

Knoxville

To explore a city, you must leave the apartment.
To leave the apartment, you must have gas in the car,
you must know where the car keys are,
you must leave the dog behind. To leave the dog behind
without her crying, you must give her something to eat,
you must move everything else that a dog could eat
out of reach. At this point, you've thought about food
too many times not to be hungry. To find something to eat,
you must look in the fridge and close it again.
You must open the fridge. If there's still nothing
you want to eat, you must go to the grocery store,
but not right now--today is reserved for discovery.
You open the pizza app but have forgotten your password.
You go to reset the password but what you type in won't work
because it's the previous password. You order a pizza.

The dog scratches at the door. She's bored,
so you ignore her. To explore a city, you must know
how to get there. You must open up Google
and type in parking, find an address, fall down
the wiki wormhole of when the parking meters
were replaced, their fancy new interface touch sensitive.
You must know if they require quarters, if you must pay
on the weekend or after 5. To save the change,
you decide to wait till after 5. The pizza hasn't arrived.
It must be any minute now, so when the dog whines,
scratches lines in the paint of the door with nails
you meant to trim last Thursday, you ignore her.

To explore the city, you must be in the right mood,
convinced the buzz behind your eyes means
excitement, not anxiety. When the knock comes
and the dog wets the carpet with excitement
or anxiety or because the pizza is twenty minutes late,
when the person apologizes, you must say it's fine
because you don't know how to be angry
to someone's face. Before you eat the pizza,
you must take the dog out. You must clean the carpet.
It will be after 5 and the buzzing behind your eyes
is no longer anxiety, but you don't know where
the car keys are and there's always tomorrow.

Mea Culpa
2016

An election ago we thought the world was ending. That its last legs might last a month, a month and a half, after the votes were cast, but the scales tipped in the right direction for once, and the year was redeemed as non-apocalyptic. This year cannot be redeemed. All the photos of suffering have been rereleased in color on the widescreen. Overexposure eats the heads off anyone who tries to lift them. Was Paris this year? Turkey? Nice? We're marking time in new disasters, each worse than the ones before because there were ones before and it happened anyway. Each somehow more and less real.

I toured campus the second week of June,
slept in an unfamiliar setting and woke
to too-familiar news closer to home
than I was: 50 lost—
in the city where my brother taught—
No, not lost, shot—
in the state where my sister taught—
50 dropped whose brother's blood
wasn't good enough to save them—
50 coopted into sad sounds by "saints"
who made it anything but what it was.
How is this much blood not enough
to name it? (homophobia, transphobia,
xenophobia, Islamophobia—) Our Fault.

I learned about Alton Sterling and Philando Castile
only when I learned about Dallas. I didn't watch the video.
I didn't want to witness a murder the way I would a movie of a murder.
I didn't want to be reminded I was useless. I was selfish
and didn't want to be reminded I was selfish.
I told myself my tongue wasn't good enough to save them.

We set the bar this year at non-apocalyptic and tripped
long before we reached it. No matter how apologetic
or apoplectic the politicians pretend to be about
the ever-increasing number of horsemen
(racism, sexism, ableism—as if our friends
needed new ways for us to hurt them)
horsemen who kicked sand in our faces, and made
the ground uneven, yet we keep building stalls
in which to house them.

Mom called me crying three days after Dallas.
She'd sung "Here Comes the Sun" as a friend
walked down the aisle and her cousin

died in a restaurant in Alabama.
We had to put my dog down
the same day we drove to the funeral and it felt
fitting. Appropriate for this clusterfuck of a year.
How many days, how many hours between shootings?
How many have I ignored because I can't mourn them
separately anymore? In my family
I'm the heartless one, and here I am, still crying.

Triage

I excise my anger through scalpelwork—
to get the quiet back, I'd carve down to bone.
Remove the moment to remove the hurt.

I lay you out, slice the belly first,
slip my hand inside to find the growth—
I excise my anger through scalpelwork.

