

TEXTUALITY OF FLESH

by

Mona Bozick

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Textuality of Flesh

Mona Bozick

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Signature:

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Mona Bozick, Student

Date

Approvals:

---

Dr. Craig Paulenich, Thesis Advisor

Date

---

Dr. Steven Reese, Committee Member

Date

---

Dr. Mary Biddinger, Committee Member

Date

---

Peter J. Kavinsky, Dean of School of Graduate Studies & Research Date

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## **Abstract**

*Textuality of Flesh* is a poetry manuscript consisting of poems that explore identity and sexuality through a central poetic persona who, biologically and mythically, is a chimera, or a person who has two complete sets of DNA.

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## Latter Day Mythos

You are flesh of my flesh, bone of bone. In my mottled, sometimes skin. In my hair that doesn't hold color, in my face changing with the light, sometimes harsh, planed, sometimes like the filtered face of Rita Hayworth. As with rosebushes grafted, I am hybrid, more than my roots. I am two, become one, in those first few hours. While they lay lethargic in some sweaty bed, smoking, loathe to sleep before the sun, we were formed, not as one in the beginning, rather two, alpha, omega. How to know we were a modern ouroboros twisting in on one another, until one, we—I was born through some unknown alchemy, more than the sum of my parts.

## Like Breathing

1

As a child—  
before the dreams  
and the change of skin—  
she loved the flight of butterflies,  
would watch them  
at rest on rocks  
along the crick-bed.  
The slow flicker of wings  
like breath,  
the pause  
between intake  
and exhalation.

2

She was never the girl  
with pink shoes, pinafores,  
never wanted to cheer  
on the sideline.  
She craved contact,  
the shoulder driving in below the blade.

3

When the boy down the street  
had a birthday—she went.  
The only girl at the party,  
the boys pretended not to see her.

But when the birthday boy,  
with piggish eyes and greasy hair,  
smashed wings  
in his ham-hock fist,  
smeared streaks  
down tree bark,

she punched him,



straddled his chest in the grass,  
until finally,  
plumed in color,  
they saw her.

## The Voice That Isn't Hers

Awareness of the niggling  
voice inside her head  
grows as she grows.  
Sometimes it acts as her conscience,  
other times eggs her on  
to climb higher, ditch school,  
pee standing up  
belly pressed to the rasping  
bark of the oak in the stand  
behind her house.

The voice helps her hide  
when mama comes calling.  
*Not under the bed,*  
*she will find you,*  
*squeeze behind the dryer,*  
*she'll never look there.*

She never doubts this voice  
that croons to her,  
that soothes her  
when loud noises rumble  
the sash against the sill  
and blue light strobes against  
the vellum of her eyelids.

## The Still Before the Rain

Walking down Main Street,  
sky high and clear,  
Lorelei sets the dogs to sniffing.  
Cats forget the birds they stalk,  
watch her as she passes.  
They gnaw on tufts of grass,  
swat anxiously at gnats  
that swarm low in nebulous clouds.  
Swallows swoop in shallow dives  
to clasp the easy prey.  
Silence spreads in rings,  
cricket-song slows,  
bees flee the meadow,  
quickly flood the hive.

In the field empty of buzz,  
cows sink to their knees,  
sleep, side to side,  
tails turned to the east.  
The only sound on still air,  
frogs in frantic cacophony  
down in the pond  
at the foot of Miller's Lane.  
In the wake of her footsteps,  
trees curl their leaves,  
the indigo folds in its petals,  
exposes its tender white.

## The Whisper of Leaves

On the long drive  
from Seattle to New Mexico  
Lorelei, like any other child,  
longs for the drive to be over.

The Dinosaur Diamond  
stretches south through Utah.  
With only creosote and  
pebbly vistas beyond  
the backseat window, she mumbles  
to her wavery reflection  
in the backseat window.  
Mama keeps  
the eight-track cranked  
over the howling of the wind  
through the VW van windows.

No twenty questions,  
license plate games,  
camp songs,  
only the loneliness of  
the desert roads heading south,  
slightly east, but always south.

Leaving Seattle behind,  
she had hoped the rain,  
always dropping from clouds  
pricked by the vertiginous point  
of the Space Needle,  
would stay, but the rain  
is loathe to let them go.

