Found Cairn

Megan E. Riley

University of New Orleans, meriley@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1828

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. The author is solely responsible for ensuring compliance with copyright. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Found Cairn

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

Megan E. Riley

B.A. University of Central Arkansas, 2011

May, 2014
for Mama
Thank you to Carolyn Hembree for being an incredible thesis advisor and mentor.

Thank you to Kay Murphy and Dr. Niyi Osundare for serving as thesis committee members. It was a true honor to work with you both.

Thank you to the Creative Writing Workshop and the English Department for fostering my journey with support and guidance.

Thank you to Bayou Magazine for allowing me to serve as reader and associate editor. The experience has made me a better poet and advocate for change in the literary community.

Many thanks to the following journals and exhibitions that featured several poems from this manuscript: Deep South Magazine, Bop Dead City, Ghost Ocean Magazine, The Feminist Wire, similar:peaks::, Quaint Magazine, The Rain, Party, and Disaster Review, Every Day Poems, Belle Journal, Eunoia Review, Nude Bruce Review, Ovolution: Little Rock.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ...................................................................................................................... 1

(untitled)................................................................................................................... 7

I.  
My Father Lifted Me from the Water....................................................................... 9  
Mrs. Vern’s Catfish ................................................................................................. 10  
Rosie and the Deer ................................................................................................. 12  
Red Ars Poetica ...................................................................................................... 13  
Glitter Like Death ................................................................................................... 14  
She’ll Fly Away .........................................................................................................15  
Dirt Lobby ............................................................................................................... 16  
Kings Pomegranate ................................................................................................. 17  
Faulkner County Funeral ....................................................................................... 18

II.  
Working for My Father ........................................................................................... 20  
Drinking with Red Bird .......................................................................................... 21  
Tether ..................................................................................................................... 22  
Confession .............................................................................................................. 24  
The Same Is Done to Harvested Fields .................................................................. 25  
Blue Falsetto ........................................................................................................... 26  
She Is 21 .................................................................................................................. 27  
Dismantling Arkansas Stars ................................................................................... 28

III.  
Believing in Rice ..................................................................................................... 30  
De Valls Bluff Voodoo ............................................................................................ 31  
Learning to Fuck .................................................................................................... 33  
Abuse ...................................................................................................................... 35  
Playing Straight ..................................................................................................... 36  
Grandma’s Tracie .................................................................................................... 37  
My Christina ........................................................................................................... 38  
Mama’s Jodi ........................................................................................................... 39  
Trying to Feed You ................................................................................................. 40  
Letter to Red Bird – July 15, 2013 ......................................................................... 42

Vita .......................................................................................................................... 43
Preface

I’ve adopted storytelling as a means of examining matters that define my life. When recently talking with my girlfriend about how to rear children, I referred to a story my grandmother told me: My great-grandmother, Ruby Williams, was a wild child. One day, her mother, Mamie Hayes, couldn’t take any more of her ill-mannered daughter, so she picked Ruby up by her overall straps and hung her on a coat rack bolted to the front door; spankings weren’t working anymore. Instead of crying and hollering louder, Ruby began laughing hysterically. This punishment brought Ruby much joy while Mamie was enraged with her inability to stop the household madness.

While telling this story, I realized it could be interpreted as a disturbing scenario by a variety of listeners, even though my family has been laughing at this story for generations. I worried what my girlfriend’s reaction would be. A burst of laughter eased my concerns and my girlfriend nodded her head in understanding. “Sounds like my family.” My one-sided story turned into a conversation between us concerning how we perceive our family histories. We both agreed on a chief point: There’s a big difference between how things were told to us and how we understand them today. Just like the game of telephone we both played as children, stories change as they pass through different ears.