Before the tumult that shook our secret world,
I trusted your heart as if it were my own
removed. To halt the momentum of hurt

I unearth the organ, scrape off the cells that burst
from your raised voice. As all good doctors know,
when speech is not enough, a scalpel will work.

The eyes I cannot meet, I cleanse of dirt,
rinse the residue of ire from your throat.
As I relive the moment, the more it hurts.

I'll stitch up the body and act, as I've rehearsed,
as if there were no wrong. Change is always worse, so
I've excised my anger through scalpelwork.
Remove the moment, remove the hurt.

The Minotaur Gets a Nose Ring

The Minotaur gets a nose ring to be
ironic. A septum piercing to be
exact. He goes to the bar to be
a little less himself and dances with anyone
who doesn't mention it. To be
gilded with a symbol that meant follower
but doesn't mean follower anymore.
To remind himself when he feels too bee
fy that he is bull, is bovine—that he half rhymes
with divine and is alive from divine inter
ference. To embrace his wild side
and by wild he means too be
autiful for human skin to hold.

Undressing My Mother
after Robert Hass

I talk in storms, in myth
to skirt the subject. What I have to say
is said in whispers in closed rooms
while my brother or sister
stand guard at the door.

The worst of it is
 she's going to read this
The worst of it is
 she reads everything I write

Her body is not novelty. I have seen
the mirrors of my mother
stacked endlessly upright
as she undresses in the evening.
I have followed the trajectory of my own shape
as it parades past windows I imagine
the Lommens have been shocked into ignoring.

Look at my mother in the mirror,
where she's harmless.
Did this power of hers to meet
your eye as she removes her bra,
to hold a conversation stepping out
of lace underwear, begin in hospital?
Leave your hand too near,
unattended, and she will press it
 to the hollow in her breast
where the port was following the blood
clot. What does she want
me to believe? I have come to know
it doesn't take a wholeness to survive.

Pray for us sisters, now and at the hour of

I was the one who found her. My dad adding more Italian seasoning to the burgers than he
could get away with with her in the kitchen, leaving out the Worchestershire sauce
altogether. The three of us in the living room, close enough to smell the sizzle, far enough
not to have to help and my brother volunteered for me to check on her—

Looking back, she was naked. She couldn't have been, looking back, just woken from a nap,
a stop by the bathroom before dinner, but her presence in my mind feels naked, pale against
the red against the tile, slumped on the floor, as pale as the tile—

Dad told me to call 911; I handed him the phone.

Pray for us sisters that now is not the hour of

What is secret? What is s a c r e d?
Who gave you the right to enter
the bathroom, to soak your socks
in my mother's blood and track it
on the tile? Did I
open this door to avoid my anger?

This was after the surgery. After my parents' banquet without my parents,
my brother making me laugh on the drive, absence drowning in denial.

There is a letter hidden in my drawer where she says goodbye.
There have been too many times my brother watched me cry.

A year to the day, my mother drove us to the banquet and she was cruel and I cried. She
made me hug her and in my mind she was anesthetized and under a knife and I wanted to
hug a different her and I didn't want to hug her.

The worst is
she's going to read
The worst of it
everything I write

My mother is most vicious when she feels turned upon—
don't look at her directly. In the mirror,
she is breakable and therefore human.
Follow the silver of her scars—she jokes
they should put a zipper in, for next time.
I am not afraid of her nakedness or the seam
where they took the cancer out, gave her a metal heart.

How is it continually surprising
that my mother isn't nice?
Sickly sweet, sure, southern belle,
sure, birdwatcher, naturelover, yes,
all these things and more,
I have been blest with the best
of parents. It is sacrilege
to speak against her.

What gives me the right to unzip her for you?
To shove my mother to the center of the room
and turn the AC on until the point is clearer.
Does stranding her in the cold afford us clarity?

I love my mother. After the cancer and the surgery,

the chemo, radiation, the blood clot and the bypass.
After the cruelty and the tears and the distance now to say this
without a sibling at the door, standing guard.

There have been too many times we almost said goodbye.
This is a catalogue of when you made me cry.
Stay for us sisters, now and forever.