Pretend Nothing Happened

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by

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We see the world not as it is, but as we are.

— Anais Nin
Season of Red

I close my eyes,
and still,
the roses he gave me are dry
on the coffee table, peeled back,
quiet like the dead.

I’ve learned that in this world,
there are only people,
hurt and colored, parading.
My father says morning
is the jaw of God, noiseless
and yawning gold.
My mother says night
is the eye she ran to school with,
broken and deep—a girl.

Nights, I would yell at
the ones I loved—and try to kill
that galactic silence
where what I wanted from them
did not come.
Now, I drag the red
and drink my wine.

I know we all have our colors.
We buy things that color.
We fill up our life with it,
put it in a wicker basket
on the counter but I want
to scream, enough.
Because I drink it every single night.
I splash it on new loves.
I even wipe my eyes with it.
I

Who can I believe in?
I’m kneeling on the floor.

— Peter Frampton
“Show Me The Way”
Late mornings,

my mother cried in our living room,
as I turned the pages
of a Danielle Steele novel—
half in my world,
half in hers.

I glance at the side of her cheek
half-hidden by the dusty red lampshade,
her skin rusted, her tears
plunging.

Reading of a ballerina
who makes it in Hollywood,
I could have slapped her,
her lips flickering
like little moths.

Satisfied with imitations of light,
moths will settle on a lampshade and be swatted.
My mother sat in a couch corner, crying,
over her life.

We are not moths.
We were too big for that tiny house.

And still, we spent mornings
in separate corners of a sofa
dwindling
in the silvered lives of others
while insects inched along
radiantly outside.
Growing Up in Fresno
after Luis Omar Salinas

On this gusty night
at a farm for losers,
I imagine girls
drinking all night.
There’s souvenir coffee
mugs brimming
with cheap wine,
slivers of leg
peeking through
a barnyard door.
A girl is getting
fingebanged
on a diesel flat
while The Temptations play
from the open window
of a teal Silverado.
What a utopian tragedy.
I would leave,
but God just left
on a beer run.
He’s wearing my heels.
Learning to Speak

1
My father calls my mother a whale.  
He calls her bitch while she sits on the first couch they bought together, laughing at me and hearing none of it. I’m covered in foil, playing Robocop, There are so many teeth in our mouths.

2
My mother calls my father a wimp.  
He turns away and waters his tomatoes.  
She calls my father retard.  He shakes his head and walks away. She says fuck you. He stomps to the front door, his gym bag packed with clothes.

3
My sister-in-law calls my brother pussy as he strains his spine, curved since childhood, to sit tall at the dining table. She says sissy as their son watches Barney from his high chair, his eyes big and droopy like hers.

4
Today, in the front yard of our house, I call my father a liar. He squints at the cracks in the driveway. As he leaves, I say old man. His head bobs like a dead bee in the pool. I call him a coward as he gets into his truck. My father sits, hands on the wheel, engine idle, trying to remember where he learned these words.
The Move

We will eat pasta with pesto sauce and sausage because it is one of the few things I can cook, and you will pretend to be excited about dinner.

We will watch the sun make time while we consider the lives of our neighbors and how love turns to pain. We will listen to each other impersonate a drum roll underneath the sheets we buy at Target, thin cappuccino covers melting in between our bodies in March, our first spring together. You can smoke in the morning without a mind and I will take efficient showers, even let you pee while I shave my legs. I won’t look at the shape your body makes in the air. We can go to strip clubs on Tuesday nights, make someone our favorite and I will finally consider stripping for you.

I’ll surprise you in November, after work, with black heels and back-bends. I will pretend to know what I am doing, and you will think I have done this before.
Talking to Myself While I Drink the Same Margarita for An Hour

It’s been five years since you’ve forgotten
an entire night, because now,
you’re drinking slowly and by yourself.

You’re trying to swallow it all down:
the black outs,
the mornings you would wake up
with your underwear inside out,
the shattered glass
in the dirt around your ex-boyfriend’s blue sedan,
when you threw a twenty pound weight into its window
because you swore you saw cocaine in the glove box,
the disappointment
the way you were left longing
for mutual pleasure,
for lighter limbs after a smoke
for clearer crystals—
your own little pouch of diamonds.

Don’t act like when you warmed up
that rice in the microwave tonight,
you didn’t think about the times you spent
drying out coke on a painted ceramic plate,
the blue one with honey painted gladiolas,
the heat glittering into the creased pink skin
of your long fingers.

And don’t pretend that in the mornings,
when you smudge black mascara on your fingertips,
you don’t consider the way
you held that pipe for too long,
burning tiny worlds of crystal,
cauterizing flame painted ponds
on curled glass.

You used to believe your hands were attractive,
that they were dignified and moved easy
like wind through the top of the Chinese Elm
in your parent’s front yard,
that they were the most feminine part of your body,
although some men exaggerated their grace
for your attention,
asked, *has anyone ever told you,*
and you pretended
no one ever had.

When they reached over the speckled
marble bar to touch them,
you felt their eyes waiting
to catch your glance,
you knew, by now, it was their subtle way
of pleaded to take you home,
and you would quickly walk away,
but sometimes,
you would stare back,
you would stay.

But now, that you’re being good,
the skin on your hands has ashed over,
grown rough and lost its charm,
and no one
has complimented your hands
since you were wild and twenty.
Candle In the Window

*after Credence Clearwater Revival*

My mother sits in the backyard—
drinking beer, smoking Virginia Slims,
grass encroaching the concrete
we laid for just these moments.
For drinking beer and swaying to oldies,
for letting rings go
from long cigarettes, for smoke
dissolving into the memory of her best friend—

my Nina, rolling cigarettes
in her trailer, cherries
burning back
thin delicate paper.
Aren’t we all
cracking into layers?
Such little room we have
to wither
from one side to the other.

And when Fogerty sings,

*Put a candle*
_in the window,_

_Cause’ I feeeeeeel I’ve got to move_

my mother lets go
of her tired cigarette—
what is left of it,
two gold rings on a humbled silhouette,
the amber, gone,
and my mother in the patio.
My Brother’s Return

Carpet burns my palms while I do yoga
in my new apartment, and my brother
sweats in his sleep in Al Dahfra.
Me, writhing and curling like a belly
after drinking, and he, sharing dusty air
in a makeshift bunker with a young black man
from Tennessee. I imagine when he looked
at the moon tonight, he thought of his new son laughing,
and cried. This is what deployment is like:
knowing always, what time it is
both in Fujairah and California,
watching an Arab woman trudge
alongside a dirt road—thinking of your wife
and her nostalgia for long drives,
listening to a mortar whine
like a spoiled child in the sky.

