
Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

2015

Hard Luck Baby

Tanya Lipscomb
University of Central Florida



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Lipscomb, Tanya, "Hard Luck Baby" (2015). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 689.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/689>



Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship

HARD LUCK BABY

by

TANYA PATRICIA LIPSCOMB
B.A. North Carolina Central University, 2007
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2015

Major Professor: Terry Ann Thaxton

ABSTRACT

Hard Luck Baby is a collection that elucidates the life of a southern, black mother as she grapples with her culture, family, love and the complex reality of black life in America. Hannah, is a woman who was born in the bubbling 40s, raised in the racial 60s and raptured in the drug-infested 80s. It is through these decades that the rough edges of America are exposed. She discusses her life experiences in a manner that allows readers to touch, as much as empathy will allow, the feelings that contour the deepest areas of her barrel. She shares her first example of love and its reverberations along with various accounts of growth. With minimal mention that demands acknowledgment, Hannah achieves an accurate description of American culture, as it relates to poor black people. She juxtaposes multiple societal and familial norms that contributed to her personal development. She is participating in a self-assigned purge of gripping hard-truths, but the crowning moment starts to take shape as she begins to understand herself and her children.

Hard Luck Baby is the music of pained grandparents, parents, siblings, and children played over an American landscape. It is a platform for a woman who has been silenced to speak. Written in first person, many of the poems are stories that might have been told from other perspectives with venom, malice or sorrow, but the speaker takes ownership of her role in creating such emotions. As Hannah speaks, the audience may as well, be sitting crossed-legged on a front porch as she rocks in her chair recalling events from her life. She speaks about love, loss, rejection, disappointment, growth, friendship, fight, and forgiveness. At its close, *Hard Luck Baby* is an elderly woman giving stern-faced lessons to anyone who would dare to sit and listen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this collection has been a wonderfully fulfilling experience. Bumpy ride, but well worth it. Ms. Hannah Lipscomb, you live in these pages. I thank you for teaching me so much about life, love, mistakes and survival. I love you so much. You gave me permission to tell this story and I know that's totally due to your growth and acceptance. You are a beautiful woman and I am so proud to call you "Mama". My siblings, thank you for letting your little sister be herself. I love y'all. Stacey Hardin, you were my kickstand. Thank you for assuming that position and being fully aware of it, even when my own lenses were fogged. Carlee Malmute and Lana Ghannam, you two kept me afloat in this program. Thank you very much for being real friends. Danyelle Bradley, thank you for staying up late listening to me brainstorm. You listened to so many poems without complaint and were often more excited than I was about some of them. That mattered. Terry Ann Thaxton, thank you! You have been such a strong believer in my writing. You exude such wonderful energy. Your positivity has been a tangible force during the creation of this collection. Thank you all for your immense support. Love. Love. Love.

For my mother, Hannah, who is no longer ashamed
of having become tired when the race was too much.

For my big sister, Brandy, who bundled us all in her arms
and kept running.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ONE	1
Grandfather	2
Impressions	3
Oscar for Hattie McDaniel.....	4
Hannah	5
Agnes Victoria Brown Miller	6
Roots	7
Porches.....	8
Final Affairs	9
A Prophecy.....	10
Turned.....	11
TWO	13
A workspace cool.....	14
Silhouettes.....	16
Evening Jazz	17
NEMEAN	18
Winter	19
Submission.....	20
matchsticks.....	21
First Blood	23
Miss the City	25
None of the Salt	26
THREE.....	27
The Fray	28
Making Biscuits	30
Come Eat.....	32
Persephone's Abduction	33
Hollow Noise	35
Fran	38
Clippings.....	39

Phone Call.....	40
Eviction.....	41
Spring’s Leaf.....	43
Enough.....	45
For Sons.....	46
FOUR.....	47
Coconut.....	48
Baby Bird.....	50
A Gift From Her Son.....	51
The Truck.....	52
Bitter Carolina.....	54
Dementia’s window.....	56
Drive.....	58
You, Daddy.....	59
Gourd.....	60
FIVE.....	61
Subjects.....	62
Write.....	63
His Breakable Work.....	64
waking.....	65
marathon.....	67
SIX.....	70
On Forgiveness.....	71
APPENDIX: READING LIST.....	76

ONE

I love my family unconditionally, but for some reason I've never felt like I belonged. There was something about me that I didn't understand and I didn't know how to explain. Maybe it was all in my head, but the feeling was there all my life. I was strong in academics and always there to assist my family when they were in need, but I wasn't as strong as everyone thought.

“I love my family unconditionally...”

Grandfather

for Frank Holloway—Freedom Rider

Crows, black like you, dance on their feet. Their story there with yours, grip onto the corners of your eyes like grapnel—the hearts of lighter days tucked, evident, like weighty ones mashed into the folds of your face. Your eyes are the polished blemishes made by the war of the white, the lightened ring of color. Cheeks determined to rest against a jaw line still hardened under it all. You force me to listen with your eyes and brows that push the skin between into a bulge that dares life to try you again. You'll chew bullets thrown, swallow poisons again while wrinkles cape who you are known to be. A grinder, steady like years and time. Run still like blood long washed away, and remnants flushed into the wells of your eyes. The shadowy overcast dawns the tint, holds answers, challenges the asking of childish questions. Force me to listen. Pay attention to time racing across our forehead. Trails. Routes I should pray to take—a trail beater—that my head, too, might be salted and peppered with the seasons.

Impressions

My lips do not round a bright red bend.
They don't pop and contrast against black skin
and evening's frightened look.

My grandparents did not have pinked lips,
bucked, yellowed eyes
against a black.

I do not prop thickly made cotton
dresses, pockets baring biscuits and mustard
for your children.

The deepest of
my African ancestors know

I do not shuffle when I walk or lower my head when I speak.

I won't feed you cook or clean or
enter your back door.

I will not look down when you pass.
I will not look down when you pass.

Oscar for Hattie McDaniel

Say action and I will
blink at perfect times.
Fan the garment with
enough flair to make
eyes pay attention. I will

prance like small ponies
lift my feet—easy in front,
best spot of lighting's
spark. Lure the camera lens
as I deliver lines until even I

could believe them to be true.
Say the word and I will turn on
for you. Light switch up—unafraid
of the fluorescence.
There is a stage I must play on
my whole life for people
who believe in entertainment.

I will play my way to laughs.
I want you to like what I give.
Like who I am, not who I know
how to be. The seating
separate from those I share
a screen with. My name amplified,

called over mics like the way I plunge
my voice into the night.
into unwantedness.
Caves of stalagmites,
too stubborn to fall
into this world.

Hannah

I slipped into this jar, born and sealed, all at once,
one hole in the lid to breathe.

I came rolling in on treble.
Billie's B-flat minor
juicing bitter fruits from southern
songs. In on
Hattie's win: A first for us all.

Stumbling in
with aggression
of the NAACP. Warm blooded,
blistered,
breathing Drew's banked blood and
Wright's Native Son.

A Second Reconstruction

came in on it all and waited
for my serving of more.

The next ten years,
around the world, wars
not rumors of wars
and I was aligned in zodiac energy
to osmose it all
and the Freedom
Riders rode.

and the Freedom Riders rode

and we watched,
cause Daddy wouldn't let us ride them rides.

