

## Carry the Weight

he comes home  
from school  
with his heavy  
tye-dyed backpack  
draped across skinny shoulders  
walking with that slow  
sixth grade swagger  
carrying that slow  
stocky sixth grade  
baby weight  
with the Weight of a  
world on his shoulders  
if

the world was a dumpster  
behind a dirty McDonalds  
with a thousand leftover  
Big Macs and  
a thousand extra large fries  
with a thousand barrels  
of fry grease  
poured on top  
and lit on fire

like the world was the last herd of  
elephants  
being poached by a herd of  
narcissists  
like the world was an Amazon forest  
set ablaze

he holds that Weight like  
he's seen  
babies shot in kindergartens  
by military grade weaponry  
bodies torn to shreds  
by bullets made for buildings  
made for death  
like he's used his sixth grade body to  
hold closed a classroom door  
to pile on top of a killer  
to hope he's heavy enough  
to hold him down  
the way it holds him down

he holds it like  
he carries  
the state of Florida  
Pulse. pulse. pulsing.  
Sandy Hook  
all of Colorado  
fields of Columbine  
Texas and  
a couple hundred years of  
brown people being told  
they aren't welcome  
on their own lands  
in the land of the free

like that rainbow tye-dyed backpack  
is Stonewall  
and marriage equality  
and the Supreme Court  
and stilettos and  
forbidden fake eyelash strips  
peeled off a boys eyes before  
he climbed back in the window  
climbed into his bed in  
Brooklyn  
in seventy-two  
in Nashville  
in two thousand two  
in Rapid City  
in twentytwenty

like it weighs as much as  
a woman's right to choose  
like he's carrying Christine Blasey Ford's  
heavy holy testimony  
like he's carrying Brett Kavanaugh's  
heaping pile of shit

like that shit is on fire  
like we ate too many animals  
and now the whole planet  
has the meat sweats  
like we used to have dinner  
prepared for us nightly by a  
five star Michelin chef  
and now we get a mayonnaise sandwich

like the adults have left the room  
and blamed the millennials  
barricaded the doors  
run out of the school  
loaded up on gasoline  
sped in their cars  
home to their weapons stockpile  
where from the safety of their laptop screens  
they'll protest red flag laws  
while waving white flags  
and surrendering his  
future

he climbs into my gas guzzling  
soccer mom  
full-sized  
van  
and all four tires pop under  
the Weight

and we are forced to walk  
silently home  
sloping shoulders  
backpack swinging  
and a quivering upper lip  
me perched on his shoulders  
overweight and  
old as fuck  
and him  
knees crumbling  
and palms bleeding  
from the shrapnel  
and his resolve  
and the weight of  
one thousand unmet promises  
in a one thousand year war  
where he'll carry the bodies  
where he'll carry the Weight

## Grace

My original son was born  
Original sin stained and  
Wailing  
At a hospital called Grace  
And middle-named  
Determination  
Finger and heel  
Pricked with needles  
Smacked along the back  
And told to cry

For the next ten years  
He'd be told  
Over and over  
To stifle the tears  
Harness the rage  
Take control of emotions  
Until  
With grace  
I relearned my own  
Emotion  
Was offered names for  
Feelings  
Was rebirthed into  
A way of becoming  
Loud  
And proud  
A weeping grace

Ten years of  
Telling my brother  
His love was unequal  
To the contemptuous  
Possessive  
Codependent love  
I clung to  
While he sought safety  
In the arms of boys who promised  
A grace in the midnight  
Weeping for family  
Hoping for change

Man up  
We thought  
But we were wrong  
Strength is in the breaking  
Tears rolling  
Hands shaking  
Lips open enough to  
Draw a breathe from  
Another's lungs

This love smacked me  
Along the back  
And taught me to cry

## I Do Not Owe You My Beauty

I do not owe you my beauty or  
the youthful glow I collected  
some summer on the shores of  
Lake Superior  
throwing fish hooks into open mouths  
of well fed fish  
throwing glances at boys on docks and shorelines  
shorts and sandals  
grit in my mouth as I chewed my tongue to a pulp asking for my  
towel back  
spit not swallow  
swimsuit top  
giggling boys snapping beach towels on sandy asses  
give me my name back

I do not owe you my beauty or  
the coal dark sultry stare of well lined  
eyes  
the club in Minneapolis  
dance floor in Dakota  
crotch rubbed against my shoulder for eleven miles as he stood above me on a Mexican street bus  
the violent undressing of my  
clothed body by his naked stare  
hands wrapped around my neck  
masturbating minds like exploring mineshafts

I do not owe you my beauty  
come sit on your knee and tell you about me  
come sit on your lap and give you a kiss  
come sit on your cock and tell you I want you  
call you daddy or master or a long-drawn-out apology imsorryimsorryimsorryimsorry  
my worth the width of the handprint  
you left on my ass  
pulling panties lined with pearls from my palms as penance  
remind me the rent is due  
rename generosity