My brother says, no parties
when I come home. He wants to return
to the quiet, to the small spaces
he knows, to dry valley heat,
to pig’s feet in menudo,
to shit-talking the Raiders each Sunday
on a thread-bare couch, to feeling cared about
in our mother’s dining room during dinner.
Seeing him, I will probably cry
and we will make ironic jokes to smooth
ourselves over. How was your vacation
in Abu Dhabi and Man, you missed out
on the liquor convention in Dubai.

We will go inside my parent’s yellowing house
and eat the pizza he has been missing since March.
When he goes to the bathroom, I will follow him,
pretending to look for the back of an earring
I dropped, hoping to hear him sing to himself
like he did before he knew he would miss
his son’s first birthday. Wanting to listen, I will reach
down in the hallway to pinch the imaginary
backing up between my fingers, and hear
his sobbing against the buzz of the bathroom fan,
as he almost feels comfortable again.
When My Father Wins the Lotto

He holds the hose in his right hand
and waters our lawn. Leaves of a plum tree
pivot on their stems, revolving through the heat
of Fresno. From the patio table, I watch my father
daydream over another summer here.

He steps over to a dwarfed avocado tree,
sinks the hose into the dirt, and says,
*If I win the lotto, I’d buy a big house in Mexico,
you know, those ones right on the beach there,
and oh man, I’d probably never leave.*

He grins big, bares a gap between
his block yellow teeth, and awe flexes
in the squint of his brown eyes, as he points
the hose high, dusting off the leaves
of our plum tree.

He’s been buying lotto tickets on the way home
from work for thirty-eight years, spending a dollar
a day for a break from worrying
about mortgage payments, shattered windshields,
pregnant daughters. Sixty-three and he’s never been outside California. Yet, he watches the weather channel daily so he can speak about the world. He waters his fruit trees and picks his tomatoes. He falls asleep on the couch.

The plum tree in our backyard has over-ripened fruit fallen all around its grey, chapped trunk, purple and half-sunk into the earth it’s landed on. My father can’t keep up with the growing fruit and dream about hitting a jackpot at the same time.

*It’s something not meant for us,* I think, that life where Americans go to Disneyland and eat funnel cakes on the pier at dusk.

I watch my father dream of it striking it rich—sailing away to a place he imagines in evenings, his wide feet planted in viney Bermuda grass, holding tightly onto a water hose that sprays out to the greening yard.
Roses

*after Roque Dalton*

*Fourteen years old and I cry every morning.*

I lock the bedroom door,  
duck under my bunk-bed,  
and the moon dies, again.

*Maybe none of you know what I’m talking about.*

I know it’s nothing special,  
no carving of ear, no body  
like an empty bowl,  
but it’s something,  
a tiny storm with eyes.

*I drank wine for the first time today.*  
It was sour, my tongue  
a squinched budded caterpillar,  
until it wasn’t, and a butterfly  
smacked against my window  
before flying into a stack of wood.  
I got naked and thought  
about how even the sun  
is too big for this world,  
how I’ve been crying  
every morning  
just to feel I am alive.

I’ve stuck mirrors all over my walls  
and my father leaves before I wake up.  
Even the roses close before I can see them.

But maybe this is just the *wine talking, not me,*  
*while the skin* swallowing me unravels in shade.
In My Boyfriend’s Kitchen

I would watch his mother make roti.
She would fold flour on a worn wood board, pour spices from unmarked bottles, call him Punu and pat the soft, cold, petal of dough, like she might have tucked my boyfriend’s sheets into the corners of his bed.

In my mind,
I’m still by the window.
I fiddle with spices on a rack while he and his mother speak Punjabi. The words splatter all around me, like hot oil jumping from a pan.

She adds spices from small slotted bottles. How easily they pour. I ask, *what is that you are adding now?* Trying to learn ingredients I believe I will never know.

Every time I cry, that soft necessary cry, is the time I picked up the bottle, rolled it
hard between my hands. It is
the glass clinking against the gold
ring he gave me that year, the glint
of an amethyst in fluorescent light.

Every woman has her way
of making things. And that was not
my kitchen. I enjoyed warm bread
that morning, even rubbed it
with pickled lemon, not realizing
she would never call me her daughter.
Words That Exhaust My Heart

Dinner, pizza, cilantro, Sl
must, school, soccer, glow
backyard, plum tree, couch, sow
money, insurance, job, grow
McDonald’s, Costco, Coors, jobs
family, father, playtime, gone,
daughter, supposed to, college, give
practice, love, patience, glib,
duty, remember, work, God
believe, next year, water, job
mother, father, sister, pride
brother, Republican, military, lie
trust, sleep, invisible, love
ignore, forgive, pray, above,
one day, family, money, God
tired, ghosts, faith, gone
Like a heartbeat drives you mad
in the stillness of remembering
what you had, and what you lost

— Fleetwood Mac,
“Dreams”
Mexican Bingo

I can’t play unless I call the cards in Spanish: la maceta, la arpa, el arbol. Then, la mueeeerrrte. La boooottta. And of course, I drink another beer. We cover our cards with beans we can barely see, tough little hearts of dirt that split in our hands. We are clichés. My cousin Ruby strolls through the house in a black tube top, asking to give someone another old English tattoo. An ashtray brims with butts of cigarettes and weed we can’t fit in the joint. My tia asks me to order the inmate package for Daniel, says, use *Golden State Care*, *mija, I heard they were the best*. And I do. I order ten Top Ramens and a pair of Nike Cortez for my cousin at Wasco, my cousin who lives in a box. When I’m alone, I can’t help but think he’s built it himself. At my Tia’s, we make up our own names for the people on the cards. La chalupa is the ho in the boat, el negro is my cousin’s Oaxacan boyfriend, Sleepy, el soldad is my brother in Iraq, el boraccho is my Tio Gilbert splayed on the couch, el corazon is my sister, the only reason my father does not leave, and el Diablo, well, my mother says that’s me. I drink more so I can say what I need to say—roll my r’s, make my a’s a little dirtier, and I know I’ll be ashamed of it tomorrow and the next. I won’t tell anyone how I play Mexican Bingo. I throw the beans away every time.
Swimming in Garbage

1.