The van chugs desperately south.  
Boredom nibbles at her chest,  
makes it hard to breathe  
in the desert heat  
funneling through the windows.  
She drags the silver-handled,  
horse-hair brush through  
her wind-woven hair, loose strands

fly out the window,  
float like streamers.  
Rain clouds gather  
above the highway,  
like the clouds, dark and foreboding,  
in the cheap dime-store  
novels mama reads,  
juice glass of iced Boone's Farm  
in hand, before falling asleep  
with the bedside lamp still on.

Tangles of hair  
coil in thermals  
above the desert floor,  
undulating shimmers of heat  
distort funhouse  
cacti in the distance.  
Lightning jags  
the blackened sky stretching  
from horizon lip  
to the apex  
of the bubbled windshield.

Hail pummels  
the van, rain sluices  
down the glass, Mama  
pulls onto the hard-packed grit  
beside Highway 191.  
Even with the windows up,  
she hears that rain  
in the desert sounds hard  
without the whisper  
of leaves.

## How She Got Her Name

*When I think of Lorelei my head turns all around  
As gentle as a butterfly she moves without a sound  
-Styx*

Mama won't say his name,  
only that she loved him,  
that she knew as the sun dripped  
across the sill she was with child.  
She waited four months to tell him,  
the swell above her panties noticeable.  
She knew she would never see him again.

On her way home after the yelling  
and the accusations,  
*Lorelei* came on the radio.  
She knew it was the name,  
never stopped to pick a boy's.  
She prayed that some man  
would be turned by her daughter,  
but then, she didn't know  
what I would become.

## The Desert

Lorelei and mama take a day trip up into the mountains. This first desert spring is dry and hard. Lorelei balks at keeping her shoes on for fear of scorpions and diamondbacks; she would rather sink her toes in grass. They leave town, the road becomes narrow and rocky as they climb. The rainy season is just beginning, but already the track is washed out in the dips and culverts. They get to where they can't drive anymore, so they hike in. The vistas make it worthwhile. In Washington, trees block out the view and moisture seeps into your pores. Rain here is distinct. It falls in sheets, in bands. Rain falling on a town fifty miles away spreads out across the horizon like a veil, like hair across a woman's eyes. When it comes, it is relief, is power, is life. Some people can't take months without rain, can't abide the need to pray for rain. Lorelei knows mama is one of those people. She can see the road reflected in her eyes. She hopes that mama waits until the monsoon ends, but then she will be ready. She hates people's prayers echoing in her head.

## Bringing Rain

1

The men from neighboring farms  
advance on the back door  
without trees  
to camouflage  
their approach.

They wait until twilight hovers  
just above the ground,  
covers them as they circle.

They skirt on tiptoe  
the tangled patch of tickseed  
encroaching on  
the buckled back steps.

In the light of the screen door,  
they brace feet firmly.

Mama answers in cutoffs,  
wine glass in hand,  
bare-breasted beneath an old wife-beater.

The farmers, decent family men,  
glance,  
quickly discover  
flecks of filth on boots.  
They never make eye contact,  
but then that would be tough,  
standing  
in the dark.

Light bends around Mama,  
leaves them  
in her shadow.

She waits silently while they screw up  
the courage to ask,  
something they find  
mighty difficult.



Voices, low, hesitant,  
they stammer their need.

*I heard a rumor someone here could help me.*

Mama, wordless, backs away from the door,  
leaves them  
in the pool of light  
sifting through the tatty screen.

They wait,  
shifting  
foot to foot,  
until she returns  
with me,  
self-conscious in a cotton shift  
that barely fig-leafs,  
pulls tight across my swelling chest.  
She explains what the men want,  
hands me my sweater  
off the hook behind the door.

2

In the truck, always a truck,  
Mama sits by the door.  
I sit,  
straddling the stick-shift,  
thigh bumping thigh  
over each dry-rutted hole  
in the rough  
back-country roads.

He never looks at me that I can see.  
But each time  
he shifts gears,  
he wipes his sweaty palm  
down the length of the thigh  
pressed to mine,  
his fingertips brush the skin  
of my knees as he grabs  
the stick between them.

He never speaks,  
probably afraid the quaver in his voice  
gives him away. Mama never notices.

She just stares out the window,  
dragging on her Virginia Slim.

He pulls the truck so close to the screen  
of grain outside the door we have to slide across  
the seat to get out Mama's door.  
The farmer-man grabs my hand,  
leads me out into the field.

Mama leans against the side of the truck bed,  
shrinks  
into the pinpoint  
of her cigarette.