Ruby’s punishment serves as an allegory of my family history: it reflects 1) how violence has been perpetuated in the Williams clan and also 2) that we have, generations later, found humor in the uncomfortable retellings of violent personal tales. As time passed and both Mamie and Ruby died, a distance grew between the emotion of that punishment moment and younger family members. This distance makes it easier to tell the story, easier to laugh at, easier to accept. I believe, however, if my family would
examine the personal stories we each share, they would not be able to deny the negative context many tales contain. And even then, I bet we will continue to laugh.

I grew up hearing stories. At the kitchen table, in my grandmother’s room, in the fishing boat with Mama, on maroon-cushioned church pews. Stories about Arkansas Post, floods, Riceland, the family tree and cousins I’ll never know. Because I live far away from my family, the storytelling continues via telephone: when Mama calls to carry on about my kid brother’s antics, when Aunt Brenda calls to ask what flavor pie I’d like to see at Thanksgiving because, “we all know your grandma wants that damn lemon ice box.” There’s a pacing to these stories, rhythms that mimic church hymns, always a catchy chorus (“This is my story,/This is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long.”) or key change (that glorious one in the final moments of “The Lord’s Prayer”). Both family stories and church hymns were the first examples of poetry in my life.

In my late teens, I became involved in the Central Arkansas slam poetry scene and eventually formed my own slam poetry event when I was an undergraduate. I identified elements of storytelling in slam poetry that went beyond simple oration. The core of many slam poems is how the poet tells it. The flick of fingers, wave of hands, voice inflections, they all invite emotion. The body of a performer becomes a vessel for the poem to escape, albeit through body movements, raising and lowering of voices, and the energy of other performers.

Group slam performances remind me much of a choir. Each performer is a facet – soprano, tenor, alto – brought together to share a message – hymn, prayer, benediction. I grew up singing in Southern Baptist churches, so slam functioned as a revival of lyrical creativity for me. Like church, slam creates a community. Instead of singing “It Is Well With My Soul” while my grandmother played the piano, I spit a poem
titled “Hope River,” which incorporates lines from Sam Cooke’s “A Change Gonna Come.” It was during these years I recognized what it meant to be a poet vs. fictioneer or essayist. Poetry not only allows for song but requires it. My favorite poetry begs the reader to emote, gather the printed words in her mouth and speak them, feel the assonance wrap around her tongue.

In this manuscript, I focus on themes of queerness, religion, and class. These themes could branch into discussions of what it means to be a queer Southerner, a white Southerner, a poor Southerner, but I focus my energies on writing about the thing itself, as Mary Ruefle defines, rather than worrying about how my poetry “fits” into a larger discourse. The distance I have between the narratives in this manuscript varies. Both “Playing Straight” and “Confession” are poems about intimate heterosexual experiences; however, I have ten years between the event in “Playing Straight” and today vs. four years with “Confession.” I am able to derive a clearer meaning of what happened in “Playing Straight” because I have had more time to process the event and relate it to who I identity as today. I’m still unsure how some of these experiences affect me, in terms of identity, but by sharing them again and again, I begin to find meaning.

I attempt to write each poem in this manuscript as I would read it. Visual caesura and absence of punctuation manipulate the reader’s breath and tempo of thought. Caesura helps me get through some of the narratives, those which are difficult to retell. A few stories included here occurred decades ago and contain traumatic material (drug use, sexual abuse, etc.). I can remember only some portions of those narratives, so with visual caesura, I may demonstrate the “gaps” in my memory with physical gaps on the page.
One of my favorite poets, Jericho Brown, utilizes visual caesura in his collection, *Please*. From “Tin Man”: “Can I get you an axe handle for destruction?/Tired of your body? Use mine. Manhandle./Beat time: I won’t feel one damn thing.” Visual caesura allows for ambiguity in the poem’s message. However, his repetitive use of imperatives does convey a clear tone of aggression, which assists in deciphering what may be going on in those white spaces (what’s between the lines).

