Your howling
was a curse protecting me from Death
slicing his sickle on our wall. So now,

your bones rest beneath mine—
less flesh, but just as brittle
and weary as the living, only a thin
sheet of cement separating us.

I sleep where you sleep, but
unlike you, at dawn, I wake
to roaches and the rattle of tin cans
when the trash settles on the street.

I never knew you, only begged
for dry shelter, and a deaf ear
to pray to, quietly asking
your forgiveness for my burdens.

Like God, you never answer anymore.
Still, I have to believe you listen.
As much as you are a name etched
in my stone pillow, you are alive, fueling

the fire of my dreams. Moaning in me
as the wind through the graves, as you
must have moaned, calling out to me,
calling out to her, or to no one.

To Malaya Lawas (1998-Present)

When we dream together, I am
alive to you, my death relevant
only in the realm of the waking.
At night, you speak to me.

Alive to you, my death relevant
to my lack of bodily form,
at night, you speak to me,
but my words are muted.

To my lack of bodily form,
you keep me in your subconscious.
But my words are muted
until we meet in your dreams.

You keep me in your subconscious,
the captive of your internal cave
until we meet in your dreams
under black night's shade. Keep me as

the captive of your internal cave.
Let me exist only when daylight dies
under black night's shade. Keep me as
your misfit spirit, and we will thrive.

Let me exist only when daylight dies.
When we dream together, I am
your misfit spirit, and we will thrive
only in the realm of the waking.

Bodies Entwined

Keep me company, Marikit.
Shelter is not what it used to be
and I long for the company
of lungs no longer heavy, of arms
surrounding this cage, my ribs,
crooked spines, yours, mine, bending
together, awake, in this expansive space
we might share. Come. I will give you
a frame, a place to come alive
again, a body, one body, my body
enough for both of us.
My mind can be a lonely place,

the graveyard is lonelier still.
Your bones will disintegrate,
since nature always takes back
what she has given. Still, I
will fuse us. I invite you to
inhabit my body, and let me
carry our souls, filling
a void that was never
empty but waited.
We are alive again.

All Saints Day

We cleaned our home: swept up the leaves,
collected pebbles and grit, packed up
any signs of the living. Two days
we slept with trash in the alleys
so your family could mourn you,

but they don't know how we now
are stronger. You are with me. They burn
prayer candles to conjure saints.
But our sanctuary welcomes Death,
where saints no longer listen to flame.

What remains: a trace of smoke, piles
of ash, your bones still here, now frail
as incense. Together, we walk the streets,
more a single body than twins conjoined.

We could no better part than peel our skin,
go back, as separate bodies, to the grave.
It wouldn't be the same.

ASH BACK INTO FIRE

*brave love, dream
not of staunching such strict flame, but come,
lean to my wound; burn on, burn on.*
- Sylvia Plath in "Firesong"

Coffee with Orion

Street lights illuminate one by one along the street,
urban constellations lighting the sky, Orion's belt
detaching faintly through the branches of trees.

Something else hangs from Orion's waist, only the luxury
of frayed rope to hold up his dusty jeans: a pocket knife,
short a sword by several inches of steel, but rusted

just the same. My drink goes cold as dusk settles
into the clouded sky. The coffee shop chair's tremble
remembering past occupants: ghosts of leisure.

Oh, Orion, you are but a man among the Gods,
yet here, you hold your title with vengeance,
to make the most of hunting my naïve heart.

Your eyes fixate on a crack in the sidewalk, but
I focus on your hair, falling out of place, like a shooting
star falling from heaven to this dull and dying Earth.

If lightning can strike the same place twice,
touch me again, let sparks fly when you stroke
my hand, my skin tingling like a breaking bone.

If I must die, let it be by fire, or hunting bow.
Place me among the stars that bind you.

Celestial

Our lips left raw
from half-way kisses,
we fight through
hours and minutes
until we can wake
to battle the sun.

I see freckles
on your shoulders
outlining faded
constellations. Scattered
stars on skin connect us
when our bones curl
together, limbs grazing
each other
in close orbit.

Your eyes
reflect me moonlike,
if only your waning
fingers can tremble
down the crater
of my spine,
make us whole.

Tear into me,
try to touch,
cup all of me
in your big
dipper hands.

Ruination Ritual

Earth, string me up like daisies,
wreaths of petals pushed through twine.
Mark me with ash for the unknown.
I have waited, but now you are mine.

Wreaths of petals pushed through twine,
I'll sing you hymns in metered time.
I have waited, but now you are mine.
Pull your strings that twist and bind.

I'll sing you hymns in metered time:
Engulf me in soil. Choke me with roots.
Pull your strings that twist and bind.
Bury me within your fertile fruits.

Engulf me in soil. Choke me with roots.
Carve my name across your bark.
Bury me within your fertile fruits.
Be the ember that lights the dark.

Carve my name across your bark.
Mark me with ash for the unknown.
Be the ember that lights the dark.
Earth, string me up like daisies.

Serotinal²

Move as I want you to move, as my trees sway
back and forth in summer's warm billowing air,
you shall melt into my branches. Let me mold
you into blossoms.