I do not owe you my beauty  
the summons of Greek mythology the rewriting of Wonder Woman the sexualization of My Little Pony  
the all male Ninja Turtles the scented washable markers we used to line our lips as toddlers the tragedy  
of Sylvia Plath the scent of a woman the mother's bargain the oldest profession the dirtiest hotel room  
the knowledge of escape routes the salad in your teeth

I do not owe you my beauty  
not my long silky hair  
not my shaved legs or armpits  
or lip  
not the curve of my shoulder  
my hip  
the rise of my navel  
forever forcing fuckably flatter  
the way desire is spelled out  
dimple  
ear  
so  
I  
render  
everything undone and alone and not worth it

I do not owe you my beauty  
so when you ask for my tears  
I let them fall bleating bleeding lemon from  
puffy eyes  
I ring the redness around them with black  
as you like it  
use a fifth grade highlighter to circle  
every blemish  
I resolve to lose my hair alongside my father but do not wait for his to go  
pull fistfulls from a bloody scalp  
decorate with table salt in every wound  
put an infants' hairbow on every scab and stare you down  
every woman I know has  
claw marks on the  
insides of her eyelids  
let me tell you about beauty  
when every eye closing is a slasher film  
every eye opening is a slasher film  
every cartoon is a slasher film  
every pornography is a slasher film  
harder faster better longer

every sleep is watching youth pass  
every scream turned up loud enough becomes indistinguishable from silence  
it is possible I think that the trees are screaming  
top of their lungs  
as they display beauty every autumn  
every fall is a slasher film  
every scream is caught so far back in the throat you wrapped your hands around and called sexy  
that we've put our hands up  
unable to breathe  
put on the jumpsuit  
taken no bail  
accepted the paradoxical prison  
put on the shame  
the escapism of ugly  
before I will owe you my beauty  
because  
I do not owe you the least of me  
the best of me  
the bloody knees or baited breath  
the heightened rent of being a woman  
the terms of repayment  
the mess of your stain  
swallow don't spit  
the endless apologies  
Imsosorryimsosorryimsosorryimsosorry  
but  
I do not owe you a goddamn thing

## My Brother's Engagement

my brother's engagement is my first tattoo  
18 years old  
driving home from college  
early morning hours  
crashing on my parents' sloping  
living room couch  
awaiting mom's chemo results  
dad sees the tramp stamp  
symbol in the space between my  
shirt and the waistband of my  
flannel pajama pants

I hope that's temporary  
he says  
and intakes his morning potassium  
glass of orange juice  
conservative news

my brother's engagement is my sister's sexual  
assault  
16 years old  
walking to her car in an alley  
early morning hours  
disappearing into my parents' blind eye  
her quiet bedroom floor  
awaiting a holy period  
because what were you wearing  
why were you walking downtown  
shirt untucked and coat undone  
icy winter down unzipped pants

no one needs to know  
they think  
while she dissolves into  
a glass of addiction  
conservative stares

my brother's engagement is a son's criminal  
charges  
27 years old  
driving record read in court  
all hours of the day  
always taking cover in  
my parents' quiet kitchen  
awaiting a custody battle

youngest brother buys my  
parents a convertible in pleading bribery  
to cover the bruises blossoming beneath  
his girlfriends' skintight dress

now he'll get help  
they say  
how can they they bear witness to  
glass breaking midnights  
conservative apologies

my brother's engagement is a hard pill to  
swallow  
64 years old  
six years of relationship stability  
fortyninethousandfourhundred hours  
building handmade blocks of safety  
a permanent home  
awaiting their approval  
when they visit and vacation in his comfort  
call him for affirmation and expect gifts  
weekly phone calls and letters  
a comfortable sweater

we're just blindsided  
they say  
it's so hard to forgive this act of rebellion  
stained glass commitment  
conservative shame

my brother's engagement is a sky-splitting  
sunrise  
at 30 years old  
the first healthy model of love I've seen  
in countless hours of investigation  
his is the story we've ached  
to tell on the long drive home  
awaiting the joyous way words  
flow like waterfalls down the canyon  
cut tributaries through what we've known  
sprout flowers in rocky patches  
light like a smile

we'll forgive you  
they say  
sit stoically at the ceremony  
drink monogrammed wine glasses  
conservative celebration

## Vows

We wrote our own vows  
But I do not remember them  
Childish words from  
Children's lips  
While children grew  
Children  
Inside  
Childish bellies  
We pledged life or love or  
Forever  
Like we knew what forever was

The morning of the wedding  
I sliced the bottom of my  
Fourth toe on  
A piece of broken mirror  
Some sort of  
Soul or sole  
Symbolic  
Just south of the finger  
On which I'd wear his ring  
Take his name  
Bear his children  
Betray him  
Leave him  
Return

Do you think there should be  
Starter marriages  
I ask him  
Recently  
Three year mini commitments  
So you know you know  
Before you vow you know  
And he agrees  
Laughing  
Lined brow wrinkling  
Over blue brown eyes  
That have betrayed me  
Left me  
And returned

We wrote our own vows  
But I do not remember them  
I write this life  
Half spent in his arms  
Half spent running  
Half spent returning  
Instead