We used to fill garbage cans with water, and swim. Small pieces of waste swirling around us as we soaked. There was torn packaging, cigarette ash, faded flower petals from the dining room table, all spiraling slowly in the slosh.

Even pieces of chicken skin flicked against our hips. Blades of grass from the lawn clung to my lips.

When I spoke, my brother peered around me, said he could not see me. I was too dark from summer, he said. He never listened to me.

Once, I ripped my fingernail from its bed against the plastic wall of the garbage can. The nail somersaulted in the water and blood squirted like red ribbon underneath. My brother could not get out of his garbage can to help me. The water was up to his chest.

2.

My brother joined the Army at nineteen, planted electrical wires in dirt on a military base in Kabul, lifted the injured out of helicopters coming from freshly bombed villages. Some of the victims’ arms were just tattered flesh, held by my brother and some other nameless boys.

He told me of a girl whose hands were maimed by a cluster bomb, an air-dropped explosive meant to shred human bodies. The girl was twelve. Her brother was killed pumping water from a well.

In a time of weakness, my brother said, people around here
might as well have never been born.
I told him he was cold-hearted,
that he had been away too long.
He told me I was lucky
and didn’t know shit.

3.

My brother returned a year later. And now,
he takes amputee limps to be burned
in a makeshift incinerator in Balad.
He doesn’t take out the trash at our house
anymore. I only call him on his birthday.
He still maintains power lines on base.

My nail grew back, but now, it has
a tiny groove along the middle.
I remember the thick burning of my ripped nail;
grown-in and hard leaving the body,
our blood spreading throughout the water
my brother filled up a garbage can with.

4.

My brother has been in the Army eight years now
and we have a gardener to take out the trash.
He doesn’t tell me about the victims
he carries anymore. Instead, we talk
about the Niners and car problems
and breathe over silence on the phone.

My mother does not watch the news.
I inspect tags in stores, toss back
anything made in the United States.
My little sister brags about our brother’s
service, but she never hid his Hot Wheels
from him in the lost sock drawer.
My father has three bumper stickers
on his truck that say Army Dad,
My Son is My Hero, Proud Parent
of an Iraqi Freedom Vet.
How or why he fit them on there,  
I don’t know.

We don’t swim at all anymore. Sometimes,  
I forget it even happened. A huge American flag  
flaps above the front door when I visit home.

We sit at the table together, talk about the weather,  
and underneath, I pick at my nails  
painted pink. In the yard, the flag wobbles  
loudly in its post, and like always, we pretend  
not to hear. We unfold our napkins  
and my brother says grace, and again,  
I can’t bring myself to go outside  
and take it down.
Traces of My Father

There isn’t one photo of my dad in this house. In the garden, he makes a trellis for purple perennials and leaves a sifter heavy with dirt. He’ll tell you how he plants his cherry tomatoes once a year if you ask him about his life. He’ll tell you that a father’s duty is provision if you ask him why. Nothing he says to me lasts. He’s never said love and looked me in the face. My mother keeps yelling at him for tracking dirt into our house.

I’ve learned that men give love in provisional ways. My grandpa was a butcher, carved time only for throwing footballs in the street. My dad is a math teacher, who has taught me efficiency through division problems in our living room. I’ve gone through life, knowing, in pieces, and now, his words are a dream I keep having of tiny breaking clods.

He’s moved the soil from the store’s plastic bag to the garden bed and the tomatoes die each fall. I leave leftovers for my dad in the microwave. I put his pajamas back in his armoire. I watch the skin wilt on the vines, knowing, that one day, even that will become rock. I sit on my knees and scrub the carpet for hours. These tracks are in so deep. They are never coming out.
Deciding Not to Go to India

*after Hafez and Li-Young Lee*

*To spend even a moment* mourning this trip would be *a waste of time.* I’ll sit by a canal instead, and drink.

Your mother would speak in Punjabi while I ask questions but who really cares about the answers anyways?

Let’s pretend I’m not here one more time.

To give up my skin for a few nights sleep in a marble house would be too high a price to pay for this routine of ashes.

Ashes are lost all the time, thrown into the air with the rest of the dirt, a dirty boxer’s trick to blind the eyes from love.

Love is time wrapped through the knuckles, the extinction of a city *between brick walls no wider than my face.*

My boyfriend told me India has people scratching at the window of your car, feverish and whimpering with need.

All the stars in the sky are dead, so why do they keep flinging themselves on me? I scream, leave me alone with my wine!

Not everyone understands the sameness between lovers and stones tumbling over a cliff, but both can be found, here.

If I am found, I choose to be found drunk on the blackest wine and stumbling over the flirtiness of stars, useless

like a bruise in the muscle.
Fugue

A boy once told a girl he saw God in her. They lived in a town where each horizon, each day-end is dust. They believed it was every town. They got older. But they were in love.

They move from a small town to a big town. Now they are very busy people. They try to remember the small town. They eat oranges their parents send them to remind themselves.

They are in Los Angeles. They drive. They drink lots of coffee. They are in the grocery store. They drive his SUV. It fits all their things. He carries the basket.

They are in a small bar in a big town. The Tavern is just behind their apartment. They reminisce about their little town, its horizon like dirty carpet God rolled out. At the bar, they spend too much money. Afterwards, they drink lots of water and close the cupboards quietly at home. They watch Storage Wars, hoping the buyers find something valuable in the box. They are in love.

They finish a lease on an apartment that once smelled sweet. It was a vanilla candle, burned away. It was the flowers blooming at the continuation school across the street.

They jog the neighborhood. It is what they are supposed to do. They watch the sun sink behind skinny buildings—years constructed in dust. They jog. They believe. They forget to eat the oranges. They look to the horizon and gnats swarm the air.
To My Student

I am not interested in Vampires with rubies for lungs, or a story of uniquely different penises, titled Shlongscapes. I’m sure your imagination is indeed one of your best qualities, but let’s keep one foot on the ground.

