Tulpamancy

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Tulpamancy

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 Creative Writing Poetry

by

Kia Groom

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Many thanks are due to Carolyn Hembree, who in addition to serving as my thesis director has also shaped and molded my understanding of what it means to be a poet, a teacher, and a human being. I owe her an incredible debt.

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Finally, thanks to my mom and dad. Dad, you fostered in me a love of words and storytelling from an incredibly young age. Thank you for making my childhood magic. Mom, I wouldn’t have made it without you. In every sense. You are incredible.

Poems from this manuscript have appeared in Cordite (“Alice at Last”), and been nominated for several awards: “Be Were” for the Sundog Lit Poetry Prize, as well as the Judith Wright Poetry Prize; and “& Love’s the Burning Boy,” which received an Honorable Mention for the 2015 Vassar Miller Poetry Award. Several poems from this collection have also been submitted to the 2015 Fairhope Poetry Prize, for which I am thankful to have been nominated by Carolyn Hembree and John Gery.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface: Monster Feminine ......................................................................................................................... 1

I.  
Alice at Last .............................................................................................................................................. 10  
Witch House (First Summoning) .............................................................................................................. 11  
Tulpa .........................................................................................................................................................12  
Once Out of Nature ...................................................................................................................................14  
Witch House (Second Summoning) .......................................................................................................... 15  
Shepard Scale ............................................................................................................................................16  
Palimpsest ..................................................................................................................................................17  
& Love’s the Burning Boy ........................................................................................................................18  
Imaginary Boyfriend ....................................................................................................................................19  
Almost Alice .............................................................................................................................................20  
Phantasmagoria .........................................................................................................................................21  
Witch House (Third Summoning) ............................................................................................................ 23  

II.  
Portrait of Woman as Prop ........................................................................................................................25  
Double Feature ..........................................................................................................................................27  
Ghostland ....................................................................................................................................................28  
Catholic Education ....................................................................................................................................30  
Missed Connection at the Meat Market .....................................................................................................31  
Preemptive Eulogy for Tooth Not Lost .....................................................................................................32  
On Instagram James Franco Eats a Rice Cracker .....................................................................................33  
The Winter of Faux-Morrissey ...................................................................................................................35  
Remember How to Fox Me .......................................................................................................................37  
Be Were .....................................................................................................................................................38  

Vita ............................................................................................................................................................40
Preface: Monster Feminine

Recently, a friend picked up the Art Deco statue of Melpomene on my desk, turned her over in his hands. “What is this?” he asked “The King in Yellow?”—a reference to the short horror story by Robert W. Chambers, where a play of the same name drives all who read it to madness. I was amused by this case of mistaken identity. Carved from some pale yellow substance and clad in golden robes, Melpomene does look regal. She is almost genderless: flat chested, her eyes closed and her mouth open. She stands amidst the clutter of knick-knacks on my desk, wailing up at the empty bottle of Horror Show wine balanced precariously next to her. I liked the idea that she could be two things at once: a beautiful woman meant to inspire men and an icon of the horror genre, a powerful king evoking terror and insanity in all who look upon her. Melpomene’s misidentification made her more potent for me. Instead of being restricted to representing just one thing, suddenly she contained multitudes.

I have always been drawn to myth and mysticism. Raised on a literary diet of Greek Mythology and traditional fairytales, it’s no surprise that I graduated to a fascination with spirituality, the occult, and the horror genre. Myth-making helps us to make sense of the world around us: I believe poetry does this, too. It seemed natural to me to explore poetic expression as a kind of ritual, a conjuring that evokes the world as I want it to be, or exposes the world for what I believe it truly is. I began to think of poetry as a spiritual practice—what is more God-like than to call forth something from nothing? By embracing myself as a source of creation, and by shaping my own myths, I felt powerful.

However, I struggled with the representations of women in fairytales and myths. Despite feeling empowered by poetry, when I looked at the history of the genre—and the history of literature as a whole—I saw women represented as props, as bodies, or as muses. In her essay
“The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking”, Alicia Ostriker notes that mythology would have us believe that women must either be angel or monster, a trope that is now so deeply ingrained in our collective unconscious that we see it manifested across all genres, and all forms of media (71). When she is monster, a woman embodies traditionally male characteristics—self-confidence, strength, aggression—to wrest power away from the male protagonist. She is the witch, the harpy, the shrew, and her sexuality is weaponized. When she is angel, a woman embodies traditionally feminine characteristics: she is submissive—a vessel for male desire, valuable for her chastity, her purity, and her complete lack of agency.

