

## Beacons

Little Boy,  
I've watched you grow.

A tiny child with caricature eyes  
And an easy smile.  
In Kindergarten, you were  
unruly as your eyebrows but  
you tried your best.  
In the principal's office,  
you learned that wasn't enough  
and I saw you disappointed.

I watched as adolescence enveloped  
you in its embrace.  
It was as cruel to you as it was to me  
and our sister before us. I saw you go  
into the confines of your room,  
watched you hyperventilate and suffocate  
on the pink our parents pushed upon you.  
I reached into the depths of my darkness  
to conjure a light, held it out like a beacon—  
shaky and weak but warm.  
Sometimes, it worked.

I watched as you ballooned  
under the affection of a partner who seemed  
so kind and grown.  
Together you sat on the kitchen floor,  
informed us of your plans. They were  
best laid, unlike the impulsive child I knew.  
So, I watched you go

to the other end of the earth—St. Johns.  
The food you cooked felt like independence  
on your tongue and you basked in your partner,  
a honeymoon light. But it was a cold town  
and your partner relied on the warmth of  
groceries and rent coating their nose;  
darkness crested, as isolating  
and unforgiving as the waters between you  
and home.

Somewhere, in a street light or a star or  
the neon yellow M under which  
you eked out a living,  
you found a beacon, held on tight.

Among the amalgamation of dirty dishes, low blows  
and the insidious shadow of addiction,  
it illuminated a little space for you grow.  
You grew enough that you called home.

Little boy,  
I watched you dream.

On the other side of a round table  
you built a picture of your future.  
Step by step, you outlined  
an empire, each endeavour  
built on top of another.  
Hand over hand you gestured a tower  
I smiled as I watched it bloom.

Wanting a future  
was the hardest part, you said.  
Now you want so magnificently.  
With the setting sun warming your side of the table,  
your face lit in a way that contrasts so beautifully  
with the dark bathing mine,  
you traverse the line between boy and man.

The bright side suits you wonderfully and  
I feel as though I am meeting you  
all over again.  
The realization that you no longer need me  
to forge light for you to grow  
is bittersweet.

But I have never been so pleased  
to watch you go.

## Universes

It used to be  
that I could breathe out universes.  
My tongue carved out castles,  
rolled over endless hills  
of sand or grass or snow.

In that same breath I inhaled  
the worlds I spat out before me;  
they were so filling,  
they smelled so sweet.

I could spit myself across  
a multitude of picture books but  
I was not prepared for  
the verisimilitude of paragraphs and  
how they would carve into me.

I was not prepared  
for the world to spit responsibility  
at my feet. I found I could not exhale  
tangible dreams or live  
in my tongue-carved castles. I could not  
fathom a red sea spilling  
out of my body, its waves of endless  
depression rolling over me.

I used  
my darkness like a canvas. I  
breathed against the glass separating me  
and painted pictures, indexing my pain  
like asymmetric hearts or vulgar words  
on a winter car window— they were  
just as ephemeral.

The abyss stole my breath  
like the vacuum of space  
minus gas giants and young girls'  
astronomical dreams.  
I could not spit out universes,  
I was too barren to birth a milky way.  
(And what was I without creation?)

I licked the void like its smell, sound  
and touch were not enough.  
Like I didn't already know it from my insides  
out, like, to find the comfort familiarity is

so notorious for,  
I needed to taste.

I found instead an endless mound  
of sand, the roof of my mouth  
a cracked desert.  
Behind my teeth was  
a breathlessly carved canyon;  
my pills got lost  
in the cavern on my mouth.

## Twenty-One

They say to find something fulfilling,  
something that will make life worth living.  
I was young when I realized  
I couldn't colour inside of those lines.

At 21, I am not full,  
much less fulfilled.

At 21, I know I am empty,  
but I don't know what I'm supposed to be inside.  
I try to fashion myself with fiction.  
I consume all day, all night  
and it works

until morning  
when dawn filters through me  
and I see my cookie-cutter shadow  
in sharp, sobering, relief.

In the morning, I seek reprieve; I repeat.

At 21, I am an outline.  
The void is painful and profound  
but it's inconspicuous. Because  
you fill me up with your hopes  
and your expectations.