He pulls me along,  
out to the center  
of the withered wheat.

I know the drill  
and I know Mama doesn't care about rain,  
just money.

Sweat drips  
under my arms,  
between my legs.

In the rising wind, I smell  
the scent of fear,  
my feral animal stink.

On my nostril,  
he smells like coyote.

He presses me down  
onto wheat and chaff,  
shoves into me with the weight  
of body, of fear,  
drives into me  
with the rhythm of the  
words on his breath—

*It's for the rain.*

He drags me down  
the storm inside me building,  
rage boils.

As he splits me—  
I want wrath to split him—  
into two,  
one part lifts to the wind, the other,  
beats like rain.

He sprays his seed  
into the ground, reveling  
in the rain beating  
on the packed dirt,  
pleased to bring life  
to his crops.

On the drive home,  
Mama pushed to the middle,  
I sit smoking,  
rain spattering me  
through the crack  
in the window.

The farmer speaks  
of yields  
and profits.

Mama is silent.

## Outporing

The spots surface on skin  
that shapes and twists  
into something new, a body  
I no longer recognize.  
They surface first  
on the planes of my hands,  
a faint burgeoning  
of red below the skin.

I keep my hands tuck-twisted  
into my cuffs, afraid to be touched,  
afraid of the pulling away.  
Only doctors touch,  
rub their thumbs over  
the thin bones that jut  
against the skin.

The first time a boy  
dares to touch me  
I hide my skin beneath a shroud  
of night and wind and rain.  
The storm winds my  
hair around his neck,  
drags him closer.

## The Scent of Wet

Quiet, withdrawn,  
she sits in the corner  
in kindergarten.

Children peek  
through peripheral vision,  
sense  
she is not like them,  
know  
with simple surety  
she is other.

Every year  
children edge away,  
leave a ring of empty desks,  
a buffer for her difference.

As she gets older,  
the bubble  
only magnifies their view of her.  
Girls sneer and titter,  
yet find it impossible not to watch her,  
long for her.  
Boys,  
when they doze off in study hall,  
slip into deep water dreams;  
her hair,  
tinged green,  
swirls around them.

When they jerk awake  
at the bell's peal,  
elbows slip, chins crack.  
Shame-faced,  
they stagger out of class,  
books firmly pressed  
against erections.

Water seeps from their ears  
and the scent—

of steam rising from late-July storms,  
of lakes swollen  
with salt gravel run-off,  
teeming with frozen frogs  
that twitch and jerk  
as torpid heartbeats pump slush  
back into thawing flesh,  
of sleet in February that stings the nose like coke,  
of earthworm-slicked sidewalks after slow autumn rain—

lingers in their nostrils.

## Lorelei

Standing at the diving board's edge, the children's squeals eddy around the chatter of the girls in bikinis. She lets it wash over her until silence is all she hears. Sunburn laps at the skin of her shoulders. Sweat traces down her chest. Against her soles, sandpaper treads rasp. Chlorine bleaches her thoughts clean. A young mother turns her head towards the lifeguard's tower, her boy drifts beneath the surface. But the guard's gaze is on Lorelei. Gripped by silence, he waits for the moment when she springs off the edge into the pool below. By the time Lorelei leaves the board, he, like the drowned boy, has breathed water into his lungs.

## Ignis Fatuus

High in the Lycian Way,  
fire glows through cracks,  
chimaera,  
flame beneath the cut.

Tracing roots  
of what I am,  
body fused—  
part lion,  
with fearsome jaws,  
    I am the roar.  
        My cry brings death,  
to hear is to be devoured,  
torn free from all familiarity  
into familiarity  
more profound, more terrifying.  
Part goat,  
    I am sin and cleansing.  
Part disquieting ooze of serpent's lash,  
    my mother brought  
    fear into the world.

The bubble never pricked,  
fabrication,  
I am chimera,  
    fable, falsehood, and fiction.

The nightmare in my airborne castle,  
dreamscape of hope,  
lull of illusion.

In limbo, I am  
the embodied grotesque,  
the quixotic ideal,  
Mutter's curiosity,  
the monster beneath the stairs,  
P.T.'s queer oddity.

I am my utopia,  
ghost of hallowed hallucination,



slip of optical illusion,  
rainbow of seeming, of semblance,  
snare's trip,  
ignis fatuus,  
will-o'-the-wisp.