An example of a poem in this manuscript where action is purposefully unclear is “The Same Is Done to Harvested Fields.” The scene of this poem involves the speaker being heavily drugged with prescription pills. Perspective is expected to be blurred, so I took that challenge to a literal level and distorted the chronology of real-time action and internal thought: “I lifted numb head She was staring winding a lighter making/tracers between thin fingers The bullets were cold must’ve been in there a while/release time for three green Xanax bars one after the other a schoolyard game”. I wanted the images to stand alone and behave as flashes of memory rather than a steady chronology of what happened in the scene. Visual caesura grants emotional distance, which I am grateful for, because I am the speaker in the majority of these poems.

C.D. Wright’s masterful poem, “Tours,” completely embodies what I wish for my narrative poetry to accomplish: clear and frugal language, vivid imagery that possesses multiple meanings (literal, symbolic, metaphorical), without any reflection from the speaker.

{Tours}

A girl on the stairs listens to her father beat up her mother.
Doors bang.
She comes down in her nightgown.
The piano stands there in the dark
like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can
then she turns the lamp on.

Her mother’s music is spread out
on the floor like brochures.

She hears her father
running through the leaves.

The last black key
she presses stays down, makes no sound,
someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been.

I include a handful of poems in this manuscript that have a young girl speaker. For example, “Mrs. Vern’s Catfish” is a poem about visiting with Mama’s coworker, Mrs. Vern. “Mrs. Vern put her green ball/down in my yellow triangle/leaned over the table/till her chair creaked/Chicken livers she said/Since Mama rarely bought em, I couldn’t help but ask/Do you kiss em?/She howled laughin/said Now baby/what’s the point of kissin/somethin that’s already dead?” Rather than depending on reflection to convey how I now understand that visit, I relied on the story, the thing itself. In this poem’s case, dialogue assisted in conveying the desired tone of a young girl’s first connection to death. What I admire most about “Tours” is how the speaker describes what she experiences without any wandering, without any internal thought or reflection. It makes the poem feel clean, distilled, polished in a way that only a master poet can compose.

My role as poet is rooted in one main goal: examining the past. Once I recall memories, I ask myself, *Why do I remember this this way? Is there another way of seeing this?* In terms of composition, poetry is a way for me to revise my history. In many of the stories I tell here, I leave information out. I am aware some critics may
consider this unfair for my readers. However, I must respect that some of these stories have been private up until now, secreted to protect a family member’s ego or reputation, or possibly my own. I address a few of these narratives head-on, particularly within a trio of poems at the end of the manuscript (“Grandma’s Tracie,” “My Christina,” and “Mama’s Jodi”). These titles give each subject possession over their first major woman-loving experience, whether secret or public. To own one’s personal narratives, and dare I say take responsibility for them, offers a sense of empowerment to these three subjects they’ve never had before. But these poems are based on my perspective, and therefore represent only one side (angle) to the story. I’m beginning to feel like the elders of my family, telling the stories of their mothers and grandmothers. And even though I feel the hurt of these narratives, I still laugh.
(untitled)

after Ashley Anna McHugh

I was a kind of human
freight train breeze

clamoring Not petals in tangled
air but thunder

Slope of my waist wrists
attached to roughened fingers

abandoned at the dock
me

eyes diluted trunk twisted
I was a cradle

in a tree-stand
furious falling frantic stir

Let the bruises be bruises
lilacs lilacs

Nothing to fear
I am the song an empty sign
My Father Lifted Me from the Water

Tangerine touches my face
Eyelashes lace with rind
Dimpled cheeks ripen

Sunset swells the four walls
horizontal dream familiar –

gulls fluttering into corners scratch-atching
gray-tipped back feathers

sea foam calcifies, roughened from tide

shells and sticks and salt clutter sand-striped tiles

I looked at home

Blood orange now
the room shrinks back its white walls
back to a photo album of strangers
on beaches and rocky coasts

I hear a bird       his song
through the window –

a red barn beneath tulip poplars
Mrs. Vern’s Catfish

Went down to Mrs. Vern’s
She was cookin supper
catfish her and Mr. Joe
had caught somewhere
near the Clarendon bridge
or off Goldman-Sunshine
reservoir where my stepdaddy
takes us so Noah can
ride his four-wheeler
and I can fish

Gives Mama a break
from what, I’m not sure
maybe from helpin
me too much
The worms give my hands
so much trouble
wrigglin like they got
a hot date to get ready for
How could they see
themselves in their lil
mirrors down so far
deep in the dirt?