Agnes Victoria Brown Miller

Brushstrokes of yellow wattage
hospital lights painted
over my 1949 skin, shaded
more than nurses, than siblings,
than you, Ma-Ma you rocked
me under that year's glow,
and nobody said "Hannah" like you.
You massaged my name,
were salve for my core.

Bare
and ashen with dust of Carolina clay.
Let your syrup polish me
until I shine like new money. I was
a gilded pendant on your best
Sunday dress, intricate lace
on your Sunday hat, I was something
that mattered to you, a thing
Grandpa coddled alongside you.
I was a sunflower in the south,
blooming with spite
because you nudged me
to reach past the grey,
stretch until the tips of my fingers
demanded nature to share.

My infant coos were *Agnessss*.
Aaag-nes to your ears.
cooling, like love's balm.
I remember you
in syrupy, aged, grumbles, saying
Let me be your hero.
and, my God, you were.

Roots

Her branches handed me the bowl
of grits. Salt. Black pepper. Butter, her
veins, tiny leaflets stretching to bud.
Her sweat labors so when
spirits of that decade lands,
she is her best self—broad,
thick skinned deep rooted, oaken.

Banshees swing, long
limbed, gymed on tree branches
after her, but Mrs. Brown-Miller
has me.

Bring on wind howls at night, jinxes
wrapped around family,
when Ernestine's cut ankle swells,
boils, steeps in poisonous pus pool around
the bone, tamed by taut skin,
Ma-Ma, able-bodied will take the roads
back to her South Carolina roots.
Clear-sighted on dusted roads, she knows
which doctor
sprinkles with her eyes
barks with her stares
drinks with her fingers
unites roots from her family
kept untied, unwound, unraveled
—nothing bound to her.

Porches

the sun must have wrung
its sweat
onto my head
short wisps
of hair shriveled
in kink
moist and hardened
at once tangled
weeds and welcome mat
all at once
under the porch
only place
for such a mess
matted and matted
against dark skin
hide in cobwebs
near support beams
eat mayonnaise sandwiches

packed for self-exile
packed for the teasing of sisters
packed for the one flower

blooming outside the rickety
door. nibble the crust of bread
and listen as the other two
have their hair combed
mine will be much worse
hide wait act like Mama
doesn't know where I am
when she brings her solid body
onto the front porch leans on the post
Bring yo' butt out from under there

start the screams then

Final Affairs

In the damp light, she carried you, linked forever. She named you Kelly, Patricia, Matthew, Lionel, nicknamed you. Nuzzled hers close to your nose, whispered, *Be an oak* into your infant

ear while you slept she patted and rubbed a warm piece of herself into your back. She is well into you and you her. She watched you bundle your little sister, cousin, brother tight against your chest

and swing round and round and round and round and round. Dizzy you both in circles. Her hopes for your choices: be best and be safe. Like backs pushed into corners when yellowed fangs spittle painted

like lacquer, came for your jugular. She told you what to do. But metallic is bitter like the seconds that have stoned you numb like absence like bricks and this list is here now full of names

of those who figured the right thing to do was listen when she spoke, shine smiles back at hers, fall into the softness of her opened arms.

A Prophecy
for Ma-Ma

What voodoo'd evil rides this earth
direct on red-eyed mares, shiny black
mane after quiet ones like me.
After my dangling thread
to pull slow, almost unseen. My fabrics
were faulty at creation. Never difficult
to puncture weak spots.

The day you looked into me—saw your veins
pulsing alongside mine, the Prince
warned you of my years
difficult like an aloe's bile.

You squeezed my hand.
You gon be my hard luck baby.
Swooped me into your bosom and rocked me.
But you gon be alright, though. You gon be alright.

Turned

Bone, muscle and ligaments
made me human.

I slipped my arms inside the sleeves
of the trench coat from Mama and Daddy,
buttoned it with my people fingers and walked
beside her to the bus stop.

The driver had rouge tones tickled beneath
his skin. His uniform neat—he was the one thing
that meant order. He spent the wheel wide
and to the right. Parked it easy next to the curb
in front of the bus stop.
Watch mama step up,
feed the coin slot, sit. Ride.

Next stop, he wheeled right
and to the curb. Mama stepped off.
I followed, but before the first step
could become memory, squelch
and press, I was snug and moving
backwards with the bus. My coat doing
what it was made to do: be strong
in stormy weather.
Mama, running alongside
the bus, doing was she was made to do: protect.
Driver, doing what he was paid to do: drive
the bus.

The White in him, doing what it was bred to do: hate me. Me,
doing what ragdolls always did: flail and bounce
behind in a childish one's grip.

Thin thread dragging
Along the paved street,
He had turned me into something as simple as fabric.

Snagged on a hook strong
enough to keep it.

TWO

I was darker than all my siblings. In those times color of skin was foremost, even with people of color. I got a lot of teasing about my dark skin and short hair. I used to wonder why my sisters were fair skinned, and had long hair. I guess that was normal for kids. I was a very quiet person. When I was in a group of people talking, I felt like I was invisible. No one seemed to be interested in me or my conversation, but when I met Senior I thought I had found everything I'd been lacking; I hope you never love anybody that way.

A workspace cool

well lighted
the halogens
hum and smell
of you, neck
and hair wafts
for more than
a second. you
are home
could you be here
behind my blinks
blowing whispers
towards these
thoughts of you.
light mousse
for the tasting.
I believe you
nestle, a silken
red scarf, wrapped
in yourself and me
in my mind's
hammock awaiting
arrival of dampened
flesh dragged
across the space
hair strands, thin.
you are
moonlight's blink,
warm wrapped
in me, nights
starry pitch
blanket, covering
sunrise's kiss
dusk's gaze
here. in this.
in here—within

me

Silhouettes

The leaky faucet lets me know that I am still on earth
where red wrappers don't spill their rubbery
contents over the railing I take to arrive

at our meeting space in candlelight's glow.
I need the silky experience
of the ride its sweat and spinal drags—

flickering silhouettes thrust long stretches
to the ceiling. Home, my earth, your body, this place,
causes my life fluid to pump and push

my extremities to spread wide. Empty spaces
within me fill—as snug as my arms wrapping
the muscle of your chest your back.

Hums like those of bees' wings near nectar,
tickle my ears—thick gusts of air rush
'cross your tongue over your icy lips

in hectic rhythm. Time is a foreigner with no place
here, but is as sneaky as this ride—it ticks
and tucks inside the plop-splash of the faucet's

moan. White fire squirms on the tip
of the candle—while time drips slow
down its sides.

Evening Jazz

Not dusk's lavender skies—sherbet blends.
Creamy possibilities

suffocate easy, the fluid drift of salt
in hour-glasses.

Drunken yellow moons
in pitchy skies echo home's moods—its thickness
smeared underfoot.

Not green thumbs raising flowers,
parents growing children,
brown eyes greedy for smiles
nor tiny petals needing sun.

You are burning blinks for moving
hallucinations' tears, heavy like clouds'
capsules of history's gray dirt of years.

And I am not crisp waters for cleansing,
I don't swim down lustrous skins
or even trickle through recitations of quiet poems
to long backs against walls.