What I want, is the examination of a wound. One that started in San Bernardino and opens every time you see the moon curling on its side like your father that last week. Tell me about your grandmother’s nightgown with the yellow and pink roses, how your Karate teacher caught your punch like a butterfly, before he raped you.

Yes, I do want to see your soul cry and fireworks burst in your heart, but use words like truck, ponytail, bath, and kick. Show me the wigs you wash for your mother, your first puppy’s hair tangled in the rug. Tell me how God wrote your sister’s name too fast, how now, it’s hard to grip a pen. Dip into the pocket of your life and gather the dirt—dump the entire drawer out. I want you to discover your name. This is the first time you’ve looked.
Smoke

September

My boyfriend smokes near the front door of our apartment, under a yellow light. Hand to mouth, hand to mouth, all night. I have asked him to stop smoking for two years now.

December

He smokes in the morning now, too. Hand to mouth, hand to mouth, all day. Marlboro Gold, Camel Light, Newport, whatever he can find.

March

We smoke outside our apartment near a creaky door and under a yellow light. It is covered in webs. We bury the butts in the dirt of a pot where a begonia is dying. I don’t ask him to stop smoking anymore.

June

Even when we are alone, we raise our hands to our mouths, our hands to our mouths, a ritual of half smoked cigarettes and whatever else we have left.
Withdrawal

for Jake

You scraped coating from Oxycotin pills.
You told me you could not stop
so I came home to band-aid your fingertips,
grated and grooved like day old tire tracks.

The kitchen counter covered with mangled strainers,
bent like a climbed-too-often fence,
all the little holes clotted with white talc,
a new substitute for steeped chamomile leaves.

Lynyrd Skynyrd sung through the house,
Baby, be a simple, be a simple man.

At fifteen we sat in the same baby blue kitchen
scraping wasted time from perfect white pills.
We grinded them, pressing them under our high school
IDs, scooted the dust into a little pile we called a jackpot.

We breathed out, before we sucked up through our nose;
having learned the etiquette of doing drugs—
cutting the straw aslant to lay parallel with the powder,
and a perfectly rolled ten dollar bill.
We went on and on, not thinking of when or where to stop,
swaying to that old song without trying to understand.

This morning, your eyes water like a broke down vet’s.
Your stomach swings inside-out and eats itself.
I lay next to you, because you need me to,
and we strain to hear that same song.

I wipe a rag across your sweaty face.
I cover your chilled body with blankets.

A crumpled up guy named Gary waits for you
in a paint-chipped doorway in Parkside.
I cannot keep you from leaving.
Affair With My Boss Who Is Dying From Cancer

We’ll pretend nothing even happened. That we did not drive to Santa Cruz from Stanford after his chemotherapy. That we did not pay forty dollars for beach towels or ninety dollars for the navy bathing suit I wore. That we did not drink an entire bottle of Johnny Black under the pier. That I did not trace the tumor in his red, sore chest beneath the sky stretched out like a gray bed sheet. That we did not speak of the hopelessness of his prayers. That his weakened body did not fumble in the small waves.

When we drive back, he will open his restaurant. I will work pouring beer. People will come, rest their elbows on the wood rail, watch Mallorca lose to Real Madrid. They will drink cocktails we made up as homages to Hemingway: *The Sea Change, Death in the Afternoon*. He will pretend to feel young and unchanged. I will pretend to not know where Stanford is. We will circle each other and assume what we have is fine—two people meeting each other’s simple needs. We will pretend to be ethical people, that time doesn’t matter. That we do not need to touch someone else’s skin to keep ourselves alive.
Casual Texting

Let’s do it

in front of a mirror, I want to see . . .

I can be anything you would like
me to be, even as I sear tuna

and watch Countdown with Keith Olbermann—

America’s military budget is ridiculous . . .

My underwear are tangerine lace . . .

I can tell you how tiny you’ve made me,

the inconvenience of crying in your dirty room,
wisped around by your clumsy missteps like lint,
a small depression of me

on your Tempur-pedic mattress,

People make time for things . . .

Am I important to you . . .

The refrigerator, humming deep

steel, seeming to do nothing at all

makes ice again, cold little blocks.

I’ll sit on the tile floor of my kitchen
let them fall

on me, one by one,

back hunched against the fridge’s frame.

I don’t want to hurt you anymore . . .

and I spell: don’t leave me . . .
Upon Looking at a Photo of a Young Girl and Her Father Who Raped Me

She pulls the edges of her pink, denim skirt and smiles for her dad. Little teeth, spaced like memory, a Hello Kitty pillow resting behind her on a twin size bed.

I stick up for everyone—even her dad, who crouches beside her, his stained mechanic suit buttoned all the way up. I tell myself we were young, that I should not have drank that beer.

I was thirteen when he took my virginity on a Wednesday on that twin-size bed. And three years later, when he gang raped me, I could not scream. They took turns. I stared into the eyes of a Raggedy Ann the entire time.

I’m trying not to hate that girl. I’m trying to convince myself to let her live her life in peace. She is smiling for her dad. I am forgiving: the guy who raped me, every beer I drink, my parent’s silence, myself. Who am I supposed to be now? when it’s been ten years and I can’t forget this girl, when I’m still flailing, quietly, underneath.
If you want to be free, you know, all you got to do is say so.

— Hall & Oates, “Sara Smile”
Please

How much does it matter if I manage to say one true thing about my life. That I wore white cowboy boots to Woodward Park on the rich side of town, that my mother lights a candle before she drinks. Does it matter that my brother calls to tell me he’s passing through town and does not stop? What if I tell you that I fell in love with a man who laughs every time his father tries suicide? That two months after we break up, I am having sex with a guy from Houston, five times a week, that he uses big words because he does not know any better. Will you love me? Will you put three spoons of sugar in my coffee even though it’s too much? Will you believe me, when I sit next to you and watch reality shows and cry for the woman with big boobs? Listen. Let me speak. Let me show you I am real.
My Name

*Sara, won’t you smile for me.*

-Hall and Oates


But my name was given to me in the middle of night, while joints burned themselves away, and smoke wove my parents together while they got high on the hood of a car, or in a dream I have of them. Because I like to dream people up the way I want them. Because I am a girl with a car that barely runs, a girl with long hair, a girl with short hair, a girl who cannot make up her mind. I am a girl who cries during commercials and a girl who looks away. A girl with mismatched boobs. A girl who’s never loved her dogs, who talks to her parents like children. A girl who drinks too much. And my feet hurt.