In my work, I am questing for the monster feminine—the antithesis of the sentimentality and flowery emotion that has dogged our readings of female poets. I reject the monster/angel dichotomy—I want to explore femininity as grotesque, brutal, horrific. I want to push the notion of women as creative force, not passive inspiration.

Muses, like Melpomene, fall into this second category: beautiful women who exist only to inspire great men—ATMs dispensing art and music and poetry. In part I of this collection, I reverse this trope: the female speaker (Alice/Alice-Sometimes—a reference to Lewis Carroll, to whom I owe a great creative debt) creates a Tulpa—a muse-like figure who becomes too real, too physically present to be controlled. Alice is inspired by and drawn to him, but simultaneously frightened and repelled. Ultimately, of course, the Tulpa is and has always been Alice’s creation—a part of her subconscious. Alice is, therefore, her own muse. She is both angel and monster, passive and active.

Part I is an exploration of my complex relationship with muses, and my desire to create a nuanced mythology that represents the female protagonist as God-like, while still retaining a sense of her vulnerability. The monster feminine is horrific, yes, but it does not seek to
masculinize its subjects. Rather, I am arguing that to be a woman is to be simultaneously
grotesque and sublime, and that it is possible to be powerfully monstrous while remaining
definitively feminine. Part I is also a conscious effort to employ poetry as spiritual practice:
many of the Tulpa poems can be read as ars poetica, where the un-named male character is both
conjured thoughtform and the poem itself. I highlight this by making repeated literary allusions
in the poems in Part I: Lewis Carroll, in “Alice at Last” and “Almost Alice;” W.B. Yeats in
“Once Out of Nature,” which borrows language directly from Yeats’ poem “Sailing to
Byzantium;” Elizabeth Bishop in “& Love’s the Burning Boy;” and H.P. Lovecraft in a number
of poems, most notably the Witch House poems, which draw their titles from his short story The
Dreams in the Witch House. Part I also draws in themes of philosophy and mathematics,
particularly in “Shepard Scale,” which references cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter’s 1979
book Goedel, Escher, Bach both in the poem’s structure, and its refrain of “strange loop strange
loop strange.” It is important for me to pay tribute to the writers who have shaped my
imagination and my process, as well as to make the link between the act of will/meditation that
creates a Tulpa, and the act of will/meditation that creates a poem or work of fiction.

In Part II, I tackle the monster feminine in a more direct manner. The poems in this
section are influenced by the Gurlesque, a theory of poetics that sees poets “perform their
femininity in a campy or overly mocking way…[to assault] the norms of acceptable female
behavior by irreverently deploying gender stereotypes to subversive ends” (Glumen 11). Unlike
Part I, Part II has no stable speaker and no narrative. Instead, it is unified by themes of girlhood
and womanhood, abuse and trauma, female sexuality, and the female body as a site of critical
analysis/self-analysis. “Portrait of Woman as Prop” and “Double Feature” both draw heavily on
the Gurlesque in their invocation of gender as vaudevillian performance. Elements of the
Gurlesque are also evident in poems like “Remember How to Fox Me” and “Be Were,” where the female body is in a state of flux between human and animal. In “Remember How to Fox Me,” the male character dehumanizes the little girl he is obsessed with by molding her identity to that of an animal, “[grooming] her so girl became fox. Fox became fox-hole. And he slipped in.” In “Be Were,” the male speaker sees the female subject as road-kill, desiring to “plunge [his] hand inside/and taste/beast/coronation”. As Glenum puts it, “in Gurlesque poetry, human bodies and human language (and thus identity) are not closed, discrete systems. They are grotesque bodies/systems—never finished, ever-morphing, unstable, and porous.” (17).