I am you while time tumbles to small openings.
Sands move through that pin hole
while our sultry drums muffle under the small bits.
Shared heartbeats, quieting under time, weightless, felt.

NEMEAN

Centered in his madness, smoldering in him
I became mad. I saw, crawling onto the lip
of a beach, azure waters, white granules loosed
in cyclones of sea froth dangling from his defined
thighs, a plus for her longings, pulling him farther ashore.

A polished bronze, he was, wearing waters
falling tall in heavy leaks from his mane. Each lock
an extension of my warmest space—waters run
down from his shoulders, string from his fingertips—
run the course of celiac muscle, down between and fall

from his phallus. He grips sand and grows golden:
toes of coarse blonde fur. Black claws hooked, paws
kick sand backward, engaged in attack. Grin to growl
yellowed fangs, fleshy black ridge cupping a roseate tongue,
its flick in anticipation of flesh. Chunks of previous women
wedged between incisors.

The thick mane blocks his golden eyes from the sun,
their pinhole pupils attuned to the moment. In a flash
he is upon me, in my eyeless writhe, moan, and arch.
Devouring every piece until the cerise mural is upon the sand.

Winter

Your razor wings flay
out—the thick fish bones—claw into
the closest flesh—you get in there and hold,

like how laying claim is supposed to be,

then dissipate after your storms and lightening
on a clouded tether, a bolt of purple, hot white,
zags of electricity. They run through here and heat
sometimes for just a second. You move through

and crisp the lung with your cold, drag
your footprints and tracks through veins—a husky
dragging a sled cleated with hard ice sickles, eroding
the ground beneath. Plowing for a planting of solitude.

Nothing is fertile in the grooves of the petrified
flat bed of you. But you,
with your clarity
see a space for planting
newer things like buds that your crisp fingers
would snap and fold.

And after, when the Augusts roll 'round again,
you'll watch me, in what I call your past,
blossoming and better. You will come knocking,
and I will open the door to your bundled mass,
because I always let you in.

Submission

for Arcelius L. Lipscomb Sr.

Be my lead and I'll corral troops to follow.
Trickster wife.
Lasso their heavy stomps in mudded boots,
every piece of fatigued armor for myself,
each helmet mashed into one. Strong for my head.

I will war for you.

Nurse all day, then don the white uniform at the stove
to fill your tummy,
but you are not made for such.

I am clumped

in your cell.
In your life for me.

You bring me orange capped syringes,
clouded rooms, dank with sweaty bodies.
Spoons with blackened underbellies, contoured soot
and an ass whipping if I don't take it.

Most days I work until my face tells the story.
I know you see it, but you ignore it because
this pale blotchy skin screams.
These drooped, glassed eyes
tell you "I am not happy."
Come into my cell.

Make yourself at home.

matchsticks

we built a house of matchsticks.
matched the wood ends to
wooden end, red tips with glittery
red tips. hope and fleeting glances,
our brick with mortar.
a delicate balancing act,

 we,
avoided rough brushings with
what could strike fire:
entered doors sideways, hunched.
but we, orange-embered,
in the center
of that house, rolled
often too close to the walls—
edges of our sweat so luring
we slowed to notice our flush,

and i saw you step away
from us, our shadows bump,
quiet marionettes stretch
glides on walls.
arches then points—you saw
how well we danced.
it was the quiet that echoed
loudest inside you. I've never seen
one fear so much beauty.
you were as melodic as a siren
drawing us near in a calm.
all at once—
pull one of the matchsticks

our house wobbled,
collapsed,
into our embered
mess—

onto us.

First Blood

Cars grumble in dread
for mornings exhaust.
I recognize I am on a corner.
t-shirt stretched
and stained, my feet wanted to quit
nine miles ago.

I have daughters
fifteen and one eleven. They sleep
in separate rooms—one is the petal, the other a vine.
They are the builders of brick walls sure to crumble.
Protection sure to crumble.

They are home, wrapped warm in wonders
about my whereabouts while I seek my bloodline
in a day draped rich in a painter's blue.
My foot disturbs dew on clovers—weeds that children
treat like flowers.

Little moves at this hour, but
maybe somebody will appear muted
like dawn, holding the answer.
I stand
chasing the mistake I avoided in youth,
the first high I never asked for, link
to new life.

First blood did not come in a high school
state of mind. But came rough with smoothness
in tow.

It was thinner than me. Prettier than me.
My husband gave it touches I never

felt. It dripped when he picked her
up, slid her thin, needle body inside of me

and made me taste her along with him.
She bucked, spiral flipped in my veins,
and I understood why he loved her more
than me, than our children.

Miss the City

1.

Green highway signs reintroduce me. I take this city's curves
as if they are mine. The bridge near Alston Avenue
reminds me of large slingshots and glass Pepsi bottles
for ammunition Forest Tent caterpillars falling from trees.
Barefoot foot-races and sparkling summer suns. The clouds,
even on the lightest days, hint of grey.

I see, brighter than this old city, Skin and full lips,
your smile spreading wide across your face for the joke.

I bubble alongside the chemistry of family, hear laughter
like Christmas bells,

2.

You in your vehicle
in the dark of night. You offered
shoulders like you wouldn't
before.

The way you touched me—soft—when you spread me wide
took me like sweat and candle wax.
You gave until I was grey inside.

None of the Salt

for Arcelius L. Lipscomb Sr.

You took up family with a woman you never married and she wore your last name like a badge. A plaque for the street smart man I named my son for. My champagne glass cool on her lips tasting my wine. It was your father at the base of my stairs,

solemn in his son's lift, more gentle than you had ever been. Even in your planting our cores—my goddess and your junior. Those two loops that locked us forever. It wasn't that I had given you too much without you giving to your children—how their

memories are sacks of narcotic you taught her to know as rice, him opportunity. Your magician's balance on the block, nodding in heroin's tie dyed thoughts and liquid movement. The happenstance on the family reunion you told your son nothing about.

How could you know they were your children and not feel them? Fall's early night swooshed slow, serpentine against the floor then wept around to cover me. Breaths gone for a moment, my knees the strongest thing on my body, held me and kept me low

to ground for my time to break. It was none of the salt you sprinkled onto my tongue, but all of the fact that you were no longer here for me to insanely revisit the taste.

THREE

Y'all are the best thing I've done with my life. My best creation. I don't know what I would do without y'all. I pray for all of you, all the time; asking God to please judge my kids by [their] own merit and not by my faults and transgressions. Leon is settling down these days. Leon is close to Brandy; that's good. Brandy spends time with her baby and I'm so proud of her. I haven't seen or heard from Travis is a while. I call him and leave messages; he never calls back. I guess he's dealing with his own demons about me. I ask God to intervene. I pray he'll come to love me one day. You always loved me—even though you tried not to. I always knew you loved me (Thank you!!).

The Fray

I was a red balloon tied on my baby's wrist.
Cotton candy bags wrinkled,
sweat in her palm.
My day filled me thin and full,
I let her anchor me.

There was a house I needed
to get to on the end
of the street, unclean
and barren in its way.
Her clean eyes and mouth
held me and will get me there.