Mama’ll fuss at me
for not doing it myself
She’ll fuss
spit a bit of Skoal in her can
tell me bout the times when
I was real lil
I’d kiss the minnows
lips on silver

No way I’m kissin
worms now
nor minnows for that matter
I’ve been wantin to prove
that I can do it
Stick the thing
on the hook
and let the bobber
hit the water

I asked Mrs. Vern
what bait she used
What do catfish like?
Must be somethin good
cause those fillets she was fryin
were so big two filled
her biggest cast iron

Said she’d tell me
after dinner
She was teachin me
Chinese checkers
I ate the last hushpuppy
asked again
What was it she used
to catch them big catfish?

Mrs. Vern put her green ball
down in my yellow triangle
leaned over the table
till her chair creaked
*Chicken livers* she said
Since Mama rarely bought em
I couldn’t help but ask
*Do you kiss em?*
She howled laughin
said *Now baby*
*what's the point of kissin*
*somethin that's already dead?*
Rosie and the Deer

At Justin’s  
out in the country  
That place has a name  
Why do we always call it the country?  
To drink and visit and build  
a fire and do the shit we used to  
All of us in the shed  
about eight or ten of us –  
Nora, Joe, Cloud and Zach.  
Was Josh Austin there?  
It took the Hendrix kids  
a while to notice the deer carcass in the silver sink.  
Rosie was propped up against it  
probably talkin about Girl Talk  
till someone asked if that was a foot.  
She spilled her whole damn beer  
Seemed they shoulda smelled it before they saw it.  
It’s easy to blame  
a lot of things on the country.  
Poor things didn’t know  
what to do with themselves after seeing the tangled fur and legs.  
They didn’t understand  
the deer wasn’t gonna jump out or hurt anybody  
the empty thing.
Red Ars Poetica

Can I use you? Your plumes?
Will they reveal memories?

Is it safe to speak to you this way?
I’m talking these songs
out with others
I’ve ID’ed like you

Can I express temporariness with metaphor?
What it means to watch you leave.
Red stuffed body flying in
directionless motions

How long will you linger in these words
before flying away?
No wind guiding you
only aerodynamics of buildings
the true smack of concrete
against breasts

Am I a bird on a wire?

Can I balance my songs on reality and faith?
In the by and by?

Is that a broken dichotomy?
Will the circle ever be?

I sing on the bank between a river and a small rain
Glitter like Death

It wasn’t maroon carpet
stretched one hundred yards
to the front altar

It wasn’t the once-black pantsuit

It wasn’t the velvet hat
glued askew
at a left angle

Damned carnations

Stilled sanctuary
amplified my pent-up
sneeze burst above
the open casket

Beads of spray
floated onto his face

Snow, it seemed, glitter
sunk into skin

touched once
along some beach
down some boardwalk

A red balloon tied
to my child wrist

Tissue boxes
dusty pews
My old man
with something
to shine about
She’ll Fly Away

Church pew daughter
her seated pose queerly opened
hands clasped between
denim V of her jeans

Woman who raised me
brings right hand to lips
spits Skoal mound into Pepsi can
hidden behind a Bible

Pushes hymns out of
1940s Wurlitzer piano positioned
beside empty baptismal
just a bathtub from here

Doesn’t realize she’s singing
till the chorus end
(Some glad morning
when this life is o’er)
Dirt Lobby