While some of the poems in this collection play with meter and fixed form, most are free-verse lyrics. I feel most comfortable in the lyric mode, as I find it less restrictive and more open to experimentation. For the poems in Part I, particularly, I wanted the freedom to play with visual elements and hybridity in order to create a destabilized, dream-like world for the speaker and her Tulpa to inhabit. This experimentation is most evident in “Tulpa,” where the prose sections are interrupted by lineated verse, as well as highly imagistic italicized sections that move associatively rather than logically. The Witch House poems, on the other hand, drive forward the narrative arc of Part I through more traditional prose and logical narrative. “Remember How to Fox Me” is also a prose-poem, chiefly because I felt it required a more narrative approach to convey the dramatic situation and tension between the male aggressor and his female victim. There are two poems in the manuscript that employ traditional meter: “Double Feature,” which uses iambic pentameter to contrast the regularity of the rhythm with the violence and unease of the subject matter, as well as to evoke a disturbingly child-like, sing-song tone; and “Pre-Emptive Eulogy for Tooth Not Lost,” which is a modified Pindaric ode modeled on Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn.”
Part of the reason I favor free verse is the ability it grants me to break the line not according to prescribed meter, but according to musicality and meaning. I use line breaks to emphasize rhythm, and to capitalize on the sonic elements of language in poems that are not deliberately and consistently metrical. I also use lineation for emphasis, and for visual symmetry, as in “The Winter of Faux-Morrissey,” where the line breaks after each ‘please’ to build tension and to create a stacking effect. “The Winter of Faux-Morrissey” also breaks lines against syntax to avoid directly quoting the title of each referenced song, and to force the reader to see those song titles in a new light, as part of the narrative of the poem. I also use lineation for visual effect in “On Instagram James Franco Eats a Rice Cracker,” where the first two lines echo "he eats it" to emphasize the absurdity of Franco consuming the cracker. Poems like “Catholic Education” use line breaks to foreground the musicality of language, breaking in order to emphasize alliteration, internal rhyme, and other sonic qualities. For example, in the opening strophe: “Itch in the vein, the road hot still/from sun, an asphalt stream/bisecting unlit houses. Slip of an alley/cat through starlight spittle.” the line breaks draw attention to the sibilance, as well as working the image of the alley cat so that it can be read both as “slip of an alley” (a small partition between suburban houses), and “an alley cat through starlight spittle” (a stray moving between beams of starlight).

In addition to lineation, indentation and visual caesura are an important part of my prosody. As with lineation, I often use caesura to create double, even triple readings of my poems. In “& Love’s the Burning Boy,” “Imaginary Boyfriend,” and “Be Were,” I use the caesura to allow the poems to be read in columns as well as lines, giving them a slippage of meaning that works well for the dream-like, unsettling atmosphere I’m trying to create. Other poems, such as “Ghostland” and “Tulpa,” use indentation to separate dialogue from description,
and to draw the reader’s eye to the parts of the poem I want to emphasize. I’m also fond of the visual effect white space and aeration have on a poem, guiding the reader to slow down, speed up, or otherwise enhance a particular image, as in “On Instagram James Franco Eats a Rice Cracker,” where the line “in & out & in & out” strengthens the visual of the speaker’s childhood crush slowly sucking spit in and out of his mouth.

It is very important to me that a poem look aesthetically pleasing on the page. To that end, I am mindful of grammar and punctuation—not in order to be correct, but in order to add another layer of artistry to the work. Many of the poems in this collection exchange “and” for the ampersand, partially because it looks lovely, and partially for the effect it has on the individual poem. For example, in “On Instagram James Franco Eats a Rice Cracker,” the ampersand is employed to call up the brevity and informality of communication in the digital age. In “Double Feature,” I hoped that the ampersand would serve to undercut the formal, metrical nature of the poem, upsetting the reader’s expectations of what a poem in iambic pentameter should look like. The prose-poems reject the ampersand in favor of “and,” as I felt that not spelling out the full word would distract from the rhythm of the prose. I also make use of the visual elements of grammar and punctuation by playing with capitalization, as in “Portrait of Woman as Prop,” where the male creator/writer is given capitalized pronouns to conflate him with God. By contrast, “Be Were” uses entirely lower case letters to give the poem a quiet, soft ambiance that makes the violent acts that take place in the poem all the more disturbing and insidious.

While women may no longer be muses in the classical sense, we are still viewed as fodder for the male-poet’s poem mill. There is a troubling trend in contemporary poetry to reduce and appropriate women and women’s bodies in much the same way as the horror genre has done. We are cut up and dismembered. We are raped and abused. We exist as bodies without
thoughts, without agency. The contemporary male poet’s muse is no longer the mythical woman but the actual woman—this is evidenced every time her body is invoked as an object of desire or, so often (too often), as a site of violence. Critics, unable to separate damaging and outdated conceptions of gender from the work of women poets, have contributed to a “construction of Woman as…deviant, undeveloped, narrow, [and] self-involved” (Kinnahan 191). This perception of women poets as second class, a footnote on the history of a male-dominated genre, persists even today—VIDA, the organization that tracks publication statistics based on gender across all major American markets, notes in their most recent survey that in 2013 less than 25% of work published was penned by female-identified writers. The message is clear: a woman ought to be the force of inspiration, not creative expression. She ought not to build temples. She ought to haunt them.