Her hair
shiny, coiffed. Pretty ties—
barrettes. Clothes pressed
and strong in the sunlight. Time.
In a morning
where an artist's creative
longings grip the cusp
of these hours and late ones. Time
on my baby before starting.
And she had cotton
candy, was proud of
blue and pink, unopened. Fluffed.

She followed the balloon
tied to her.

Was pushed by winds,
my youngest girl, fattest babe.
Her wrist, in my hand
was a thread woven in wrinkled linen.
Unable to separate.

Unkempt in my hand.
She followed. No queries
for my wanderlust, just the bag
of misleading candy.
Her foot trying to step clean
around a dust bowl where grass should be.
I led her to the back door, entered
the basement where kids were wearing
red, white, and blue in whatever hues
their mothers could afford,
stars spangled in their eyes, hopes for nothing
in particular and ashen faces.

Kids swam in stretched collars
of dirty t-shirts, black grime jammed
at the tips of their nail beds.
Theirs were the hands she filled
with cotton candy. Hands that shot
towards her. Tight and ordered
like dandelion petals—she the weed's core.

Making Biscuits

My hands, I wash free of dirt
and grime of the day, from the running that tires me so.
Water sheens my skin new, cleans the dinner table, too where
strange elbows and forearms sit ashen. Scrubbed against
the table cooking daily what cannot be consumed.

Flour dots the table. No lining or pan,
only a hard woodgrain pattern on which to shape them. Biscuits
are to be made here heavy as lard, self-rising flour and buttermilk.
My skin is barely seen through smeared coatings. While dough
hides, pressed under my fingernails.

One hand makes a shallow cup to support
the essentials. The other grips the messy mass and lightly
squeezes the product, spins, and pats. My daughter watches curiously as I go,
work in this thick mixture that I imagine goodness
will sprout from. Just my imprints there.

I am here kneading for dense flour clouds in compact
layers unsticky enough for her to try to mimic,
my mash and muscle. She watches and pushes her hands
in beside mine—our briefly brushing browns. I grab
what I need and swoop lessons past her.

She makes one biscuit to my mounds. Moving,
never stopping until I'm done while her small, slow hand,
trails behind unable to catch me. Fluffy flakes flipping
onto the floor for the trampling and cleaned in the end when
the clock says that it has been much too long.

Much too long like when my movement slows
and my work takes longer as strikes of brown streak hard down
the centers of my nails, cuticle to tip. Permanent parts of me like the streaks
of flour on the table. The white substance, cleaning becomes
a task that my hands can't handle. Becomes her task.

Extract the dirtiness from us. Keep our home
clean, keep me clean, because I've taken what is here,
the dingy putty of ingredients, to make what I think I need.
The captivating scent fills the house. They wait, enticed—
them too, but my daughter tires of it soon. I wonder if I ever

will. The feasters line up for what I have,
neighbors and family. And her, my child, well she just waits
until I say that I have finally finished.

Come Eat

If you pots still like it
when I hold you, get excited
over the spiral orange eyes,
then maybe you will help
me talk to my babies, help me lean in
close like syringes never let me;
like worn couches holding
stupors; like my chipped
logic: spending rent, grocery,
electricity. Girl Scout money.
Help me lean in and say to them,
*Every stroke of color in life's
mural could never be your equal.*
Help them to know that

I can't separate them
from the afterhours,
footprints
on white tiles,
muddy entryways,

but I'll whip and mash
potatoes, snap and season
green beans with fat
back meat, mold beef
into a loaf, dazzle it
with tomato paste, salt and pepper,
load their plates,
open the front door
and yell, *Come, eat!*

Persephone's Abduction

Huffing beasts burst soil to open earth.
His chariot, furious and four-horsed,
bore Hades on their backs. Eager eyed,
he broke buds at the receptacle—
trampled potential
flowers she might've picked.
When the chasm yawned
the girl didn't see—
Instead, the flowers in the field took
her. How many earth swellings,
ripples, rolled grass and dirt
mixes moved aside for Hades
to peak before the stealing—
daily ogles to enhance his longings?
She was ripe in his eyes. Then thirst
for thrust, Zeus saw the yawn pulsing,
breath, frothing thuds of hooves.
Gallop and grab: she was taken.
Breasts, yet to be developed,
breath to be soured with his fruits.

Shhhhh or her sister
cycles next. Here
the nightmare becomes life.
—the myth a reality.

The pluck fall of seeds silent to
mother's ears gaped cavern left
hollowed out to collect screams.

Hell is where it happens.
Shadows creep across sweating
walls in the grim light the fire casts.
He uses his cutlass, his stick to slice
the fruit, find the pomegranate's
seeds. An ugly arrangement.

For reassurance he plucks again.

Hollow Noise

There are others who can save you.
Enter their buildings and find peace.
Bundle in your blanket for nap-time.
Bundle in prayers before Nap-time, lay
your head, gently for respite. Think of mother's
breast resting you there. Where palms are fresh
linen on your face. Inhale clean wall and floors.
Peek into your cubby for echoes of other screams.

Then howl your own.
Cry eaten soot from underbellies of burned spoons.
Let pink, yellow crayons dance a shimmy with your treble.
let the shrills bounce in your tantrums. Say to them:
What have you missed? Don't we look, walk, know different
than other girls. Don't we know know fending for ourselves?

*Make a sandwich for your baby sister,
I'll be back soon.*

Water with cereal. Syrup sopped bread. Sugar sandwiches.

Tell!
Tell teachers, custodians, even. Anybody!
Tell them your mother tried to shine herself
under pressure's oil. She is water—they do not mix.

I am a hull and I can't see who has scraped me
clean—filled me with spirits who want to harm my babies.
Tell that I am an evil who rides your back outside dreams.
Say that you have Stockholm-ed all the liquored school
nights you can take, all the hungover days you can take,
hugged too many images of mama wearing spiked
vests—your holes to absorb the swill. You have swallowed
too many dollops of curdled milk and honey.

Tell someone. Anyone. Scream.

Animus

Bottles from the night before at Brenda's house
Are somehow in my own living room. Liquor
glasses clank in faux celebration with laughs.
Screams bounce loud from walls, eye swollen shut,
sweat is back on my skin.

I lift my hand, touch the gauze strapped lumpy
across my eye brow, the split coming to life again
as the pain pills wear off and I remember Brenda
cocked that glass bottle—a swig dancing
in the bottom—stretched it 'cross her left shoulder,

swung with her right and watched pieces of glass
ricochet off my head. She was pissy-eyed and bitter.
I spent with a chunk of glass under
my skin, follicles puckered around it
catching red ribbons as they spill from me.

My daughter's jeans, socks, and panties are draped
over our couch for her morning walk. She wears
the winter coat frumpled beside the coffee table
for the twenty minute walk to school.

Tonight she will stomp in that coat, into
the cul-de-sac where Brenda lives, protesting,
but liquor walks the street with us
and I have absorbed all of it, so I cannot
absorb her whines, "*Please,*
let's just go to bed." But I can't
do it alone and I still see red,
so she will knock

and once the door opens, will step aside while I swing
a Thunderbird bottle of my own—split Brenda
over her eye. My girl off to the side,
quiet if questioned, ready to run. She is an experienced
product of my environment. Third grade,
she is ready. Bred for this.