So I say yes, *I will smile for you.* I will dream myself up behind the bar and make you manhattans, I’ll be a girl who chops vegetables with a pretty knife in the kitchen and does not ask enough of you. I’ll be the girl who talks too much, the girl who says the right things. I’ll be her, I’ll smile for you and I won’t finish my sentences until I wake up.
Dirty Martini

*for Mike Baker*

This man leaves a little in the glass.
A hollow olive buoys. Crumbled cheese
floats. He wants another.

This bar is not like that other bar.
There, I refused to stuff olives
for a regular with a goatee dyed black.
He told me he had cancer, then
he ate all his olives. He said,
*never smoked a day in my life*,
and left. What could I have said?
I barely knew him.

Now, I pull another man’s glass
from the bar, the stem still warm,
the outside clean, the inside—
polluted by cheese, a leftover olive.
We breathe lightly through our mouths,
hoping to be noticed, waiting
to speak, and for what?
Welcome to Pocha Café

*Pocha: Chicanos who are perceived to have forgotten or rejected their Mexican heritage to some degree; fruit that has become rotten or discolored*

Here, we often forget Mexican tastes but we will serve corn tortillas with your bacon and eggs and you can ask what is in *everything* instead of just eating it. Here, we refuse lemons and corridos in unison.

We listen to War, Smokey and Selena Selena Selena. And when we are completely wasted drunk—*then* we can listen to “El Rey” and drink Victoria and embrace our stretched souls’ befuddled half-ass gritos. If you don’t know the words to El Rey because you don’t speak Spanish, make up non sense words and just sing the hook because you’ve been drinking and you love that shit.

Come listen to “Amor Eterno” and step on our dirty Converse. Be resentful with us about how we didn’t have a quinceaneda and forget that we never wanted one until we were sophomores in state colleges.

Oh what? You’re having a baby shower and your son is turning two? Come celebrate at Pocha Café with our never-ending beer package! You have a Padrino for the beer right? We might be understaffed but your kids know how to fix and garnish your beers, we’re sure.

Join us! Refuse to fake an accent and expropriate your Pochaism as an act of empowerment! Gather up all your impurities, your scraps of culture, put on your Dickies and your gold loop earrings and come lend us your broken Spanish!
Silence

The first time I cried, a cricket’s body snapped. Its wings crumpled in our rug. Its shell broke, like quiet in our house.

My mother raised me under a trillion stars and they’ve died above my head during stand offs in our kitchen; slamming silverware into drawers, the angry, rapid folding of towels.

My mother has never asked me for anything, except to close the doors quietly, while she sleeps. So I treat the door like a child, use my hands, like my mother does, softly patting a baby’s back, eyes closed.

I’m trying to make up my life to her, but all I have are words. And she cannot hold them like she holds me—a baby, an anger; unready to speak.

All my life, the entire world was stitched together by my mother’s silence. I tell her it’s okay not to want her life, but her eyes well up like a clogged sink. Her smile crushes each word I’ve raised, each year I’ve known this, like black glass and I continue my inarticulated life. And even when I want to say something nice, my mouth hollows because she will never value words as much as breath. My mouth is a star dying underneath my mother. I count the times the cricket’s body snaps, over and over the days of my life.
Welcome to Pinedale
          after Mary Oliver

This is what’s here:
chain link fences, over-grown cacti,
dirt driveways with mud-colored Cadillacs,
old Mexican women in folding chairs on the patio,
    lots covered in dead yellow grass.

The crack heads sweat in their overalls,
   covered in grime between dumpster dives on Blackstone,
   and each face
   seems to say
   Our hearts were made for you, O Lord,
   and they are restless
   until they rest, in you.

A man clutches a black plastic bag
   as he struts the street,
Two girls play tag with winos
   behind The Tabernacle.
   You are here, too.

Your maroon long sleeve smells
   like you’ve been wearing it for days
   and you are lying next to my uncle Harvey
   in a flower bed, cold and broken,
   dragged from an idling car
   just minutes ago.

You came here to teach the people of Pinedale
          that they are
          (they are not)
          better than dust.

You recite each of their names
   like a comfortable music in the mouth,
   that approaches, as we do,
   that inevitable silence,

and my uncle testifies to traveling constellations
   that leak through darkening sky
   when he spills smoke from his mouth,
and his words implode into nothing,
and he tosses a jagged rock
he’s found tonight, weakly
across the yard.
Removal

for Jerry

We toss the empty scotch bottles and beer cans. Then, we throw away carved-out apples and sweep up ashes spilt on the tile. The kitchen smells like weed.

In your room, we lift the sheets off the California King. The puke gathers in the middle like a pool of fresh tree sap, featured in amber by the sunlight creeping in.

I laid you down on your side and bordered your body with pillows. I told you happy birthday. I thought I left the door open. I never imagined you would die.

Every time you asked me out at work, I said yes. I imagined going with you to Veni Vidi Vici’s in Tower District, sharing pork loin marinated in cider.

Looking out from your bedroom window, I see gnats drifting over the grass on the other side, where last night, you leaned over the fire pit and tried to kiss me.

Now, the sunlight shoots through the planks in your new backyard fence and I think of my hand covered in that plastic sandwich bag, scooping the vomit out of your cold mouth.
The BB Gun My Brother and I Shot

is forged wood & steel.
It could not have been anything else
It is a BB gun forever.

I used to wonder why
it was not two earrings,
a pair of shiny chimes in the window
of a popular store I could walk by
and like.

There is no use in wondering.
It is a BB gun. It is wood & steel
and my brother is a soldier and I
am a teacher and we were carved
we are melded thin as sunlight
and as unrelenting.
The blades of days
cut into us.

On the side of our house,
My brother and I shot beer cans.
For hours he showed me how to aim.
We aimed for empty cans.
We nailed metal to plywood.
We set it against a horizon of dust
& grape vines, of what we would become,
our differences close enough
for both of us to shoot.