Out past Wal-Mart the last gas station the golf course its white flags onetwo threefourfivesix sign for De Witt POPULATION 3524 to see God’s creations she kept sayin Aunt Carol’s dream catcher on rearview (stretch of pine ditches sunflowers that stand tall for a week) Look left! Through beadwork burnt white field snow geese restin keepin on where it’s hot Texas Monroe maybe

Geese spread out the woods We left the purple van freezin wind pushin us catty-cornered Got our balance shoved hands up under armpits Aunt Carol mumbled the 23rd me lie down in green pastures He leads me beside still waters I’m freezing run through rutted tractor trails

Every step geese honkin louder Left into the white a few steps flock lifted up blanket bed sheets I ran back She laughed clapped for the birds look at em darlin White sheet covered sky rollin over our heads headed towards Almyra De Witt the county jail the direction we were drivin
Kings Pomegranate

*after David Halliday’s painting “Pomegranates”*

What has power done to you? Spotted splotches on plump heads and sides beneath your crowns a warm lamp’s glow keeping you alive Folks are embarrassed Even P quit telling your myths left it to porch talk outside Eatonville or somewhere in Yoknapatawpha County

Stories change First it was just a few seeds the Persecution diet Then it was someone placing you in a basket sent you floating a muddy river nourish our barren lands we’ve been living on three generations now You must understand our shock you in a 9 x 9 inch cell a tuft of your own leaves behind you

Prisoners
Faulkner County Funeral

Plane trails spell X
My sky melting

Pink peaches purple
among the blueberry patches

Ragged shade skeletons
roots hug hips

Jet cloud streams flow on through
milky meadow

Thick ribs of clouds
the bean field’s water furrows

This dying place
a corpse I ain’t ready to lay rest

Her arms, hair, the neck
I bury myself in

stiff with cold now
burn tangerine now
II.
Working for My Father

Wish I could’ve been his waitress,
another servant for him.
Brought his order of fried eggs,
extra crispy bacon, browns.
How that bastard loved
his green onions.

Could’ve heard his worn-out heart
battle body as he counts over his bill,
$7.63, maybe the last he’d pay
before his heart gave and he fell
over dead on the garage’s cement floor.
Hell, he did speed, drank Jack,
married Mama,
divorced her and hid
with the kid he stole from her.

Wish I could’ve gotten a good look
at his money log, what was left
for the week, something around $50.
How he forced Mama to carry that log
everywhere she spent money
to prove she was where she was supposed to be.
How that Friday before she left him,
he hollered about her cheating
with the cab driver.
What was it, she forgot to write down
the $2.78 total for the morning’s gallon of milk?

Wish I could’ve served him
extra biscuits to make enough
tips for cigarettes.
Sure, I’d smoke his brand,
Pall Mall reds.
Wish I could’ve given the angry stranger
the finger when the shakes made him
drop his coffee spoon.
How he beat Mama because
he broke his hairbrush.
She was the kind who’d take it.

Not me.
I could’ve been the woman
he didn’t hate.
Drinking With Red Bird

Drunk bird at the cold
glass bottom
rub soft down
around brown eyes

Beads reflecting silver jewelry
my sterling worms
around neck and wrists
He asks to touch

Wonder why he always looks
away from me

Must be bird nature
constant attention
to wind patterns
Moon and her tides

No time for touch
just enough seed
the quiet body
Tether

Ball hung from
overgrown maple
really a soccer ball dented
in half with yellow nylon rope
stepfather named *tether ball*
That’s what it was

School was over
I pushed the trampoline
beneath the tree
jumped high enough
to bite the tip
off an oak leaf
I shoved my fist
into the bulging ball
it swung away from me
it swung back
my bouncing sports bra
small knots I’d been praying for
weren’t as big as my cousin’s
She wore a nude bra with underwire
so her peach
knobs wouldn’t show through
tight Aeropostale shirts