## In the Tank

Lorelei's punishment for skipping  
home is to sit the platform  
at the spring carnival. She waits for the  
jerseyed boys, jockeying,  
stripes blending them into a herd,  
to hit the target,  
their aim the only sure thing about them.

She is *not* the cheerleader  
who manages a coquettish hair-flip  
as she goes down spluttering.

When Lorelei goes down,  
the water is slick  
as oil against her skin.  
As she twists in the water,  
poised to rise to the surface,  
they see skin  
stretched between her fingers.  
Now these boys, the jocks,  
and their balding fathers too,  
know the stuff of their dreams.  
The ringing in their ears  
is like siren song.

She emerges silent, dry.  
Rising from her is the faint  
scent of nightmares.  
They should have known better  
than to put her in the tank.

## The Press of Blade

It starts the way it always starts,  
    with a white trash friend in high school,  
the bitchy girl with teased  
    black hair and tight, tight jeans.  
Squealing, Krystal fucks boys  
    in back seats,  
        on Wal-Mart-special flip-n-fucks,  
            faking her moans to rev him up.

Dirty and tragic,  
    the girl likes to carve  
        her conquests' names  
    with razor blades into skin,  
spiky names that fade away  
    quickly—  
    without scars.

For Lorelei,  
    with too much blood  
    in her veins,  
letting becomes measured,  
    more seductive than the dick of some illiterate.

She lingers over  
    where to press,  
        to wrist, to inner thigh,  
    the moment when skin  
        bends without breaking,  
    the instant when it yields,  
    the tongue-lick upon steel.

## Danger Upon the Skin

She likes boys with the pearlized  
sheen of danger upon their skin,  
the ones who skate the cliff's edge  
on two wheels, whose fingers  
on her skin smell of pistol grip,  
brake fluid, blood, and dirt.  
She moistens at the careless surety  
of their hands on her body,  
the lust-haze in their eyes  
when she shoots Patrōn.  
These boys are safe,  
will not drown in her,  
do not see her in dreams.

## Lost in the Silver

The reflection of lover peers back at her from the mirror to which she presses her lips. She applies lipstick, the darker the better. It is the reflection she wants. The doppelganger she desires, the possibility in the mirrored face. Gazing into the eyes before her, searching beneath the surface for some hint, some meaning, she keeps them open, sees the fog of breath the moment before her lips touch. It is she, always she, that she wants, the reflection in the mirror, the sameness of lip, the parallel angle of cheek, the gaze that always meets. She never needs for more, never hungers for the other. The other never satisfies her with backseat gropes, fucks in basements. The hands she feels are her own. The metallic tang at the back of throat says something indecipherable, something lost in the silver behind the glass, something that keeps her up at night, something, some *thing*.

## Emmadora

1

Pain coils through her muscles,  
clenches and grabs like a constrictor.

In her agony, denied relief, denied pills,  
my grandmother twists, trying to ease

the tension in her legs, legs that  
look like my legs, my mother's.

the same meaty thighs, scrawny calves,  
the same pudenda shrouded in hair,

my grandmother's steelier than the  
snow-spun wisps upon her head.

2

I imagine her as a young woman in love,  
as the woman who ran off with a lover

from the circus. It was the 40s, she a mother  
already. Did she meet him with little girls

clinging to her hands, their sweaty, cotton-candy  
fingers feeling to her like quicksand?

Was he the strong man, virile and able to protect  
her from the husband left behind? Or was he

the horseback acrobat who reminded her  
of the boy she loved as little girl growing up

in a small Pennsylvania farm-town. Possibly  
he was the lion-tamer, exotic, smelling of sweat

and animal pheromones. I don't know what pulled  
her away from her daughters, and I don't know

what it was that brought her back, a year later,  
to the man who took it out on her in voltage.

## In the Mirror

She assesses bone structure,  
    the length of her nose,  
smooths with fingertip  
    the arch of eyebrow,  
ponders what distinguishes a woman's lips.

Is it the way  
the lower lip slightly droops  
    sexy in her, weak in a man?  
She firms her lips, but looks angry,  
    not strong,

examines the reflection of nipples,  
    palms against the swell  
        over pubis.  
Molds the fat laid above bone,  
    flattens contour of hip,

yanks up boxers,  
    snaps elastic.  
Clit lengthens, swells,  
    bulges the placket.