While I do not believe that poetry is required to be political, for me, being a woman and a poet (as opposed to a “woman poet”) is an inherently political act. I write to upset and unbalance the status quo, to challenge a literary climate that has reduced women to passive angels, or derided them as hysterical, sexually promiscuous monsters. My muse does not fall neatly into either of these categories. As Ostriker says, “a muse imagined in one’s own likeness, with whom one can fornicate with violence and laughter, implies the extraordinary possibility of a poetry of wholeness and joy.” Let me be Melpomene and The King in Yellow. Let me be tragic and fearsome, gentle and mad. The monster feminine is a poetics of empowerment, where women are allowed to be grotesque and terrifying while maintaining their gender identity and agency. I will be my own muse. I am a woman, and I contain multitudes. If my poems are myths—to quote Sappho—“this will I now sing deftly/to please my sisters.”
Works Cited


Alice at Last

I un-wake to damage.
Light-bulb stutters, frantic
once off, once on, illuminates
imagined
    skyline.

Inside my bedroom it rains
for days. The head
full of synaptic hauntings
shudders. Old-milk sky
dimming.

I tell myself there is
a world outside
the world. Stay still
completely, gather dust
    & watch the fretful halls.

Walls convulse,
contract & close. The filament
at the bulb’s chest flickers. Lethe
half dream-
drowned in me.

Here a sickness not worth
surfacing. Better to sink.
To listen: soft light, soft
light & the pressure
    the pressure of doorways.
Witch House (First Summoning)

The house lurked on the corner of Carroll Avenue, down the road from where C and I lived catty-cornered in suburban slabs. Down the street, away from our circa 1970 exposed brick boxes, the houses merged to faded weatherboard. At the bottom of the hill, abandoned buildings had burned or simply fallen down, never to be helped back up. The Witch House nestled comfortably between fact and myth. Other kids said *demons and curses*. Parents said *crack-heads, junkies, delinquents. Tear it down*, they said, but no one ever did.

That evening, a need for damage--I dawdled home. Mosquitoes orbited, hum of evening. My limbs dense clouds I couldn’t slap away. C’s voice, from a great distance, wire static.

The house looked into me. Its stained-glass eye.

That night I dreamed a hall of endless doors. Light behind windows flicked: once on. Once off.

Batted lashes, broken. The lungless breath-lace curtains.
Tulpa

_from the Tibetan meaning “to build” or “to construct”._

I.

In 1992, Alice made a Tulpa.

_Carry an amulet. Kiss its three sharp corners. Shine._

It began subjective, but with practice could be seen: imagined ghost that flickered in the physical world, a sort of self-induced hallucination.

_Recall the chalk clouds. Recall the scent of symbols scratched on motel walls. Remember rising damp, the face in the mildew who told you_

_do not be

_afraid._

In time the vision grew—Alice talked to Tulpa, Tulpa started

_talking back._

II.

_On the bedspread, summon your sixteenth birthday. Snuff candles, ask. Re-write time & split unopened packet, tied with coils of braided hair._

_Look at it—wish artifact. Wish perfect. Wish this skin, unbroken._

& suddenly, she’d see it summoned against her will & bathed in fire light, or else at foot of bed, this figure staring, formless mouth with words all of its own.

_To make a Tulpa, carry books to bed. Lie on your mattress & dictate your woes to furniture. Lie & map imaginary houses._
III.

Friends began to ask
  —who is the stranger in the house?
  —the man with amber eyes who slender slips into your room?

Map topography of bodies. Think: how will his paper limbs assemble into flesh? How will it feel with one half of the bed depressed?

The brittle shell of conscious conjuring had changed.

Hollow your head and light the neon Vacancy.

And with her will, Miss Alice made a monster.

IV.

Consider the shape of your hand as you teach yourself falling. Curl two fingers: beckon / closer.

A Tulpa is a phantom.
He is insubstantial.

Crown yourself with polished trauma. Balance amulet between your eyes & watch the dark soak through the floorboard cracks.

Students who succumb to fiction fail—

Kiss split plaster. Tongue holes in sacred symbols. Braid yourself, your ropes of follicles—restrain inside imagined houses.

they spend their lives in waking-dream, in half-hallucination.

Wait for tenants, for an occupation.
Once Out of Nature

He moves
from corners, eyes shine dark.
A certain shape, I know not
what, speaks in a stolen voice.
Syllable by symphony, his black eyes
gyre. How glossy, with the tar-pool
pulsing under his curve.
Byzantium: I bite
& mouth floods strange
delirium. Holy fire taste
of swallowed saints, of prayers
I scrawled darkened bedroom walls.
I dreamed this once:
tattered coat I tore from
poetry. Conjured. Thin.
Desire sick & singing, fear
enamed in this form he takes,
the scent of gold & amber.