Didn’t want a brand name
across my tits
till I saw hers
stretching the cotton-stitched logo
my neighbor groped spaces between
a and e
r and o
They moan as I tried keeping distracted
with Baywatch on his TV
mounted in the corner

Summer heat swelled the room
his Nascar bedspread felt scratchy
back of my neck sweated
walls bowed in like pairs of hips
squished soccer balls
I looked through his
bedroom windows
across the street my house
backyard trampoline
the *tether ball*
swinging with every thrust of wind

I played in the backyard till mid-August
even though Mama fussed
it was too hot
I jumped punched bounced swung
till I heard a screen door open and shut
across the street
my neighbor shirtless
jerking lawn mower pull cord
It revved up then went
quiet revved then quiet
*rev-sigh rev-sigh*
I watched
Confession

He tried to fuck a boy
but instead
came to my apartment

My hair wet with bullets
he fingered each drunkenly
accidentally fired in
my red truck

Full-lipped kisses
my hands felt
girl on boy body
skinny white like yours, Sam
His name yours, Sam

Drove him home after
our night but couldn’t
let go of how it felt
to play straight

I should want it
him us the truck bed
hollow enough
for our load

Three weeks late
but I knew I wasn’t pregnant
knew I didn’t want him
but the idea of what we were

Told him I was
but lost it after too many
Xanax spilled down throat

He said we were
a mistake and happy
we didn’t make something
we would regret
The Same Is Done to Harvested Fields

Woke up with shower head pointing towards my neck a firing gun My dealer my girlfriend sat on toilet seat cover I lifted numb head She was staring twirled lighter made tracers between thin fingers The bullets were cold must’ve been in there a while release time for three green Xanax bars one after the other a schoolyard game the razor blade Skin softens when wet knew this from learning how to shave felt tight when I tried to stand Slipped on bullets rolling down my back sides of white tub Skinny arms the width of a coat hanger she lifted me flung me over her shoulder still dripping bullets and blood crosshatches deep in thighs something to grab onto All of naked me in air for a moment Her arms weakened released a molted barn swallow through closing window Frozen toes slipped off tub’s lip fell on dewy carpet Swallow’s gnawed foot bones caught on sill inner sash descended sealed shut as grass caught the bruised bird She covered me towel dried blood on cotton brown mud freshly hardened Fell asleep with her cigarette breath home burned
Blue Falsetto

after Frank Stanford’s “Blue Yodel of Her Feet”

You won’t look me in the face I’m a hound that’s killed things we once loved so you look

My feet paled from winter paws roughened by gravel stiff branches

They hardly hold the weight of my body cold statue you admire

Your waist is a place your chest gives ground sandbar by river hums a summer song

I wish I could keep you barefoot and dance around young plants bearing in dry soil

Too much to raise your eyes across the rest of me you look at my feet yours walked

over spring ground where you found me cover this same terrain when you leave
She Is Twenty-One

The oil of wheels
Puddles flash from
truck’s body to sky

All along Bayou Meto
woods
Girl drives this July 29th –
families’ RVs
dogs pissing –

A dozen men watching:
twenty-four
purple hull peas
stare from this
porcelain bowl

A red red truck
A small rain
Hand out window
A river

Fisherman waves
asks the time like
her console worked

His stares turn
into orange bobbers;
she asks why
do you look at me?

His mouth open black
no white tooth speckle
says A pretty girl
shouldn’t be here
on her birthday
Dismantling Arkansas Stars

*Mouth-deep love
mud between your teeth*

Unlearn constellations
to see stars:

- twisted back of the archer
- whiskey-tipped bull horns

- pots hanging overhead
- full mattress on floor

The dotted home we
wished to move into

*Mouth-deep love
mud between your teeth*

Going back toward childhood
will not help:

- plastic-seamed Fisher-Price embrace
- touch of Barbie’s resin blonde

Insist on love spoil it
reach my body within yours

Eat the wildness of a new
one already in our bed
III.
Believing in Rice
   after Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Believing in Rice”

The fields survive
every hot damn summer
but it took decades
to discover how the dollar worked.