Fran

When Hurricane Fran swept Durham she
popped branches and powerlines, blew
plush limbs around the city like flakes
in a snow globe. She came with curtains.
Sheets of slanted rain cloaked the block.
A veil of ferocious gray. Winds were
her necklace, stressed trees her bracelets.
She left limbs on roads for padding for her feet.
I had a man, with money, a generator,
who was foolish enough to brave Fran
for my high. I was safe, warm, selling myself
lies then sharing with whomever was open to donation.

Fran swept my two girls into a corner
between barely furnished walls, wooden
table aching under a television she clipped
the powerline for, crack residue on what
dishes were left, a refrigerator keeping cold
only the air it circulated, couches bleached,
scrubbed clean of shit slipped from my cousin's
ass, AIDs ravishing his insides. Two months
later that cushion was all we had left of him.

That night my daughters had themselves,
each other's hip to hold, waist to wrap
around, temples touching. Themselves
to hug in Fran's stormy night.

Clippings

I wanted you to try harder to look for me.
Sit sober on the front porch.
Stay home at night and cook.
Be my mommy.

You know my don't likes: onion, or gravy;
my likes: ham, stuffing, cool whip, liver.
But I don't know what you really look like.
I imagine from the pieces
of kisses you've shown me, hugs and melodies,
that you are nice. You even need me.

I wanted you to look for me
when I scribbled a note beside the screen
door. I scribbled hard and sloppily to make sure
you could see it.

You didn't see it.

I was waiting on you.

I felt the hard place lined smooth,
crack rough against me. And where we should be,
only an echo of the idea that you could be looking for me.
I may have smiled.

Phone Call

spin fluorescent fast a tiny
tiny drill into my eardrum
the phone rings
wake up
call and my baby any one
of them would be on the
other end *hello*
wonder how my day was
call me damnit!

And wonder
if your guesses were right
If I had smoked half the color
of day and drank every blue
in the night shepherd me into
your anger I have given you
the staff I will follow
and sheepishly tell you in one
way or another that you are
right I wear half the day's
color on my lips in a drunkard's
cool purple and I have saved
the rest for droughts you will
again go weeks without calling
me I will tell you every blue
in the night has been ingested
tinted my innards so that I don't
forget what blue feels like I
will not forget how this feels
for you I promise to dislike
myself as much as you do
I will tell you every truth

Eviction

1.

I came after her. My voice
warm, but only in familiarity.
Jeane's house is closest to "home"
since our last eviction.

There, clean white bath,

life happens with little instruction—
carpets, furniture, and Jeane
are all blue. Walls are flats of frozen snow—
two chairs around the table.

No space for
the other two.

The bathroom's abyss sucks
loud and sure like eternity's
pull, accepting the red
like all of its victims.

Jeane flushes
what was. Exodus.

Proofed by blood on the white
towel used to clean her legs
and the bathroom floor.
Rusty brown. Arid color clash.

Pungent stale, stench; the scent
of life and tears festers on the towel
in a chest of drawers—smudges
of Persephone's undoing

2.

Jeane stretches the speckled towel around her
until she is cocooned in brown and cream,
until she is dry and thirsty and withering.

She sits on the blue couch, feet on the blue
carpet with a joint-sealed with spit
and she will attempt to find a resolution.

Her laughter, fogged, sorrowful and heavy, sneaks
through white smoke like a worm through dirt. Weed
scent fills the room, then me—I feel her thoughts.

And my thoughts become pleas, become prayers:
Ave dominus. Benedicta tu in mulieribus.
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, deum.

The frozen walls speak to me:
Patience, it will be cold here for a while.

Spring's Leaf

Just when she thought she had confused
the metal cuffs round her ankle ran fast
enough to believe they were air,
they melted into the callus of her feet,
moved to her sandpaper knuckles,
thicker for knocking
me out of my hiding places,
grit lodged
between spaces where tight spring mornings
could be, throaty laughter, a cardinal's red
gargoyled on window sills

and as if there was something luring
about being treated lowly
she crawls towards me, a beaten dog
not wanting the next blow, but blinks
slowly and wet-eyed,

I am willing, if it means you.

*She said I wrote three poems about you last night.
Scrubbed them out of me hard like an old tub
dirty toilet
soiled carpet
scrubbed from
multiplied layers of weaknesses
that I cannot seem to cut through.
They were stubborn like you, Mama.*

I had become tired of bleeding myself dry
on their phone lines watching it waste
and puddle onto the floor, strangers passing
stamp their foot patterns in our red life,
not caring who they spread too thin.
expanded with clapping feet and stomping hands, drums for
baritones of loves, and sopranos of love, and altos of love. Love,

she brings when she meets people
and their smiles break like a million clouds
in swift tumbles. She breathes a hope
there with them that causes her to question

if I were mother enough.

oh, but my thumbs gave you a spring leaf's green. Sheened.
The healthy of it seen when you comb your baby sister's hair.

a lustrous green that lets us know
that everything is and that all things
can again be new.

Enough

When burned out lighters cease
to spark, ashtrays are emptied—bellies
are not, my daughter will paint the songs
I poured into her. She will say
she enjoyed time with me.
My son, my big boy will spit an eleven year old's
wander years, bare pantries, and his father's death
into my stoic faith,
eye brows raised my resignation
his resentment.
I am "not same person."

He does not know, like my daughter does,
the times when her clock read 11:42pm and I dangled,
bunched skins, crunched knuckles
at the other end of her line. She begs me to tuck
memories and sleepy apologies back
in 1998, '95, '93, '82.

She will say

*You are not the same person, so pack them
into the cinder block walls. Let them scream and swell
in the empty refrigerator or boil in the bath
of bleach, with the socks, panties underclothes
you made us launder in bathtubs.*

*Let them sink, soak into soil at the bottom
of trees where we tossed your syringes.
Let them vanish like track marks in your arm's bend.
Let them pale
next to snuggle hugs and toddler songs of rubber tree
plants and the small ants who pull them with high hopes. Strong*

*like us. Let them melt between the palms
of a boney hand and a plump motherly one.*

For Sons

I said to him. If I were ocean enough,
I probably could have collected some of your pieces
when you burst through the door behind me
popping into tiny pellets to sting me
all your life, all over the floor,
not caring who saw or who would step on you.

Each scribed with a single letter,
parts of a bigger emotion.
Without trying
I know your thick wishes like blood
coursing my veins—stuff we share.
The wish for understanding that
this is a burdened, country
North Carolina love.
One you cannot understand. You will not
understand until it is too late.
An emotion you refuse or cannot give.

If I were ocean enough, If I could
put myself where you want me
I would have washed you in my waves
took the splintered planks, rotting shirts,
worthless shoes, pulled them to the bottom
of myself, so that you wouldn't have to.
I had given my power to a gravitational pull,
that kissed me too hard on his way out the door,
loved me too thin like warmed barbed wire,
so the broken chips of shell pushing forth
on rippled sand beneath the last whisper
of a current was all I had left for you

Each uncountable piece pops into me with
the salted water,
if I were vast enough I might wrap you in my
waves and cleanse you. Make you fit.
Make us fit maybe we already did.
I would douse you in me
had I another chance. I am only the murky circle
of outcast water that even my mother
earth fights to love.
I did not come easy.