His shellac suit,
his boots of beetle wing,
the bough he offers, paper-
pale, my sharp tooth bared,
I press to wall.

He moves like oil,
hole, animal arching
at the artifice. All through
this drowsy summer I have worked
& now his breath, this creature cut,
this moving thing still standing,
made from fragment, oozing step
by stretched-out silhouette.
Witch House (Second Summoning)

Again, the house on the horizon. A patch of greater darkness, light sucked from flickering fluorescence, language of street lights and the weak milk-moon. A house-shaped absence. Feel it: the densening of air. The press of ghostly bodies. My name in the Cestrum Nocturnum, called from the mouth of slow blooms. Mark it by pavement cracks. Mark it by crickets in the tall grass in the yard of the empty lot. Sway bare limbed. Rattle through. That house, leeching the light. Holding the light. Refining the light. I disorient. I should turn back. But there, the scent of jasmine tugging, there the hiss and click of sprinkler cycles and ah, just there, the way my fingers find the latch and push.
Shepard Scale

A strange loop arises when, by moving only upwards or downwards through a hierarchical system, one finds oneself back to where one started.

loop strange.
shape of house hollow, splinters,
a series of locked doors.
you speak in descending pitch.
cassettes
unravel in the tape deck.
i cock my head to the wall
& look for omens.
bone crown.
a shuddering sets in.
deer crown.
the yellow walls speak
backwards. crown of icy organs.
closer, come.
fold me like moth wings.
prism the kiss of my eyelids,
the keloid twist of closing.
pine heart,
palms to the beat of the boards.
the house recovering language
sings stained glass. we hang like mist.

pitch descended.
speak & the doors unlock.
i splinter hollow household.
strange loop strange loop strange
Palimpsest

Scissors slice syllables, cut
round arc of little a & cancel
context. I keep them
pinned to walls & window,
light illumined lexicon
& webbed, a wordspell: be a real boy.

At night the letters whisper.
I am lulled, & in my sleep
I sleep inside him. Everywhere
my tongue finds language.
Everywhere this loosened syntax.

Books, their spines snapped
lie in shallow graves.
Gutted for parts, his beating
heart cut straight from Red Queen,
liver from Old Ones and for the
arteries, that center animate, the House
of Usher.

He’s paper gateway,
one side of a lock I look inside.
Listen for keyholes.
I stick him up.

His eyes fragment.
Ellipsis smudged.
Mouth a conscious stream
from sill to skirting.

The ceiling is a sigil
in his name’s dark shape.
& Love’s the Burning Boy

First he was a child
hood thing, two eyes
in the wallpaper, staring.
Spoke when I couldn’t sleep,

spoke in the cadent click of ceiling
fan, filtered through
white-noise.
He grew in the head

womb of my wounded
mind, a long gestation until

limbs! A torso! Fingers I made
believe my own flesh,

this constant stroking
something like psychosis.

He had now, everywhere
eyes on the inside

watching
wearing me so gently I mistook

this shipwrecked
light, this burning ghost

who lit me up

for love.
Imaginary Boyfriend

Hey phantom boy
I see you.

Mirror focused, I see you.
Door ajar, I see you.

I see your evidence,
know the crescent shapes that imprint
hips & nail
fingers. Dial mouth,
a tone of wet tongue licking.
Dial lamp-light off & now this heat

I know your answer:
organs pulse.
Phantom, your unfocused fog, penumbra drawn
magnetic to my mold.

I know you as bed-headed roses cut for crown

I strip to stem & thorns. I fuck

de not ask. I tell:

me like shucked eyes
fuck like sockets. Fuck

invisible into my skin.
Almost Alice

My name is Alice-Sometimes and I am sleep’s wasted face. I shake out dusk into my open palms. My cheeks are pillows now and Alice waits in cerebellum coffin, ready for her resurrection. I take stock of masks—the faces I have worn. A peeling occurs. I strip the first (utilitarian, fresh-pressed business, dreams like Anti-Virus). The second face sloughs off popcorn Pepsi bottle curves, sheds dreams like sitcom re-runs, like pre-sex finger sucking. Alice, in the mind-morgue, batters casket, wails for me and I become face three: I dream desperate, hooked on hypnogogia and REM-reliant. My skinless body / my authentic self, and as the membrane splits I see her / me, a thing with eyes like rabbit holes, reaching out to open when I close.
Phantasmagoria

I. Alpha

Phosphenes, spot by spot behind
my shuttered eyelids: I build slowly,
shape of his familiar spine.
Unseen he curves beside me.

I breathe the count-down, backwards
& the world falls, air by air.