Farmers listen to trees filled with locusts
tell you how many are inside
but with the store owners
their math is always off.

Sullied overalls and boots
cross each inch of ground
while thick fingers point.

Their tractor-trailers creak
under another season’s load
while sunflowers rise
easy in lazy autumn.

Above beer cans and Dodge’s chicken boxes
Riceland smoke erases sunrises.

Folks forget rice makes men bend
so close to God’s earth.

The hunger under their breath
could anchor green pines.

Last night, I dreamt of green
lunch for a child or soldier
out in the fields
running too fast to look around
De Valls Bluff Voodoo

He offered us
beers beneath
bridge truck rumbling
heavy each second we
stayed undecided

Felt fucked up
probably fucking with
us younger
than his truck

Holleried We’re campin
in the park come kick it
and his number

We leave
the Airstream Christina
has spray on her

So dark we trip
fit through
green tent door
made half-curtsy of it
Christina does

Girl in corner pretending
to be blind Her
accent’s from
Snake Island

She whimpers
slaps can lip
as if she’s confused

I watch wide drink
beer inhale to be
able to breathe cool
enough vibe with pot,
beer, the blind girl

He’ll go ahead
kiss Christina
so we can leave
She’ll leave with me
Christina kisses tight-lipped
hard-beaked bird

How to use hands
express I want to leave
a chill lets-go

Afraid of cops
cruising through
late park hour

I’ll die blind
or deaf here
difference between
seeing and hearing
to a judge
Learning to Fuck

Therapist says it’s normal
You wouldn’t believe how
many stories I’ve heard
but I’m not sure if she knows
what she’s talking about
how to compartmentalize
the warmth of Casie’s hand
family blood running
through those veins
thicker than the water
I was baptized in
the summer I turned eight
cousin three years older
knew about boys
masturbation
how to do it right
flat palms only
her hands explained the feeling
having to pee is normal
touch through it
on the carpeted floor
opposite sides of the bed
we fucked ourselves
could hear her moans
over the purr
of the box fan blowing

Were there any more encounters?
Repeat encounters are very common
in these “types” of situations
for the first time
I blend the word encounter
into a sentence with phrases like
empty Smirnoff bottle
top of her stretched pussy
my fourteenth birthday
her boyfriend
coked out of his mind
wildly laughed
I know what ya’ll’ve done to each other
Let me see
He clenched my wrist
guided the empty bottle inside her
glass steamed up
clear fluid began filling
grit of wrinkled label between my fingers
his licked-wet lips against my ear
*You’ve been practicing*
he laughed stripped kissed her
first time I touched
the top of a woman

*Are you available this time next week?*
*We didn’t get as far as I’d like to*
and for some reason I care
about making her happy
nod yes and give her the $5 copay
cry in the car
stunned by how easy it was to pay
a stranger to listen to stories
I don’t want to tell
drive home
fuck my girlfriend till hand cramps
just like I was taught
Abuse

In this light
bodies look
like switches
Pluck a good
one or get
beaten

Never wrote
about sex
till I found
the perfect
limb
long thin
to rip off
your trunk
Playing Straight

Our bodies different
nothing I’d ever touched
in De Valls Bluff
a new river cutting
across White’s filth

Fucked on dirt road
near Gator Bar
I saw pickups lining
the lot as we moved
updownsideupdown

Both choked
heavy breasts
fleshy inches
my back stuck to white
Ford’s leather seat

He opened door
October’s cold thrust
against wet thighs
gravel crunched
under his boots

Arms the length of legs
measure how much of me
there’s left to take
though I can’t take more
than fingers’ reach

shoves in the naked thing
Grandma’s Tracie

What I’ve been told
Grandma played
piano for the church
Wasn’t High Church
but her fingers licked ivories
bought with the building fund
so this mattered
Her nail polish left red
slits on the keys
from each arpeggio