FOUR

“Looking back over my life I guess I shed some tears. I told myself time again; this time I’ll win, but another fight, things ain’t right. I’m losing again. Takes a fool to lose twice start all over again”

I chose that song at the beginning because it helps me start my thinking. I tried so hard to show love but it never worked for me. Something always went wrong. Except for you always loved me. I pray. I ask God for forgiveness. I was so insecure. Now I wonder if my insecurities were at the base of my problems. I decided I was a comedian. This way I felt everyone was laughing with me instead of at me. I’m gon’ be me regardless. I can’t be nobody else. If you try to be somebody else—see that’s how I got all messed up inside my head because I was trying to be this person and I was trying to be that person. You try and all you do is cause confusion in your life. You’ve got to be you. I know for a fact everything grinning in your face and anything shining ain’t gold and the pains comes when you trust somebody and you feel like they’ the one that’s gon’ be there for you and they’ the one that turns on you, you know. And that hurts. I was a very sensitive woman—that hurt me. Now, Bobby was my friend. He had his issues just like the next person, but he loved me for me.

Coconut

1.

A stutter away from your black
hands engorged veins, knuckles
chipped too far from engine work.
your dark oiled nail bed is against crisp
hospital sheets. Ash on your skin,
soap in my nose, those showers
you take leaves proof of what rocks me.

Day leaks through windows, your long
legs, veins, arms stretch to corners of beds,
your tough hair into the pillow deep,
breaths coming hard off the pillow case.
I listen to your rhythm, feed myself, slip
your blanket open
and you are there, hovering.
An entity too light for yourself.

2.

The sun hammocks on the horizon.
In your presence

I am

floating bubbles.
I evaporate
with you. My pulse
in my throat,
it rhythmically bulges my chest.

Along with the pink-orange,
the sky holds me too and fills my nose
with coconut from faraway.

Mirror glow of my

skin beckons, it's still art to you—
I become your fantasies
there. First breaths here.
Nesting beneath your smile
like still waters
They smell
of those coconuts
we swallowed milk from.

I need the sweetness to coat
my tongue. Its thick
consistency and balmy tumble
between my brown.
Cocoa
and honey—strange sweetness.

Baby Bird

1

I can't say why she's speckled the way she is,
but I gave my baby a different name to save
myself. Handed her
spotty roots to the man who barely loved me
to protect man who had tried to.

2

She is a rich coffee brown, no sugar, no cream.
The way her daddy takes it—the way Bobby is
fashioned. Like old men weary
of catching two birds by their last tail feathers
just before they escape..

3

It was the spots that confused her. *Is my daddy
Bobby or Senior?* The toffee speck, bold and
at attention in one of her eyes. Birthmark
on her thigh, a jagged tailed heart stamped
on Senior's thigh, too. Toffee in Senior's eye, too.

4

Dried roots wrapped slowly over
her, weaved fast around me, when
I said. "*Bobby. Your daddy is
Bobby.*"

5

We were a sandwich in the front seat
of Bobby's truck. Then, floating in space
between us, she peered up, like towards
a birds nest, leaking with questions.

A Gift From Her Son

In shadows at the hall's end, her stance
beneath the portrait of a glowing Jesus—

the plump heart floating in front of His chest,
Lena was a small bodied agony on weekends

that never changed. She waited with an arsenal
of slant eyed-stares, pointed comments ready

to spear from her venomous grandmother tongue.
Loathing the hard biological fact that my daughter

was hers. Deciding repeatedly, with every
new chance, that she was the runt to be ignored.

Lena's eyes were blades that cut my baby open
to see if she was really maggots and black

rotting flesh inside. Stench of the dark meat—
spill from the soupy gash onto the floor. Pieces

of her scampering in the slithery worm way
of walking. Scatter wide, writhe, slide, slither,

squirm to a place safe for hiding. Was He there
with that floating heart, watching her peer into Lena's

Native American cheek bones and perfect skin.
Did He see her look into Lena's casket and not cry?

The Truck

our baby rides on the back
sees your head through
the open window where you monitor
from the driver seat she props her feet
against the big spare tire dingy
paint reveals rust spots fall
leaves from years ago and now
she watches you drive
the truck
lifts you high
above vehicles works
hard for you
it knows

you need to be
a strong man to work
every morning by five
it even died so you could
revive it
paint the engine a gloss
of royal blue twinkling
parts i could
not name but

it grumbles down hot
paved streets big tires
take the trip wear man-ish
chain dress in winter treads
pressed gentle over snow
turns packed flakes
into pressed ice cakes
or creamed slush
when other cars and weak

drivers were stopped
it let you know

what to do those callused
hands doing the work
on bare steering wheels mid
winter you haul big things managed
with bungees so tight
near eyes always squint
you just yell over your shoulder
“move back on out the way now”

Bitter Carolina

Beneath his heaving chest,
my child, young,
eight years old, on his couch,
her pouty face fluffed
inside her palms—she'd rather
be with mom.

I still hear the rattle and faint
whistle of his breath piercing
like high pitch frequencies.
I see the exposed brick
in his apartment. Stallions

run unbridled
in winds of emotion
beneath my eyelids,
trampling images
of his concave, toothless
mouth and rolling eyes.

Slathered in phlegm—pink
with blood, her thin
body, climbing apple
trees in his backyard,
suffocates itself.

Her eye roll, mastered
at eleven, is overshadowed
by his sharp shoulder
blades, boney and ribbed,
hunched spine. Hunkered
by the weight of cancer.

Beneath his accusing

eye brows conspiracy theories
wash in his inability
to remember that he
had a fifth child— her.
She wasn't supposed to care,
not cringe at the violent,
bitter taste of his wilting
body, unfamiliar
whisper or shredding cough.
She was simply supposed to swallow.

Dementia's window

The sky was clear when the tiny space opened.

You saw that life had never left
and asked for me.

1981, your skin
was a brilliant brown, polished
with man sweat, a mechanic's drizzle.
And maybe I wanted to be a sponge
for a short time. I invited you in.
You hydrated what I did not know
was thirsting, hydrated
what you did know was thirsting
and when our time was up, left me
with a fragile fleck of the brilliant brown.
It grew here, stretched and coiled, tether-like,
and ours.

We enjoyed brown fibers burned
into smoke we inhaled,
swallowed laughter and lies in dimly lit kitchens
on wobbly, salvaged chairs—your wood glue fix
only able to handle so much.
We cackled in our lush's comfort and learned each other
through dates, addresses and dates. Many dates,
then your lungs their divided cells,
multiplied, metastasized, then your window
screeched slowly
till the panes met.

The brilliant brown has faded because
you are here, but your absence rubs rough.
Then I see it, as fresh as 1981.
Around the wheelchair's handles,
your resemblance,
leeches blood from its fingertips
and when the window has closed again,

rolls you away from me.

Drive

I felt that clinching myself
when bloody chunks
rode his palm, rode white rags
pressed to his mouth. Trouble riding
the arch of his eyebrows, riding
the coarse, wild sparks
like the last cowboy in the fight.
People in white and his children
whirring around him, a still-life
in the midst. I felt the clinching

myself, when he picked me
from the movement,

“Hannah, am I dying?”