For days he told me to focus on red words.
For years he warned me not to look back
for his approval. I didn’t listen.
I’m tired of looking back.
The Island of Raped Women

*aft#fr Francis Driscoll*

There is an open field here and all the animals are happy. Mornings, underneath tulle canopies we drink coffee from tiny porcelain cups. We drink cup after cup, and we use lots of sugar. We drink it with our cups over saucers so we don’t spill. We drink it very very fast. Afterwards we wash our dishes in a brook of frigid water. We try not to break our cups on the rocks. Then, we hang our cups from hooks on a thatched ceiling where we all have our names and we put our cups there where our names are and everyone knows which is theirs and which is yours but we all have pretty porcelain cups and we drink from them in the morning and we look so happy with our hands occupied with such pretty things and steam rising quietly from our cups. When we aren’t drinking coffee we read Danielle Steele or the King James Bible. That is all we have to read and that’s good because that is all we want to read. We try to read the bible but sometimes the sun is shining too much on the page so we go under elm trees and read Danielle Steele in the shade where only a little bit of sunlight shines through looking like lace patterned on the pages where women lose faith in people and then someone comes up the road to save her they come on horseback or by foot or in some heavily tinted car and they save them. There are no roads here but there are dirt paths swirled all over the island in circles and we stroll through them all day and run into women we knew back in the world like the librarian from my children’s elementary school and our best friend’s cousin and even our own little sisters. There are whole families of women here and they all look beautiful now painted in lace sunlight and shade with small porcelain cups. There are grandmothers and great grandmothers and sisters and mothers and daughters and mothers and we are all so happy loading our coffee with sugar and walking on paths and thinking about the affairs we have had, and yes, we have all had many affairs. Before dinner, we paint each other’s nails either pink or lilac or purple or blue and we compliment each other while we read our books and all you can see is our nails our nails, painted, and we comb each other’s hair and slip wild flowers into each other’s buns and we talk about our books before we go to bed where we all sleep in a series of rows like the flowers and we have flowers in our hair so you can’t tell really where our bodies are and where the flowers are and we like it that way and we dream about our old lives and our boyfriends and our sons and our jobs and all the fast food we used to eat and the way we shopped in small grocery stores sorting through fruit picking the colorful ones and we dream about these things these things these old blue things but we don’t miss them and in the mornings we look at our pretty nails so pink and purple, our pretty nails and we drink our coffee, we drink our coffee. We try not to spill. We try very hard not to spill.
Split

My heart is a perennial,
Its skinny roots are twisting down in the hillside.
The man sitting before me on the bus reads *What Our Souls Are Made Of.*
He’s learning pain is not so bad.
I wish I was born in the 50s. People had feelings, then and sang them hard. I want to hold hands with the stranger,
ask him how long he’s been divorced.
I want to know why they go—
what she saw in that mechanic at Jiffy Lube. I burned the arrabiata sauce the first week. I should have been quiet when he talked about the difficult scene.
A parallel highway is lit with diesels and moves like a tail of roaring fireflies.
We are all going to the same place to try again.
But I don’t want this ride to be a sprout in a cracked road.
This ride should burn.

Don’t sip the water yet,

let us finish reading these books, I need my heart to char all the way,

to break this year like twigs.
So if you wake up with the sunrise
and all your dreams are still as new
and happiness is what you need so bad
well, girl, the answer lies with you

and What Should Never Be”
Chingona 1

*Chingona*: literally translates to “the fucker”; a badass woman

1
She is the Chingona.
See her in her lowrider
sleeked in black glitter paint,
next to Puppet, whose real name
is probably Ronald, a bald man
with shades.
This is her brother.
Or this is her old man.
She is the Chingona and this
is someone she loves undyingly,
no matter what you say.

2
I am the Chingona.
See me in my Chevy Cavalier,
semi-sparkling down Blackstone,
with my window stuck. Hear me—
singing Mary Jane at the stoplight
horribly, unapologetically and loud.
See Pancho, or Francisco.
He is my brother.
He is my father.
He is the invisible man next to me.
And I forgive him. So imagine,
him holding the wheel
in his dark little hands.
Imagine him all of my life.

3
We are every fucker
you’ve ever known.
Notice our gold loop earrings,
our bullshit you can never
get enough of, the way
we never give
you what you want.

It’s beautiful really, being a fucker.
Our sadness, which is also
your sadness, always rides
the dark dignity
of a Chingona’s open lips,
the color of new blood.
Dissolve

You always liked it bitter
No sugar. No creamer.
Black.

It’s quiet in my new kitchen.
I make myself a whole
pot of coffee and pour it
into a see-through mug.
I spoon raw sugar into it.
chunked, uneven.

After seven years together, you,
got out of my car and walked
three miles down San Fernando
to our apartment in Glendale.

Tired of trying
to talk you out of drunkenness,
I threw an empty beer bottle and
it ricocheted off of your shoulder,
shattered my windshield.

We could not sleep in the same bed
every night and still make love.
I cannot accept
that you left me
like you did.

You sat, like a stone
when I cried. I heard
you shifting on the couch.
I made the coffee
the way you like it.
What My Roommate Might Know

In the kitchen, I have just trimmed raw chicken and wiped my hands on the dish towel hanging from the stove. Then, I make a cheese sandwich. At first, I think she doesn’t notice.

She’s in her room now. Light is cracking the canyon outside the sliding door into yellow toenails and lumpy bruises. I want to go get her and tell her

*Look at these festering mountains!*
   But I don’t.

She may think I am crazy. Next thing you know, I will ask to bring home a kitten. Name it Skittles. She will deduce that I cry during drives on interstate freeways because I am self-destructively nostalgic, thinking about the friends I could not save, thinking about myself, a needle stuck in my arm. She will decide that I hallucinate, that I have dreamt of having sex with Prince and like to touch cold skin, even my own—things no one needs to know.

What she does know about me is that my feet are always dirty from wandering. That I like braids and leather. That my mother hung a whip on the wall.

She knows I can’t sleep at night, and sympathizes, but then again, she is only eighteen. What does she know about trouble?

I consider the coins lying around my room drinking money and spend it as soon as it mounts up. My roommate *only drinks to get drunk.* She knows how to indulge herself.
in ways I have grown ashamed of: looking into mirrors, buying new clothes, ordering pizza and eating it alone.
This year

I am a bottle of Patron.
Next year, maybe sap.
Although,
I’d rather be steam
rising from a hot tub,
where a few poetry students
are talking,
some Pacifico bottles
speckling the uneven
concrete beside,
near empty, maybe
just one more drink.