Sun gathers sweat on your stems; and I lick, my
red-slip of a tongue, salty on your petals,
as hints of lavender and sage kiss your skin,
much gentler than I.

You grow as temperatures rise, stifled by swarms
of bees come to collect your fragrant pollen.
They flourish because you have not wilted yet.
You bloom inside me.

Hydrangea, Dahlia, Mondarda, Auster,
I could call you by any other name. Still
you will thrive in the dog days of my nectar.
Will we spoil come fall?

² serotinal – adjective - pertaining to or occurring in late Summer (Dictionary.com, serotinal)

The Earth Dies Screaming³

Gnashing her teeth, gurgling, the Earth says,
“We cannot rid ourselves of each other.”
Alone, Earth learns trusting us is a mistake.

Knowing we’ll scream, “Never again,”
but lying as harmed lovers are wont to do,
we fall into the same destructive cycle.

Erecting monuments to her natural beauty,
we call at dawn hoping to mend wounds
ripped into caverns and mountain sides,

but die each time we hurt each other,
each time a species goes extinct,
each time an iceberg melts into an ocean.

The Earth inhales our gas in her rasping lungs,
fumes we exhaled in vain. Even in the faintest
moments, we keep blowing carbon dioxide

into her and Earth screams, “Touch my soil,
hold me between your fingers,
evaporate into me,”

as we clutch her throat in our hands,
and her soil disintegrates
under our feet.

³ Title inspired by the song “Earth Died Screaming”, written and performed by Tom Waits (Waits)

I Am Rain

Asleep, dreaming
I am rain. Dripping into puddles,
collecting in broken
flowerpots on your balcony.

I am rain. Dripping into puddles,
separating as atoms do,
flowerpots on your balcony,
dividing, absorbing into wood,

separating as atoms do.
We combine, our skin multiplying,
dividing, absorbing into wood.
We try to clean ourselves, but fail.

We combine, our skin multiplying
into dew on grass blades.
We try to clean ourselves, but fail
because we can't separate now,

into dew on grass blades.
Asleep, dreaming,
because we can't separate now,
collecting in broken
flowerpots.

Ash Back into Fire

You are not here. No longer
do I dream as we used to, when
running felt like flying, as though
everything could be reanimated.

If I could turn ash back into fire,
or dull lead into glistening gold,
I could nurture us into a new shell.
I could give you everything.

But only the Earth we have ruined
can find a way to revive its dead,
make new the spoils of the past.
Still, I fight for us. To the Oracles

I will look, make a pact with the Devil,
worship Hephaestus, salt the Earth:
anything to see our flames reignite.

Tell Me⁴

Red-headed siren,
with tactile fingers,
with sailor-tongue:

I taste your words on my lips
when I am mute. Give me your lyrics
through weathered smoker's lungs.

Tell me, do you strum the chords
of my soul as you would your own?

Find my broken body in the ocean, confess
you too know the burn of licking wounds,
a way to mend the parts taken from me.

Tell me, is there love enough to hold me
together the way your songs do?

Serenade me as the crickets did,
when I was young and their song
could still soothe my thunder.

Tell me: *I'm an animal.*
Tell me: *you're an animal, too.*

⁴ Italicized lines excerpted from "I'm An Animal," written by Neko Case (Case)

Muse

I have come to you, once in a dream,
twice, shaped by my tongue. A poetic enigma:

I was formed from you. Not as foam, not as bone,
nor marble nor clay worked between fingers
until your palms began to sweat. None of these.

My womb, a beer-soaked paper bag.
My birth, wet with ink and pulp.
My body, swollen with lyric and rhyme.

I showed you safety through the current
of my touch till your body rang with the verve
of an oil drum. By evening, you mumbled

prayers to me on the street corner,
so I gave you a symphony of words.
Let my words come to you. Invite them in.

And you will write, something soft at first,
in the crease between my neck and shoulder,
feel your verse like the blood beneath my skin.

Keep Me Wild

Baby wolf, let me lick you,
sterilize your wounds.
Let me stitch
together the slit
the hunter carved
into your skin. Leave

your mother to die
in peace, as we all will
one day. When I hold you
to my breast, stop yelping.

When we flee, whimper,
or howl at the full
moon. Nuzzle your
muzzle in the crook
of my elbow,

paw at my skin. Keep
digging for the bone
you didn't bury.
Its scent, the musk
of marrow, lingers
but it will fade or

be replaced. I will
find us a cave
to call home, build us
a fire as you curl up
in the dirt. Then,
when fleshy food is
no longer found,
we can chew leaves,
and fresh berries,
scavenge for mushrooms
inside molded tree stumps.

Your hair matted
with dried blood,
bits of sticks
and mud like cloudy,
tree sap. But I will
clean you, pick ticks
from your fur gown,

until you mend, then
tune my ears to
the rustling
leaves, stalking
prey who wander

too close. Together,
we will stay wild
for years. I will keep you
hidden from the hunters.
as you will keep me
covered, dry and safe
in our den.

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Vita

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