You fill me up with thousands of dollars  
in the name of something I never wanted,  
for a promise I never made—  
A promise I don't think I can keep.

You fill me up with guilt.

At 21, I am told I'll swim.  
With care, ignorantly and assuredly  
I am told that if I really had to,  
I would survive.

But I am on some sort of descent  
and those well-meaning words  
are heavy to hear. They fill me up  
As I go down, down, down.  
The confusing thing is:

I know how to swim.

At 21, I am trying.

I am trying not to rupture from the pressure  
caused by the stuffing you've lovingly  
shoved down my throat.

I am trying to find colour  
and the means by which to paint myself  
a fair and functional picture.  
I paint myself happy, I paint myself hopeful.  
I try, desperately, to paint with meaning

and then I am drowning.

## The Stopwatch

Stop, goes the watch. It's a stopwatch,  
she got it years ago, just after the wedding,  
before the baby, around the time of paint swatches,  
and new 100-threadcount bedding.

The baby was swelling, under her skin,  
round and full, *of life*, he'd whisper to his wife  
and the golden stopwatch ticked on akin  
to the little heartbeat, and the kicking of little feet.

He had given her a potato, once,  
when they were young and courting.  
It was the start of everything— a picnic brunch.  
She thought her stomach looked a bit like that potato.

It made her smile, when she thought  
of the vegetable that once grew,  
like the baby, so close to coming—  
her baby that she almost knew.

Then one night, while the clock went a-ticking,  
she looked at her love, over a supper of potatoes  
and wine, her baby kicking,  
and stroked her golden ring to a brilliant shine.

Then stop went the watch, no more tick tock.  
The baby's beating takes on an unsteady metering.  
Two pairs of eyes, open wide in shock  
and the almost-baby, snug in her stomach,  
hung heavy like potatoes, stopped.

## A Little Bit Broken

She whispers, "I'm broken"  
Scattered by blows so off-handed  
that they catch her defenseless and  
make her chest cave into the fist-sized space  
her heart has forsaken

    She tired of stitching it back together  
    and, disavowed, the contraction of muscles sent it  
    further and further down  
    into the pit in her stomach  
    until it was gone and the ever fluttering butterflies  
    mourned its passing

She utters, "I'm broken"  
Taken apart piece after piece by  
eyes that look and never see

    They stripped her of her layers:  
    the quiet one, the strange one,  
    the one that was normal  
    in all the wrong ways

until she is a shell of  
her music and shows,  
candy wrappers and clothes,  
a blue and white striped comforter,  
and anything, really, that she can will together into  
a patchwork person  
and she wonders when exactly she  
left herself locked in the closet  
to cry.

"I'm broken" she screams  
her voice hoarse, breaks her skin  
like a rage-shattered vase.  
I, with her sadness leaking from my eyes,  
cry, "No child,  
you are beautiful"  
and anger and doubt distort her face.

Still, I gather every scattered piece  
    Such fragility, it breaks my heart.  
    So I cradle them with honour,  
    see the jagged edges for what they are,  
    tell her I'm proud that she lives with her scars  
and, because I know her more than well,  
I find their places  
    Some so far gone that I travel to the moon  
    and back to find them  
I sew them back in,



each stitch for a time when she couldn't  
and I know that she is stronger than ever.

"I'm broken" she rolls it over her tongue.  
It doesn't taste right—  
something's different.  
Her body lurches with terror  
because if she's not broken, then what is she?  
I don't respond,  
just fold the blue and white, striped comforter and  
put it away. I wrestle the baggy sweaters from her arms,  
peel off the candy wrappers with care,  
find silence and hit  
PLAY.

She looks so lost, a skeleton of a being  
with no idea how to fill all those crevices  
but then her heart beats,  
her eyes light up with something I saw years ago;  
for a second she forgets she doesn't smile

and I know she'll be okay.

Now,  
once in a while she says, "I'm a little bit broken"  
I nod because I understand  
and, patiently,  
trail her pieces behind me on a string,  
like children  
with their yellowing twine  
and tin cans rattling  
running down the street  
towards an imaginary world  
full of valiant purpose  
where we will become whole again.