Across her breasts,  
    bandages subdue rondure,  
create pectorals, the illusion  
        of brute strength.

She pivots,  
    admires the new silhouette in the mirror,

pulls on pants,  
    legs lengthen,  
  
        buttons the front, then cuffs of her shirt.  
Her shoulders broaden,  
joints stiffen,  
    she becomes the image.



## She Will Paint the Sounds

of words onto her body.  
They will bridge the arc of her back,  
conform to the flex of foot,  
slither over the slope of hip.

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.*<sup>1</sup>

In verse she will carve the image  
of petal on inner thigh.  
Skin her tablet, her canvas.

They will skate over shoulder,  
down rib, across breast.  
They will twine in color, in black,  
sink into mottled stretch of skin.  
Sketched over bone, sinew,  
the taut tendon in her neck,  
they will be words that say,

*his words were occupying armies  
her laughs were an assassin's attempts.*<sup>2</sup>

These words carved deep into dermis  
form the textuality of her flesh  
and they say,

*Resistance is the secret of joy.*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro"

<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes, "Lovesong"

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

## Anchoring

When she turns her head,  
her features shift,  
                    leave her uncertain which parts are real,  
                    which imagined.

She looks into the mirror,  
            eyes wedged like doorstops  
            into the corners of the sockets,

the feel of skin  
sliding beneath her fingers  
frightens her.

                    Anchoring the pieces makes them stay in place,  
                    stops the dissolution.

Geometry makes things make sense.  
If she adds or subtracts,  
shapes begin to settle themselves.  
            First, she plucks eyebrows  
                    into a definable parabolic curve  
                    with an eccentricity of one,

                    stitches an equation  
with needle in ink,  
            skin adjacent to muscle,  
                    parallel to the bone-cage  
                    beneath.

She weaves  
thin strips of metal,  
            always perpendicular to the body,  
through the gristle of her nose—  
            solidifying the strip of bone and skin—  
then lances lip, clit, nipples.

## We Grew Up Fatherless

When I was twelve,  
my mother tried to find  
    God.

But in the way  
there was always  
    some long-haired man in cutoffs  
who, with knee balanced  
    on bench or step,  
        never realized,  
            or didn't care,  
that his balls  
were hanging out.

With that man standing  
    between her and God,  
God didn't have a chance.

## Congo

Called by the rain,  
she goes to the Congo.

Sells her house,  
    the beater that barely runs,  
    the dresses crammed in the back of the closet  
        (just in case).

She buys heavy boots  
    with steel in the toes,  
    bug repellent,  
    disposable razors,  
    a tiny cross of silver.

She takes flight after flight,  
    each plane smaller,  
        hotter.

The last circles over  
    turbid water  
        stretched further than  
        any she has seen before.

She has dreamt this water—  
    fed by storms  
    whose thunder seems  
    to never end  
—it rolls in her chest  
    where her heart should be.

In a pirogue bought at the river's edge,  
she strikes off to the opposite shore,  
    disappears  
    into the trees.

## The Tortured Body

bears a thrust beneath the skin  
    which strains against the tensile  
        strength of tissue.  
Modern medicine has forgotten the power  
    of letting,  
of letting things slip through the fingers,  
    of letting go,  
        of letting the blade slip in.

At the edge of the tub,  
    lip cool against flesh,  
        I slow,  
                wait for blood to reach  
                my fingertips.

The skin  
blue as the ocean off costa del azahar,  
    smooth.

Fractals bloom,  
each path determined by  
    the fine hairs  
        a razor never cuts.

The rivulets, random.

Lit by sun upon  
    a bloodflower blossom,  
Lorenz's butterfly  
    lifts its wings.

A woman high on the cliffs of Oropesa  
waits for the breeze.  
    It lifts the hair  
        that lies hot upon her neck,  
    rocks her back on her heels.

## Stepping Off

You did that thing that I  
always longed to do—  
just stepped away.  
One foot into the trees  
and you were gone.

At sixteen, on a layover  
in Houston, I thought,  
*maybe I will move through  
into a moment of brilliance,*

*negated against the light,  
before I disappear  
into someone else's life.*

At thirty, I gaze north  
from Seattle into the trees

think about the first step.

## The Dream

She wakes up drenched.  
In the dream,  
she was swimming  
and as she moved her legs  
below the water,  
still separate and distinct,  
she saw scales forming.  
First a spot of shiny silver,  
then a lovely one of green.  
She is parched,  
longs to drink the water,  
but with each mouthful,  
more scales appear,  
she is not ready to give in yet,  
not ready to give up land,  
so she surfaces,  
breathes deeply the humid air  
of her bedroom.