I’d like to float away
in a slight, sexy form
like pink tissue
lingering in the air
between old lovers—
words on their tongues—
into a sky measured
in the sway of
expensive palm trees,
the satisfaction
of being on top of a man-
made hill, over
an old life, and every
sloped roof, every
glow from a streetlamp
and every trail of lights
left by diesels
on highway 215
fall apart
the way I do not—
mellifluously and
without complaint,
still trusting
the disorder of wind.
Diamond Back

My mother goes everywhere
scavenging jewelry from clearance cases,
the glass counters at Mervyn’s,
at Gottschalk’s, freckled arms pointing,
fingers sliding over the diamond back
of a tennis bracelet.

Seven years old
staring down the faux pearls, tracing
my mother’s name and mine
—smudges on glass.

I feel my hands
slipping from the case,
from stones, from my father,
from our name, from everything.
Even now, my mother’s voice, bargaining
follows me like a ghost and I cannot keep
those hands from sealing
my heart.

Nothing opens it.
Not the flip of a leaf in sun, not my father
rocking in his chair like a broken stem
in wind, not the man stroking my body in words.
Sometimes, the ghost in the mirror
asks me about love.

I fasten earrings.
I clasp bracelets and the possibility returns
to me for the second it takes
to notice a tiny stone,
a glint, an elegy for a marriage,
before I turn off the light
and it slides back into its case,
thick and familiar. Just like my mother,
I am always dressing a ghost.
Some nights

 when I know God is looking,
 I consume memories of my ex in my sleep.
 I wipe the crumbs from the counters with my hand
 and tuck them into my pockets. Later, I spread them
 over my cutting board at home.

 It’s not an accident.

 Now, there are too many dishes in the kitchen.
 I try to eat off all of them; heads of asparagus
 in a white bowl, sticky pecans broken
 in yogurt on a black plate. Sometimes I cry
 when they clink against the beautiful marble
 counters. I eat very slow.

 If I weren’t this way, maybe I could eat
 my dinner alone. If I wasn’t born in November
 to a woman who danced all her life with strangers,
 I could sit calmly and watch stars shake their crystal
 tambourines, be okay with distance. It’s hard

to remember when it was otherwise.
Buds

I tried smoking cigarettes again, today, and remembered what it was like. I borrowed a really skinny one from a stranger. Afterwards, my hands smelt like people I used to know.

I would chain smoke outside the Denny’s I worked, where the girls walked all night on Motel Drive. We’d smoke and I’d listen to their stories, their sons so handsome dressed for ROTC, the day the insurance money came and how she really missed her man. I’d tell them my stories, too.

And we smoked hundreds of cigarettes, and we thought up words for big things. We flirted with truckers trying hard to ignore us, like Mr. Pepper, or the man with a PVC pipe for a cane. We sucked those little cigarettes, each puff, a river in the air, something to do.

I’m trying to remember their names.

We ate chips and asked about the other woman and she told me she liked my earrings and I told her it would all be okay and we really enjoyed ourselves out there, bullshitting and inhaling things that glow before they burn away. When we left we said, *see ya later*, although I knew I would never see them again. There was always a little pile of crushed stems left, and things we never had to say.
Wild

has no shame. She is your mother
dancing with your uncle, her body
unfolding like a bad secret that
refused to put its bra on. Wild is
me, with a lead pipe in my hand
and in my view, the head of Valerie,
my former best friend, throwing up
out the window of a red truck and hate
for her eating the old times out
of my heart and I am only fourteen.
When wild was fifteen, she scraped
hope from the bowl of sky with
a splintered wooden spoon
her mother gave her and stuffed it
in her pockets the year before
she took her questions about right
and wrong and fed them to a dog.
Look at her, look at me, naked and
dancing on top of desire, on saying
please, and smashing all that weakness
into the wet red shards we always were.
Less

He angles his shears and cuts. Brown chunks of hair plop thick as morning spit and cover the ground like a dark sheet of dirt. My tattooed hairstylist from Highway City, sweeps the scraps still clinging to the dull wooden floor, slowly, like the maintenance of a secret. That was years ago. I’m still pacing all over it.

You see, I’ve been having a hard time recognizing what is left. Without my hair, everything fits funny, my ears are suddenly too big and loop earrings dangle awkwardly like a moment between old loves. No one is confused anymore when I say fuck, thinking I wasn’t that kind of girl.

I don’t want it back: that long, straight hair, that vain old dog. But man, how long it takes to get over someone you’ve lost.

I’ll make a little plot for her in a photo album or say a toast as I drink wine tonight in my garage. I’ll say cheers to that sweet girl who always made ruffles out of the scraps she found lying in the gutter.
V

I dreamed I was in a Hollywood movie, and that I was the star of the movie, and this really blew my mind

— War, “Spill the Wine
Chingona 2 or Cactus Mom

My mother is a cactus.
She grows in a busy Texas
field. Her little wide cactus arms reach
up and crisscross into the mint-blue sky.

My mom’s pretty smart
for a cactus. Once she said,
the moon just decided to lay down and take a nap!
And when she said that I looked up
into the night anxious with crumbs of stars
and there was the moon, plopped
over like a drunk girl,
heavy and lazy
only caring about itself
and I thought, man,
my mother is smart!
I told her she should be a poet cactus,
since she had a lot of time
and looked at lots of things
but she said her friends were coming over
and in the desert,
they don’t like to share.

My mother is a cactus
and she grows needles
and she’s old
and she likes to make jokes.
She grows red tubular flowers, too.
It’s hard to love her sometimes
because her needles are invisible,
so it hurts being close.
But her flowers are always popping out
all over the place, in her face,
in her hands, in her big cactus heart
and she listens all day and feeds the dirt.
Once, someone tried to cut her down.
But she’s tough.
Cactus mothers are really tough.
Imagine This

*after Richard Siken*

You’re on a date. The candlelight glows. It’s one of those fake candles with the battery and the orange tinted light. You look great anyways. The man sitting across from you is handsome and has whispery brown eyes. He looks great, too. In a way, it’s a movie, it’s your chance, you’re the big star. Drink your martini, use your lips the way you practiced. This is your chance. Everyone is looking at you.