II. Theta

In the white room he clouds
over bed-sheets, unsettled
weather, & no electric
light will dare illuminate.

III. Delta

His skin tastes clean
sky, polished gray.
Sharp tongue on clarity. I snap
the hallway, let the shadows nip.

He is so still he shimmers.
So still he gutters out.

IV. REM

My rib-cage phantoms. Rain
pretends to know his name,
but at the window only nail taps.
I watch his eyelids lightning.
I watch the static gather.

V. Delta

My chest is a wet sheet tattered. Your shape
embossed in the folds & at my center
black mold.

VI. Theta

Light cracks open, thumb-pad switch depressed & I see the vacant space, stretch of my own bleached skin.

VII. Alpha

He is gone so thoroughly.

I lie in the damp & listen to my wanting thunder, thunder.
Witch House (Third Summoning)

The jasmine did it—growing in the garden, wild over cracked statues, violating knots in the weatherboard and window sills. And that scent: sick floral, liminal. I watched between the afternoon and evening, saw cup of shadows spill on splintered porch. Saw dead skin catch the light. All the fault of the jasmine, scent that creeps through key holes. Scent I crush between my fingers, small white trumpet blowing back the memory. I breathe it in, this great unraveling. Notes off-key like rooftops settling in wind. I catch it, tuneless chemical in cheap department store perfume, & when I shrink. And when I stumble. There it is, the jasmine. There, my feet outside his door again.
Portrait of Woman as Prop

The Un-Named Female Object hangs suspended at the center of His Poem waiting for the pen to fountain life-giving semen into her sockets.

The Un-Named Female Object is a corpse of pockets.

Her holes are sites of violence:

the eyes,
the mouth, the slabs of slick thigh-meat, ready for loose lines,

for rhymes, for idle penetration.

Call a Doctor.
Call a Priest.
Call the poet from his favorite bar where bleary-eyed he writes in whined cryambic pentameter, clutches his ink-thick cock and laughs.

Wank, wank--
He’ll pose her, slur suggestions, shake loose His jaw from decent hinges, animate empty vessel through violation.

*Hey, my cock!*
*Hey, my cock inside her!*
*Hey, my rock hard cock inside her corpse-holes,*
like key-holes
ignite action, locked
mechanical and mute. He makes her
open wide.

The Un-
Named Female
Object exists only
when violated

is stuck, therefore, to sticky
lexical lounge, mouse
in a glue-trap moving
her corpse-holes

tight and tighter and tightest

like he wants them.
Double Feature

In darkened theatres I split violent 
& open wide this sick-sweet bag of treats. 
The candy boy sticks scented fingers deep 
inside, & gropes for something saccharine--
between my thighs I hold the icy drink.

The curtains raise & I snap bubblegum  
the hue of flesh-light in my father’s room. 
A boy’s hand takes my skirt hem hostage & 
I breathe pleas into soft pink rubber sphere:  
*ur really pretty babe, I swear, u r*

he said this: *ur so fuckin sex c girl--*  
just girl & not my name, but who has time 
for courtship when my body is this hot, 
when all my holes are plastic pockets lined 
with Grade A Vulvateen all silky slick?

I let this boy do things he wants & watch 
the girls on screen unfurl their mutant limbs, 
a freakish blend of flesh, all breasts and legs. 
I snap the gum. I think of children’s toys. 
How somewhere in a factory a girl

is hollowing a plastic baby head 
in case of choking. How the boys would light 
my Barbie dolls on fire, a perfect pyre 
of melting mammaries, how *this* boy believes, 
he owns this flesh, his fingers creeping,

bathed in light from six-foot 
celluloid cunt.
Ghostland

Night-walk in the insect-heavy lamplight I come upon myself four years undone, an almost-stranger ghosting in the empty parking lot, my past self sitting with C on Sunday, outside the shut-up LiquorLand.

I watch C’s snot run down her bruised-blue all-night face, her 24-hour eyes round, deep as coffins as she dug shit up again, again, again

*he’s just so beautiful* C said, of D.

I watch my past unpresent, watch my chapped lips move around some soft reply, as if I care, as if I don’t spend weekends haunting share house kitchen floors, tangled up in people’s boyfriend’s bedsheets.

*Just so beautiful I don’t know what…*

C’s voice smashing like a window.

I pass his old house as I walk, closed up now, all cold windows, but I see the three of us on his couch at six AM, C’s hands twisting paper into cranes, pretending not to hate me, D ripping holes in her stockings with a pair of scissors, asking at last, if he can cut her.