Fell in love with a soprano
twenty years her junior
hid a three-month affair
behind the choir loft
painted with an olive tree

Peggy, Grandma’s sister,
found a lesbian Kama Sutra book
on the soprano’s bedside table
examined the bent purple spine
two women hugging hips on the cover

Holding her son’s hand
Peggy blessed each door frame
with holy oil and prayer
He restoreth my soul
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake

Maybe Aunt Peg thought she was doing
Grandma a favor
saving her from same shame
Peggy had when she married
that inmate and that Mexican.
Maybe she knew it was better
to resist shame than hide inside it.
My Christina

White River carried the sun
to bed beside the trailer
Inside we fucked

Carpet burn blotches reddened her
hip while bones found corresponding
joints to clink against

Ligaments and tendons stretched
Her legs linked my shoulders
into questionmotions
till I found an answer
my mouth never asked for

Surrendering to the astonishing
coincidence of finding myself
under her warmth
I relaxed every cell I could
still remember
A first
Mama’s Jodi

I heard them fucking
in the spare bedroom
Jodi was supposed to be
a visitor for two weeks
stayed six years and counting

I confronted them but Mama insisted
just us two take a drive
We sat quiet in the truck’s cab
drove past our former houses
on S. Wood, S. College, S. Lowe streets
eventually parked at a gas station
and left me with windows down
came out with a handful of scratch-offs

She bought five for each of us
I’d never known Mama
to buy lotto tickets
sit in the driver’s seat
and scratch to find luck
Each shamrock, pot of gold,
cherry with its stiff stem,
diamond, and dollar sign
sloughed off our cards
onto our chests and knees

She asked if I won
10 dollars was all
Better than nothing
She took the ticket
went back inside
returned with two more
They’re yours she insisted
but I asked her to take one
didn’t want to go
through this by myself
Trying to Feed You

1
Last day of your visit
and I’m in the kitchen
Chopped potatoes
minced garlic, onions
Cast iron sizzles
my morning hymn
I cook two eggs for you
You ask for just one
Said you’ll stop
counting calories eventually

You feed me too
much good food

2
Workshop runs late
but always time for dinner
Bowtie pasta boiling
minced garlic, onions
Pot bubbles
my evening hymn
You walk in tired
from helping other people
Said you’re not hungry
You worry too much about food
I cut the heat and try
to shake off shaky hands
Bowties conflate into infinity signs
I watch bubbles dissipate
You won’t leave the bed
browned leaf beneath a maple

Thought up a plan
fancy restaurant dinner

Don’t have much left in me
or my checking account

Felix’s and their chargrilled oysters
scoop you out of bed

Restaurant teems with tourists
who left Acme’s long line

You and me at a too-big table
dozen oysters between us

You eat a salad
Watch me eat entire tray
ask if we can leave

I’m worried you are reading these letters more than you are reading Deleuze.

How do you clutch the cotton paper and follow along with my words?

I’m happy for you, Red Bird, and your new nest being built in Stanford country.

Proofreading these letters, I notice the images: pines, tall grasses, harvest, and realize

I know your nest, too, though I don’t know where’s the best place to rest my head.

Perhaps it should lie here, on this page, white-sheeted bed dressed for us.
Vita

Megan Riley was born in Stuttgart, Arkansas (take the t’s out – it spells sugar). She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Central Arkansas in 2011. During her time there, she was an intern for 501Life Magazine and served as a poetry genre reader, Assistant Layout Editor, and ultimately, Editor-in-Chief for Vortex Magazine, the university’s student-led literary magazine. Prior to graduating, Megan was the recipient of the Margot Trietel Award for Excellence in Creative Writing in Poetry. Three months after earning her B.A., Megan initiated graduate studies at the University of New Orleans in Fall 2011. She currently serves as both Blog Editor and Assistant Poetry Editor for Bayou Magazine, a publication she’s proudly represented for three years.