## Saint Subirana

As a boy, José Manuel swims with the other boys in the lake tucked in the valley's confluence, loves the slip of fish against skin. Twisting in the ribbon-shots of light, deeper and deeper, the fish coil in his hair, between his legs, fingers, lips. But slowly, God replaces the fish. Prayers, not fish, slip through his lips. He forgets the slide of light through water over skin. But as an old man, in a small Honduran village, it is fish he brings to the starving when he prays for three days, three nights. One hundred and forty years later the fish, not sea water, but fresh water fish, not dead, but alive, not blind, but with eyes, not big fish, but small, fish from the lake tucked away in the valley, fall.



## In Mountains

It was in mountains  
that I learned of this ending,  
that it slipped between my thighs.  
It was in mountains  
that my mother told me how it ended for her,  
for the women of our family.  
Flying over mountains  
a month later,  
I felt again the push,  
my womb, my labia  
heavy with blood.  
The last of my fertility  
sapped away in this heat,  
in this soil so dry,  
but these hills  
to whom I have given my children  
will know me,  
call me home,  
wait for me.

### Slough, Definition #3

She stands in the driveway,  
watches the verdigris clouds  
push in over her head.  
The dark bulk of them  
roils silently, churning.

Wind down-blasts  
into the stillness  
like the last, gasping push  
before the crowning head  
thrusts its way out  
into the howling,  
fluorescent cold.

Pressure builds.  
She closes her eyes to  
the fine-grit sand in the air  
which scours her,  
makes her new.  
Her skin sloughs off,  
she is open.

## The Shock

1

She always lies down above  
the cover, knees tucked up,  
one hand wedged between them.

When she wakes hours later  
to put the meatloaf in the oven,  
she smooths the coverlet with her hand.

Her hair, white at twenty-three,  
thick with the smell  
of Aqua Net, never moves.

2

My grandfather is always the center.  
We pull to him,

love that he loves the Beach Boys  
and red hot fireballs  
which he buys for us by the  
case down at the bait and tackle shop.

Summers at the lake,  
he spends hours tossing us high  
over his shoulders into the water.  
Even before we swim, we let him,  
know he will be there  
to swing us back up,  
drops spraying in an arc  
that follows the line of our toes.

3

He's been dead for five years  
when I learn why she slept,  
my grandmother.

Nineteen, I struggle with motherhood.  
I am the same age she was  
at the birth of her first child.

For the first time,  
I see her, without him in the way,  
suddenly notice this woman  
so much like me.

When my sisters, almost a decade older than me,  
let it slip on a cab ride to Brooklyn,  
they are surprised by my confusion.

But how was I to know why  
her skin hung, bleached, in pleats  
around her bones, gathers and folds  
over her eyes and across her knuckles.

I never knew that electricity could do that,  
could peel the flesh from bone,  
never knew that shock could turn hair white,  
never knew that sleep could be  
the only answer.

## Imprint of Ice

Ice ripples, distorts the shape of me,  
my hair a radiant locus that can't be seen  
where none walk upon the glare crust dazzling.

I am lost beneath the sheeting  
of your mind. The story etched on skin  
blurs beneath the layers,  
compacts, melds, re-freezes.

Impenetrable beneath the sun at noon,  
glittering beneath the moon at midnight,

when they pull me from the ice in spring,  
the impression still lies upon me.

I was held beautiful by the ice field,  
only the shape of the floe  
lies upon my skin, twists the images.  
Now they tell the ice's tale.

## Unconquerable Longing

She lives near an airport,  
spends hours staring up at the sky.  
Her eyes follow the trails,  
try to discern destination  
from the direction of the lines,  
the speed of dispersement.

She loves travel,  
loves the swoop in her chest  
during take off.

In other lands  
she tries to decipher  
why it feels familiar.

Why,  
when she tastes dirt on the  
tip of her tongue,  
her bones ache, seem to swell.

Why,  
when she breathes the air deeply,  
the walls of her cunt contract  
and why,  
when she stands in the rain,

her heart speeds up  
in her chest.  
She can feel *place*  
tattooing a rhythm against her ribcage.

In dry blowing winds  
she spreads her arms,  
thinks, *wingspan*.