We bled a lot that summer, spent time chewing over words unsaid, and passing day-old gum from mouth to mouth like sacrament. All those drunk offerings
so beautiful I see

me in the doorway tasting
desperation, dexamphetamine,
and still not dead however
much I wanted it. I see my ghost
locked in the house where stopped clocks
blocked out sun, that skeleton-bellied
relic, that flayed and gutted corpse

where I can go to visit with my ancestors,
these distant echoes of my other selves.
Catholic Education

Itch in the vein, the road hot still
from sun, an asphalt stream
bisecting unlit houses. Slip of an alley
cat through starlight spittle.

Last cigarette, the way Em curls
her yellow fingers into small mouthed
sweater sleeves.

Clock tower bites light through the empty
parking lot. Gates we broke apart last summer--same
time I lost the laces from the leather
punctures in my too-small shoes--loom.

I taste penance, my mouth ash-dry and Em
slides ribs through rails, ducks the gate chain.

I become the sum of all my touches.

Here, the darkened grotto.
Here, stone-eyed Mary with her marble palms.

Under the Virgin’s eyes, Em’s hips like Hail Marys.
Under my itch the scratch I cannot trespass.

*Hail* last of the cheap champagne,
*Hail* damp hair,
*Hail* sprinkler cycles.
*Hail* the scent of sulfide.

Flash of cop lights from the hill’s dark lip,
and Em’s hands nudging the dawn
down the bed of the sky, asking

one strike more. Just one
more toll of the hollow bell, before we web

our fingers, streak through the blistered night.
Missed Connection at the Meat Market

Yesterday at the Banks Street
Meat Market a man asked me

if I was married. As if
desire could be kindled

in the sparkly bowls of cheap
glass smoking apparatus.

As if my lack of legal
lover meant that I’d get wet,

aroused by his invasive
eyes and hands and questioning.

As if I held a secret
passion, lit by phallic gas

nozzles slick with gasoline,
for his broken-down half-corpse

of a body. Not enough
overpriced bleach in the world

to scrub out that assumption.
My filthy, barren fingers

betrayed me. I don’t know why
they call it a meat market

anyway. The only meats
they stock are pickled inside

plastic jars, or else well past
their legal expiration.
Preemptive Eulogy for Tooth Not Lost

You, the ugliest baby tooth sticking around well past my eighteenth birthday. Babe, it’s been too long. Drop from my gum’s warm pillow and seek a bed in someone else’s mouth: you would look pleasing in a set of dentures, screwed into bone and shackled, metal pins and rings. Ugly gum limpet, why do you haunt my hard palate? Why do you bruise my jaw with your infected root? Why can’t I bear to yank you from my grown-up face?

Tooth-baby, I tongue the hole that threatens to open up around you. There is room for you now to wiggle and I worry how to hold my mouth around your absence. I torture you with household implements, with toothpicks, forks, and floss. I need to clean my maw of your infection. I am anchored to the backwards years by you, you tiny off-white shackle, and I’m scared of losing who I was before. You make me little.

Little baby, milk-tooth molar, don’t make this so difficult. I’m sick of dragging round this dead-beat dentin, sick of swearing off hard substances. I miss the pressure of enamel, of how you used to grind away my stress. You don’t fit me: this jaw, this face I’ve grown around a child’s face needs something sturdy. But I’m scared of holes, untended openings, the tender nerve my tongue will wander drunken back to.
On Instagram James Franco Eats a Rice Cracker

He eats it slowly. He eats it
with his eyes closed. He eats it
as if the throes of near-religious ecstasy.

LOOK AT THE YUM says FrancosWife500

I watch the grains
of bleach-white masticated rice, agitating
in James’ million-dollar mouth & I’m reminded

of my grade-school crush, Jason. The kid
with the earring
who made long cords of yo-yo phlegm spit
in & out & in & out

I’m reminded how impressed I was, how
I would have swapped saliva
If he’d asked & how
at home I practiced spitting.

Franco eats the cracker. He eats it
with conviction. He eats it
with a sense of purpose. He eats it
drunk and propped up in a hotel bed.

GeekyFreek declares it ducking perf.

At the mall I try on lingerie.
Nothing fits. Under harsh tube light
I stipple. Skin is not quite bone
enough. My stomach cut
by pink panty elastic.

Franco eats that fucking cracker.

I am half-digested.

I go home and write this poem &
I cord my mucus into threads.
I still can’t spit a line long enough to please
the old white guys in the Academy.
James Franco eats the *hell* out of that cracker. He eats it in a nest of messy sheets. He eats it in a state of abject bliss. He eats it like he writes his poems.