I’m the director. I’m on a scaffold. I’m filming you with a camera on a crane. I can see everything. Do what we rehearsed. Tell him your lines. You’ve always wanted to say you were in love. C’mon. What are you afraid of? He’s going to say it back. Just do it. Isn’t this what you wanted? You always have.

Imagine this: You see a gunman bust through the door. He’s wearing a nylon. This is your life. Someone is going to die in the bartender’s arms. Play along. You think it’s ironic. Because this is a movie and this is your life and this is what you always thought would happen. You know what to do. You’ve been waiting your whole life for this. Someone is going to die. You’re the star.

Imagine: Everyone’s screaming. There’s a gun. Your hands are clasped around it. Your thumbs are crisscrossed around the back in a W. Your date is afraid. He’s waving his hands. I’m the director. I’m you. I’ve had enough. You didn’t know I was going to feel this way. The gun is getting heavy. Something needs to happen. Don’t you remember your lines?

You’re the director. That’s your job. This is where you come in. Everyone is waiting. You’re wasting our time. We’re all watching. This is a movie. This is your life. Now is your chance. This is your big chance. You look great. You’re a star.
To All the Poems I’ve Ever Written

You use people.
You’re never pretty enough.
You never shave.
You forgot to wash your hair.
You should really cut your nails.

You’re the one with the problem.
Stop wearing the same things.
You’re always in the wrong season—
pastel punk love stories in December,
your beaded bar memories in late spring.
You’re too wild to have that yellow cardigan on.
You’re not as clever as you think you are.

You always drag me to the bar, order us
what sounds good and is full of implications.
You shove me onto the dance floor and stare.
You wait for me to move.
You remind me of my horrible rhythm.

You only care about yourself.
My mom is going to yell at you.
You are going to scream at her.
You’re probably going to make her cry.
In the end, it’s always about you.
You don’t even remember my name.
Graduation Announcements

My mother muttered, *don’t take this away from me*. She wants to gush about my graduation, see what she’s worked for all these years. I say, *it doesn’t matter, Mom*, as I rip the order form, her irises deflating like tiny brown balloons, her mouth thin—a piece of paper doesn’t make the change.

She goes into the kitchen and cooks the pot roast and potatoes, while my father and his brothers, math teachers, stack papers, holding their values together on a desk with a metal clip. The men in my family never ask my opinion. They like to speak. They want to know how I’ll make money afterwards. Then, they fix the sink. If I listen, maybe they can tell me somewhere comfortable to go. Some life that sounds smart rolling out of mouths like personal scripture: a three bedroom in a white neighborhood, an insurance policy, some kids I can tell people I love.

I’ve already ripped those papers. Here is my announcement—I am taking our name away so we can examine what we mean. Consider this the arrival of *us*. Consider this, extinction.
Chingona 3 or Denise

I first saw you at work in the restaurant. You walked past and I was afraid to look in your eyes. You were so tall, in your dark skin. You wore red lipstick and your hair curled and tucked like a pin-up. As you poked the POS screen with martini orders, I’d study the poise of your shoulders erected in your starched, black shirt, trace the jagged profile of your face—those contours of you, firmly sad, and deep. I’d examine the way you noticed guests, always anticipating their needs.

Eventually, you asked my name. We never mentioned love or pain. One weekend, at Hollywood Bowl, we watched a red-haired woman sing about broken living and walking away. Both of us stood in the glint of light coming from others, waving their phones in the air, you and I and the stars lamenting our lives in the LA sky, trying to fill ourselves up. I saw your eyes. We were the same, as if our stares were pulling back the world and quitting happiness for us both. I named that night for us.

It’s been one year now, Denise. I’ve moved away. But nights, I sit at my window, looking at the earth gleaming in darkness, into which a path is lit, a path to you, a way into a night, and out, onto another side.
Party Favors for My Historical Birthday

A brother who will never make
a mess. A black tutu and a tambourine.
A little sister with a distinct sadness
who always says please. A mini spatula.
A plastic kitchen. A tiny can of Vienna
sausages. There’s a soccer ball and
an attentive father. A tortilla spread
with butter. My mother’s pretty fingers
wrapped around a book. My mother’s
pretty fingers, wiping.

There’s a Tragic Kingdom CD. Twelve
Baby Sitter’s Club paperbacks. A vibrating
doodle pen to touch yourself with.
There’s a puppy with no tail, a slice of
cheese ripped to shreds. A hangover
while watching Jurassic Park.
There’s a mirror, a photograph of us,
a broken hour and teeth. I tried to give
them away to a Patrick Nagal model,
but she already had her own.
Here’s everything I have. I’m giving
them to you. So you can understand.
So you don’t throw all of me away.
Wedding

Tonight, I’m dancing
in my silk purple bridesmaid’s dress,
like its seams aren’t about to burst,
like my feet aren’t sliding around
sweaty in five-inch heels, my skin;
the small mirrors on a disco ball
spinning over dirt in Fresno.

War and Al and Etta are putting
their downbeat funky spell
on my body and my mind is cruising
in a Fleetline Chevy Bomb
on Who Gives a Fuck Boulevard.

Tonight, I am dancing.
Because I’ve had enough
tequila and champagne
and days spent working
to stomp on the pride
of every hyna in this room.

And tomorrow, I’m going to forget
that my Tia said I need to “get it together”
as she sloshed her glass of chardonnay,
that my father, being the oldest amongst
his brothers, didn’t make that speech
like everyone expected him too, that my third
cousin Andy tried to take me home, again,
or that I danced to The Stylistics’
*You’re a Big Girl Now* with my uncle,
while my dad slumped in his chair.

Right now, I’m a spoonful of sugar,
a barrel of flames at night,
a heavy hipped tornado in a Midwestern town, and a brick house
The Commodores don’t want
to tear down.

I’m shutting my eyes and twisting
to funktastic *ooo-baby babys*
and cruising groovy into tomorrow
on an emerald spiked slow jam.
I’m closing my eyes and not looking
*even once*, not faking it, not even
for a second, *no*,
not tonight,
not tonight,
not tonight,
for once.