## Moths

Moths fly out of the southwest, thunderheads ripple with the lift and drop of their wings. They eclipse the moon's hazy penumbra, shine briefly in the still light. With tidal rhythm, streaks surge wing, to wing, to wing. Asleep, with thunder just beginning to dance over the foothills, I dream of water not seen for years, dream of swimming. In the morning, I cannot tell whether the scales that dust my arms belong to the powdery calletta, or the fish of my dream-sea.

## The Breaking Point of Water

Below the surface,  
there is balance.

For every up-pull,  
there is an undertow.

Water is her world.

In dreams,  
she lives below the skin,  
surfs like a porpoise, bare-bodied,  
feels the click of pleasure in her throat,  
slides along the crest, unafraid.

There is no liquid  
above the surface of her dreams.  
It tenses,  
bulging slightly,  
over the rim of her waking,  
stretches, because,  
when liquid behaves,  
nothing spills.



## Revolution

She keeps her eyes  
    cast upon the ground.  
    No one meets their gaze.

Her irises  
    cut boldly into holes,  
disquiet.

Like sunlight over water, they reflect  
    the rippling of algae,  
    the fallen leaf mosaic,  
    the boulengerina's undulation.

She strides lightly,  
    still branches unbroken  
    beneath her tread.

Shadows ripple in her wake.  
She knows for what she is searching,  
    but it isn't in the busy streets of Kinshasa,  
    the watchful gaze of villagers,  
    the steady stares of soldiers.

She has dreamed  
    and she knows for whom she searches.

Across the Line  
for Rochom P'ngieng

I am no longer me.

*Neither am I.*

When I stepped across the line  
between light and dark—

*A real line or a metaphorical line?*

(a real line)—  
The meadow burned green  
into my retinas. When I  
stepped into the cool black  
under the trees,  
the blades of grass  
lingered, an afterimage,  
in my sight. The bleating  
of sheep blurred  
beneath the shadows.

*I never took the step.  
I stood in the doorway,  
the city's skyline jutting up  
behind the parking deck,  
taxis lined the walk in front of me.  
The blue smell of exhaust permeated the air,  
but I could not take that step  
down off the curb.*

I lost myself under the trees.  
I lost my name, my voice,  
the smell of my mother's skin,  
the fear of being taken,  
of open fields.

*I lost myself here.  
Married to a man  
who doesn't know me.  
He knows my skin,  
I wake to find his nose pressed  
to my neck, but he doesn't know  
that I dream of airplanes  
and doorways,  
that the scent on my skin  
in the morning is sea salt.*

## Her Fantasy

She begins to hate the way that he eats,  
thick, sluggish lips wrapping around each bite.  
Food roils visibly in his puffy cheeks,  
he cranes his neck when he swallows.

He brags about her cooking to others,  
at meals takes more than anyone else,  
for Christmas buys her knives  
that twinkle in the lights from the tree.

She is fascinated by the blade's sheen,  
slides it over the pad  
of her finger, the line left behind  
the same velvet burgundy as the tree skirt.

She daydreams while making dinner.  
The boning knife would slip easily between ribs,  
the nasty little point of the paring  
would fit snugly in the niche between ear and jaw.  
The butcher's knife slices such fine fillets.

## Cocoon

The forest enfolds her in its limbs,  
wraps her in light that  
shifts through the bower overhead.

She hacks her way through the brush.  
Bitten and bleeding,  
she drops  
exhausted  
with the light.

(On the equator the sun does not set.  
It slips into the Congo  
which waits  
stretched wide  
to gather it in.)

In dark's embrace she dreams,  
butterflies spread their wings upon her skin,  
lay them open upon her eyes  
and through them sees  
a patchwork of pattern.  
She dreams of change.  
She dreams of revolution.  
She awakes  
with the words in her throat.

## Lluvia de Peces

Like Subirana, fish fall at her feet.

A soft patter smatters the roof,  
quickens.  
Fish drop in liquid  
plops and slaps.  
Frogs skitter, half-hearted,  
stunned by the precipitous plummet.

She picks her way across  
the aquatic carpet  
covering the crabgrass,

plants her feet,

and howls at clouds heavy,  
coagulated,

screams for deliverance.

It never ends.  
She will stagger  
into the aftermath,  
survey the staple sustenance  
of some remote village scattered  
like offerings at her feet.

She will begin to shovel.