Bits of cracker ooze from Franco’s slack-jawed mouth.

He puts that shit on Instagram.
The Winter of Faux-Morrissey


Hand in Glove, glove in This Charming Man, shit didn’t mean to slip but What Difference Does It Make? Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now, or if not miserable then knotted in the gut pit. William, I said, to the boy with his arms around me, It Was Really Nothing. How Soon Is Now? Too soon? Not soon enough, and then my pen is on the empty waste of your skin, scratching like Shakespeare’s Sister, words to a Joke That Isn’t Funny Anymore, some dull punch line involving the other boy, The Boy with the Thorn in His Side, the boy I go down on in my friend’s apartment, all hole like Bigmouth Strikes Again, and then: Panic (requires no modification), just Panic Panic all the time—when I’m showering, when I’m loading the dishwasher, when I Ask and my cell phone battery dies, and I’m wandering through the suburbs at 6 A.M., that little shit having rallied, Shoplifters of the World Unite[d] to crack my ribs and fist the fuck out of my black-hole heart. Sheila, Take a Bow! This is the gothest poem I’ve ever written. I’m the grad school cliché. I’m the Girlfriend in a Coma coasting through the spring of the rest of my love life, eyes glazed, mouth mouthing I Started (stop) I Started (stop) I Started Something I Couldn’t Finish.

Last Night I dreamed that Somebody Loved Me and I woke up in a cold sweat. Can’t be sure if I’m scared of the possibility, or the possibility of the loss. Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One: before I was a woman I was a girl. Before I was a girl I was an amoral network of shadow. Some people say demon. This, Charming Man, is no exaggeration. How Soon Is Now? Too soon. Because I was withered when I was born—which is a goth way of saying I’m afraid, which is an unfiltered way of saying
I don’t need no man, which is a feminist way of saying
*There Is a Light That Never
Goes Out.* No matter how many times you snuff
the candle, no matter
how late you are
with the electricity bill.
No matter
how many times you Ask:
*Please,*
*Please,*
*Please Let Me Get
What I Want.*
Remember How to Fox Me

He made believe she was feral: fox felt ears, color of Crayola “Earth.” Same color she used to draw him wet from the shower. She only spoke in yips that summer, never came when she was called. He made a game of it: domesticating little beast, this animal-thing that hid beneath the tables where he’d find her, later, cake-smeread. Her shoes unlaced, face sugar, clean licked. Groomed her so girl became fox. Fox became fox-hole. And he slipped in. He knew how to keep quiet in carnage. Knew that patience is the art of stalking prey. She buried her smallness in nosing dirt—once for the touches, once for the secrets stored as her small snout pressed nose to carpet. She drew him wet from the shower. Stick figure in wax. She wore the ears & looked away. Never cried. Never a noise at all.

Now some nights he hears a scratching at the back door. Lights in the yard warn creature in the trashcans or intruder, maybe, and he gets his gun but there’s nothing. Just thick scrawls of crayon wax on walls, an indistinct indictment.

Once he saw a guy collapse the head of a red fox with a bullet.

He split her differently. But split her just the same.
Be Were

tonight the pigment will rise
through your skin, form in fawn
formations deer: your stockinged
shanks hang now from half-open window &
loose shoe you slough off

it was a slow summer
but now i crown you
in the backseat: destructive diadem nestled in the thorns
of your hair, stuck in
a swollen wound that seeps a stream
of blood

i take it, what i’m owed, & crickets kiss your split lips with their sound:

oh, whittled girlhood
oh, crust of mud
that shapes a foot to hoof.

the sun sets on your thighs.
you stumble out & eyes
abandon pigment: sclera
floods dark oil
& in the road deer: you break open

your insides burst with fur
i want to plunge my hand
inside again & taste beast coronation

it was a slow summer
but now i pick fine hairs
from between teeth

& watch you
shake out frail on roadside
gore & glisten of damp girl
& dearest

that’s the thing, with men
we always forget, when hunting for
blood, first:

flesh.
Vita

Kia Groom was born in Oxford, England, and grew up in Perth, Western Australia, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Creative Writing from Edith Cowan University. For the past three years she has lived with three cats and a man who looks like Jesus, in a small pink shotgun in the Mid City neighborhood of New Orleans. In 2013 she founded Quaint Magazine, a literary journal dedicated to publishing quirky, subversive work from female-identified and non-binary individuals. Presently, she works as Associate Poetry Editor for Bayou Magazine, writes angry feminist rants for Quaint’s blog, and tweets obsessively @whodreamedit. She hopes to graduate from the University of New Orleans in May of 2015, with an MFA in Poetry.