His world of motors, tools, beers,
smiles, so many smiles wiped
from his screen
like he wiped cold fog
from car windows, a winter’s
must. White rag in tow.

Finally he knew.

“Yes, Bobby, you are.”

He felt, denied, hung
his head—almost chin to chest.

A sense of defeat he never imaged.

You, Daddy

You ignored what he did, but
God dealt with him. You
tossed his deceitful smile
to the side like a finished cigarette.
Said his nightly footsteps
were towards bathrooms.
I choose not to dwell

on the fact that your decisions
upset my efforts to remain in constant
control of my life—
a kaleidoscope of rotating rocks

resembling you.
Your mistakes mixed with our
striking resemblance creates a film.
Opaque blurs of color that remind
me of shit and lizards.
Underlying issues have no effect
on me—see? But your

death will split me to my center until I'm
as raw as you after chemo. But I don't
desire to prevent or even
disrupt sacred smoking time—the
yolk of God's work of making you feel
all of your wrongs.

Soon there will be no awkward truck
Rides, no Winston smoke
floating through their lungs.

You now.

Gourd

1.

Last week, Monday, I took a photograph
of our hands—we held each other's. You
aligned my fingers with yours—another
striking similarity, held my hand
and let time be a blanket over us
for winters you will miss.

Some place deep inside here is a hollow.
Inside that, hardened nuggets clank.
like those inside the African
instrument that keeps rhythm.
The music echoed Thursday's wails
sister's, nieces', my own.

Brutes. Our animal screams
filled my head, spiraled into the hollow,
clanking hard, patting rhythms. Nobody

to cradle them, be strong for them—like you
and your hands. No one to give them silly
toothless smiles, rough hugs, shiny quarters. Your
interpretation of love.

2.

The nuggets still, like me, stare
blankly at letters spelling your name.
I am imagining the photo
of you wearing your grey goatee.

This Monday I am as heavy
as the load the family bears.
Your name outside the funeral
home, a thing I can't understand.

FIVE

But I thank God, and I know it might be wrong, but I thank God for Brandy when I was like that. For you! You know what I'm saying? And I look around and I realize, Brandy's come around now, but I took her childhood. I took it away from her. Not meaning to take it, you know—her feelings for me were just so strong—if she knew I was sick she would go out like she was going to school, but she would come back to take care of me. But you know, I feel good now, but I'm crying because—when I think back...All I know is I thank God for where I am now. I know all of my kids. Don't nobody know them better than me; I know you better than you think I know you.

Subjects

I don't want my daughter to write sad stories.
Can't dignify the soupy brown infection that
slimes and slips across the vital parts
inside with a poem. I want a warm,
sun kissed poem
She won't jot the death
of men she loved to create echoes in hollows.
There has to be a haven for what moves
her, sucks of life in
the right direction. Her poems have to be clean,

without scent of broken heart,
prick of seared lies, how
family enters glass houses
with mallets,
unseen until the biggest pieces tumble.

There is space for lighted candles.
It is a batty cave. Cold.

Write

I want to write about
Grandma's cracked
cookie jar,
porcelain yellow and full,

swinging high on city park swings—
jumping off,
I had wings
But tonight I need books.

The creaking pop of opening its cover—
telling black type
on the page.

The golden prize inside the open bell
of spring's honey suckles

I want to write about raindrops,
scraped knees, thoughts, or skies—maybe fingers,
but I can only think of books.

A story moves here:
flimsy bodies flop into chairs,
and open for embrace

the need like blinking to turn
the pages.
And the empty satisfaction of
the last one.

I want to write on eyes or brows,
frogs,
grass,
the crucifix.

His Breakable Work

Let it already be folded into a tiny square,
fitting in my pocket. A bearable thing,
weightless but heavy in my tow of it.

Let me find it among my rubble—tangled
in an old sock, commingling with dirty laundry,
cotton and polyester, poor and shaking,

peek from under crumpled poems tossed
in corners—missing, it could have been dead.

When she needs to take it with her, this sin,
let it press the farthest thread in her pocket—
folded into itself, not quite touching her true
laugh or groggy morn voice,

so when she enters the temple, says she holds it
for someone else, that it does not belong
to her, it seems believable. Although, I know

He knows—let it be a prop umbrella folded
with her, just for her, as she sits in the back
and listens for confirmation that He does, in fact,

extend the same redemption rope down to her
for streets of gold. That she is offered pearls
for her neck or to add to gates, not abandonment,

or people stilled in salt pillars for having turned
to behold this sin—to look upon her one last time.

waking

the cool that will rush
up through me is proof
enough that this place
is real. I am real, and this dream
ushered me into morning
easy like a ribbon painted
by Dali, a silken slide
I coast into day with,
then stories populated
my dream world,
in words,
turned phrasing,
a southern light bulb's yellow
glow, a black loud laughter,
a food, mothers, sisters, us.

in my world the poets
talk to me—tell me where
the words work best.
I slide past
grandmothers, few hugs
from brothers, fathers,
and others that have been
and I know they belong
on pages—scribed good
on handmade paper
with bleeding ink. She wakes
lands smoothly, not
with thud, or stumble
or momentum's jog
just step
and she is writing.

Morning is here
and night still covers.

I'd like to step outside
through sliding glass,
drop my feet
bare onto grass wet
from deep evening's
rain, I'd like to step
outside.

marathon

After the battles, ancestors sat a crystal glass
in the middle of dryness and let its cup-sweat muddy the dirt

road it stood on. A statue of relief
for the weary, the weathered. You wondered

if the pain had been the pierce of needles, boils
bubbled on skin—under heat or blunt solids spiked

at the head. Just how hard
was the battle?

You learned
to pull yourself from the wet,

the clothes
on your flat-chested body,

didn't get soggy
in storms/weather. You were far too silly,

had no idea
of what a monsoon

felt, looked, stung like, but
you ran like you did.

when the storm got
into its groove of pressing
matter with its wide padded thumb
that flattens
in minutes. Hunched
your back over, let it
take the thumbs' thud
of big rain drips—at least

the front of your clothes
could remain dry. It would take
years before you pulled
the same blouse from your closet—
the half soaked one—realized
that a monsoon
would have surely left all parts of you
sodden, stripped.

Wasn't a monsoon
a midsized rain storm?
You were only a little damp from drizzle,

and that cool glass of water with
its cold sweat makes soup of the once powdery dirt.
Surrounded
mud—
you pick it up, understand

your mission and you drink. Mud

pressed grainy and mucky through your fingers.
You carried mired handprints. Left them

in Washington at marches,
on rocking chairs on sweltering porches—sweat

rags draped over your shoulder—sundress
flowing in breezes. Left them on boxes

of Band-Aids re-shelved next to
calamine lotion—Whose flesh did they match?

Left them in churches, soiled the tails of rising
prayers released too soon. You leave them on hair

barrettes on kinky heads combed
for church. You leave them at back doors

of ice cream parlors, on every box of cereal
bearing only “flesh-tone” faces. It is the print

of your great grandmother,
a kitchen slave, feeding a family— her own
eating picked-over scraps. Leave them

—show your disapproval. Push
your shoulders back, leave them.
Look everyman in the eye,
leave them.