## Piecework

1

Grandma made a crazy quilt  
stitched with lines that twist and twine,  
sewn from tiny patches of her husband,  
bits of blue denim,  
raspberry satin circles  
snipped in the gin-joint days,  
deep velvet strips  
torn from a gown she never wore,  
seamed in thread that loops and whorls,  
snakes across the tapestry,  
dips into shadows and traces,  
shape of hare and antelope,  
catfish, moon.

2

Lorelei spends years  
collecting for her quilt,  
carries miniature scissors  
wherever she goes,  
pulls them from her pocket,  
cuts the shape of memory from  
the plaid flannel of her first lover's shirt,  
a snippet of mama's lavender dressing gown,  
a square from the nubby wool blanket  
still gritty from that night at the edge of the world.  
She pieces them together in her mind,  
the flow of water beneath trees,  
wings in flight, moon  
and rain.

## The Stage

I yawn, my throat blisters.  
Syrupy perfume lies thick  
over the audience. I long  
for intermission so that I may slip  
down the steps, out the back.

You step onto stage  
and under the lights your hair  
is the copper gleam of a cello's belly.  
Your voice strides above the guitars,  
hits like a hammer  
of whiskey within my veins.

## Cunning Stunts

In your absence,  
in clay I mold.

Remember

the furrow of your cunt,  
run thumb  
along the labial ridge,  
explore the layering of flesh,  
and tendon,  
and bone,  
unable to discern whether  
blood which pulses  
through my thumb-pads  
is mine  
or yours.

Pry back layer upon layer  
stratified like rock face,  
pliable as Carrara  
beneath chisel,  
slide fingertip along  
the vein  
of marbling,  
fluctuation of coloration.

Delve your depths,  
learn dips and grooves,  
cunicular crevices,  
the supple press of liquid stone,  
the give of living clay.

Enact with tongue  
the dance of Ama-no-Uzume,  
spell out the name  
Amaterasu,  
dance around your salt-lick  
rust-iron cunt taste.  
Curl-locked  
animal cave-pool of spell and bone.



Beckon forth the sun  
    cloistered deep  
        within your  
            dark grotto,  
storm-wrath stunned           but willing.

I cave into you  
                    persephonic,  
lured by fruit you offer me,  
        fruit that beguiled Eve  
claret-hued            beaded,  
                    engorged like the ramparts of your cunt  
as you come.

But then again like Baubo,  
lewd,            naked,

        I dance for Demeter  
and I am she  
        cuntstruck.

## Carna

*Janus was the god of doorways. He was young and old, the sun and moon, the beginning of all things. He made his nymph lover Carna into the goddess of door hinges, handles, and thresholds.*

This body is the way to learn the world—  
    the blades of grass tenderly slice  
        the feet that walk upon it.  
Skin senses the raindrop  
    the moment before it lands.  
A mother's muscles tense  
    just before her child falls.  
The body feels joy as it leans into the wind  
    high on a cliff-face,  
    knows with certainty the feel  
    of the rocks below,  
    the heat of the sun  
        on the swallow's feathers  
    as it lifts into the breeze—

flesh is the linch pin on which life turns.

He is life and death,  
but, without me,  
    the door is always shut,  
        or always open,  
I am the hinge that lets them in.

## Sunday Morning

He comes in to wake me. He's been up for hours with the boys. The late winter sun is warm on my skin. The boys follow him in, burrow under covers with cold feet, hone in on my sleepy heat. The baby hates to be snuggled, heads for the stairs and the cartoons that can be heard through the floorboards. The older boy follows his father into the bathroom to piss, brush his teeth. The father comes back to me, fits his body to mine, and listening for the sound of the water shutting off, rocks into me. Silently we come, me, and then him, before leaving the warmth to grind coffee, start breakfast, all in the warm winter light.

Center Street Bridge, June 2007  
*for Cesar Vallejo*

From this I am the one who returns.  
From the things I have left behind,  
I return. From my husband, my lover,  
the remnants of a life ill-conceived,  
from myself, split into before and after, I return.

Driving the bridge of the valley,  
the moon sucks burnished light  
from the sun which teeters  
on the curve of the safety fence.  
I feel my legs cradled in the seat,  
my feet in sandals on the pedals.

The sweat upon my skin, the music  
ripping from my mouth, all tug me  
back into this body, no longer alibi,  
but reminder of joy, the reason  
for these words upon the page.