Read books,
leave them.

Write books,
leave them.

Leave them, for other beautiful black babies to find.

SIX

Things are beginning to be understood now. I feel better than I have in a long time. I'm learning to live thru God. It's a wonderful feeling—not apologizing all the time. I go to church every Sunday at Pilgrim Baptist Church. I've come a long way since God is on my side. Thing about doing drugs was that it never made me happy 'cause when I did it, I always thought: No this ain't you, Hannah. This ain't you. I am glad I got mind settled. I sleep at night now, thank God. No more sitting up waiting for the sun to come up. No more crying. Forgive if you can. God forgives *you* of everything. The more time you spend holding grudges—well, that's the time you won't get back.

Forgive if you can. God forgives *you*
of everything. The more time you spend
holding grudges—well, that's the time
you won't get back.

On Forgiveness

I

By the time I had figured this out
the worst of it was over. I've now reached
my thirties and you have finally
become my mother again.
I can now see the cyclical uglies forced upon you
demands of "be a mother," spewed into your face—
an oak's sticky sap, residue clouded your vision.
When you try to be more of a mother nobody believes
you. Nobody listens—they spew again "Be. A. Mother!"
You nurture what thinks for you, paint it purple.
Your genius dried matte, hardened. You are a chest,
a locker standing upright, concealing rust tipped
arrows reserved for our use—your combination
dialed high. Its code a thing you keep secret
until your words dripped with cheap vodka the long
dormant disgust grows thorny, fast-grating its way up.
the unreal blanket of guilt settles on your shoulders.

Who knows your night weepings and bursting apologies
better than your children?

God knows! Y'all deserved a better mother than me!

Nights when you call screaming
into my phone: *I hate myself, you know—
for the way I raised y'all. What I did to y'all.*

For years I listened stone still,
as if you could see me.
There was a pickled truth there, you deserved

its acid, so I let you continue to dig
through your sloppy words
until you tasted its bitter. Let it seethe

on your tongue, eat through till where it hurt most.
Those woods that surrounded us, you dragged us
there. Those briars are still lodged

and all we wanted was for some member of your family
to pluck them, be a balm. Our cousin had rooms in their homes,
places in their hearts. She bounced the backs of their horses

—we only saw them photographed.
I was too young to distinguish the difference between
her deceased mom and my drug-addicted mother.

In my mind, mine had already died
and everyone in my family decided to ignore me—
a black sheep, born of my mother's wool.

3

At 12 years old, I lay beside you.
Hours before the bottoms of other addicts passing
and passing through our home, a capsule for holding highs.

I imagined you recalled the words *sister, daughter, Mama,*
look at what you've wrought. Look how you're making me feel.

But, to the deliverer of all pains, no one thought to say
 Hannah, look how you've made you feel.
But I love you, Ma.
Mommy, I love you. I love you.

Ma, I love you. I love you—Repeatedly! Every time! Because
the ones weren't enough,
 you had to know that I did.
I loved *you* in the middle of your tug-of-war.

I called after you, Ma, but you walked out
that door—*Mama! Mama! Where are you going?*

I write about you sometimes. I talk facts:
hunger, anger, staunch scents of things
urban chemists whipped up in their kitchens—Pyrex
dishes holding milky numbness waiting to harden,
quiet Christmas mornings and changes.

 About changes.

About new births or rebirths and I tell them,
that when you see your God, He will know
the prayers you sent up at the height of your highs
and ones whispered on your knees in quiet places.
in dark closets, maybe from your sobered mouth.

5

Even Satan's minions, in past lives, were white,
and clean, and winged with iridescent feathers,
and beautiful, and strong,
and Hannah —I wonder

if it ever occurred to the judges
and onlookers, the pall bearers
of the life you lived, that your load is primary.
It is your God you will answer to.

Did any of us know that He will look back
and recall your prayers and be proud
of his child for her growth? He will remember
the blood curdling screams thrown before

prayers you sent when your ankles
and fingers were bloodied and pulped.
You clawed at earth's crust while
evil pulled at your feet trying to snatch you

into the murk. He'll recall pulling you up
and how you fell at his feet each and every time.
He will know that you always knew.
He would be right on time.

He will look upon you and behold
his beautiful creation and in his deepest,
most godly voice say,
It is good.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

Addonizio, Kim. *Jimmy & Rita*. Texas: Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2012.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Avery, Peter. *Hafiz of Shiraz*. New York: Handsel Books, 2003.

Baldwin, James. *Collected Essay*. New York: *Corinth Books*.1963.

Boland, Eavan. *In a Time of Violence*. New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1994.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Chicago: The David Company. 1987

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1963

Clifton, Lucille. *Blessing the Boats*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2000.

Dawson, Erica. *Big Eyed Afraid*. Baltimore: Waywiser Press, 2007.

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

Didion, Joan. *Blue Nights*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 2011.

Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1986.

Dove, Rita, *Mother Love*. New York; London : W.W. Norton, 1995.

Glück, Louise. *The Wild Iris*. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1992.

Giovanni, Nikki. *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, New York: William Morrow and Co., 1996.

Harris, Trudier. *Summer Snow*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

Hasan, Raza Ali. *67 Mogul Miniatures*. Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press, 2009.

Hayden, Robert *Collected Poems*, New York: Liveright, 1997.

Hudgins, Andrew. *After the Lost War*. Boston; New York: William Morrow and Co., 1988.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing....* Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Jones, LeRoi. *Preface to A Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. New York: Corinth Books, 1961.

Kasischke, Laura. *Lilies Without*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press. 2007.

Komunyakaa, Yusef. *Taboo*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

Lehman, David; M. Doty. *The Best American Poetry 2012*. New York: Scribner, 2012.

Lehman, David; C. Wright. *The Best American Poetry 2008*. New York: Scribner, 2012.

Lee, Li-Young. *Behind My Eyes*. New York: Norton, 2008.

Lorde, Audre. *The Black Unicorn*. New York, Norton, 1978.

Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals, New York, Aunt Lute Books, 1980*.

Lorde, Audre. *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton. & Company, 1997.

Manning, Maurice. *Bucolics*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2007.

Merwin, W.S. *Vixen*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996.

Nduka, Uche. *Eel on Reef*. New York: Akashic Books, 2007.

Neruda, Pablo. *The Book of Questions*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press. 1974.

Olds, Sharon. *The Gold Cell*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 2008.

Olds, Sharon. *The Unswept Room*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Olds, Sharon. *One Secret Thing*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1961.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*. New York: Ausable Press, 2007.

Rich, Adrienne. *The Fact of a Doorframe*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Sanchez, Sonia. *Shake Loose My Skin*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

Sanchez, Sonia. *Does Your House Have Lions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Scott, Jill. *The Moments, the Minutes, the Hours*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is
Enuff*. Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2003.

Smith, Phillip. *100 Best-Loved Poems*. New York: Dover Publication, 1995.

Tate, James. *The Lost Pilot*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967.

Trethaway, Natasha. *Bellocq's Ophelia*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2002.

Voigt, Ellen Bryant. *Messenger*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., Inc., 1944.

Williams, William Carlos. *Poems*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1909.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper, 1940.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Wright, Richard. *Uncle Tom's Children*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.