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Happily Ever After And Other Lies My Childhood Told Me

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HAPPILY EVER AFTER AND OTHER LIES
MY CHILDHOOD TOLD ME

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Rachel Anna Neff

2016

Dedication

To all the domesticated, feral, and wild hearts in my life who have shaped, challenged, and inspired me to become who I am today: these poems are for you.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER AND OTHER LIES
MY CHILDHOOD TOLD ME

by

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Ph.D. Spanish (2013)

THESIS

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CRITICAL PREFACE

Poetry has been a part of my writing from my earliest days, particularly poems with form and rhyme. I also have found mythology fascinating. Growing up and identifying as a woman, I have experienced how myths, legends, and folktales (or foundational fictions as Doris Sommer calls them) shape cultural values and inform our belief systems. Because these stories are among the first we hear, they help inform how we see our place in the world. These stories become part of our cultural consciousness in a way that shapes our interpersonal relationships, metaphors, and even how we understand our place within our larger society. Every story produced and shared within a culture builds upon the stories that came before it. Once a story is widely shared, the characters within that story can become archetypal, the story can become metaphorical, and the plot can culturally socialize its readers.

The MFA is not my first advanced degree. In fact, it is a creative response to the years of research I did on family as a metaphor for the nation over the course of my doctorate. As such, I returned to several of the sources I found during the course of my doctoral studies. Studying at that level of intensity in my second language deeply influenced who I was as a writer, reader, and scholar. Most notably, the pattern I found most fascinating was how many Spanish writers used mythology and fairy tales to critique the Franco regime. Of the many I read and studied, three stand out: Antonio Buero Vallejo, Carmen Laforet, and Carmen Martín Gaité. While I studied all three writers as part of my dissertation, I can't seem to find the quote that has been rattling around in my head the past several months while working on this project, which is the idea of fairy tales as a time without time, as a space without space. The idea of fairy tales as the here and now outside of the here and now has resonated and influenced this project in many ways.

I became fascinated with the idea of exploring metaphors and dialoging with them in my poetry. At first, I used nursery rhymes and Shakespearean stories to do the retelling. Taking an old story and telling it from someone else's point of view is why the book and musical *Wicked* are so popular. Using familiar myths opens up a shorthand to storytelling. Similarly, defamiliarizing these myths, questioning the dominant narrative, creates a cognitive dissonance in the reader. Discomfort is one pathway to confronting the foundational fictions that influence our society. Stories. We are all stories. Archetypes. Romance. How life should be lived. What our dreams, goals, and aspirations should be.

When outlining this project, I wanted to create a logical arc. I started by examining religion and spirituality. In part, one of the obstacles I faced was that I often encountered poetry in its dissected, anthologized form. Prior to outlining this manuscript, I found it was difficult to think of my work in more than one or two short bursts. I would write one poem that stood alone, but there wasn't a clear theme or voice. I've always been drawn to the sound of language and the viscosity of text. Having a theme and having a logical progression made the project easier to accomplish.

With "Daphne," I turned to mythology. From there, the project began to have four distinct sections – mythology, Shakespeare, nursery rhymes and fairy tales, and Hollywood reflections. The poems would take the reader from the past to the present to the past to the possible future. Familiar stories would become uncomfortably unfamiliar. I also sought to collapse the space between the speaker of the poem and the reader. The use of "I" makes the story more intimate. I looked back to the mythology I fell in love with as a child and continued to read throughout my life, settling on the idea of my speaker as woman and also a woman speaking

in first person. Like the Greek chorus of old, the voice of the people is captured in the first-person perspective.

Coupled with my Spanish literature background, I wanted to have this speaker reflect the idea of *testimonio*, or testimony, where one voice can act as a witness to multiple wrongs. Rigoberta Menchú detailed atrocities using first person and her biography *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* was criticized by some for not being her individual experience. In this vein, the act of witnessing and reporting using “I” makes the testimony more intense. By using first person, the story is a voice that witnesses stories my friends and I have experienced. However, when women use I in poetry, the audience often takes it for experienced truth and not *testimonio* or a Greek chorus. If women witness, their testimony is questioned (think of Jesus appearing to women and these women not being believed) and if she tells a story, it can’t really have come from her imagination – it had to come from somewhere ... and other subtle sexist musings.

One way to question or subvert the dominant metaphorical system (particularly when this system excludes or diminishes the existence of others based solely on the basis of their biological sex and socially performed gender) is to take common stories and reimagine them. By using familiar characters and changing the perspective of the narrative, one can break the spell of the hegemony. The act of questioning a common story creates doubt. Where there is doubt, one can challenge the reader’s perspective regarding the original story and moral lessons.

What then, is the poet’s responsibility in all of this talk of metaphors, myth, fiction, and fable? Who else is a poet but a person who connects to the world on a deep and empathetic level? A poet serves as the chorus for the daily existence from the mundane to the miraculous. The poet has a responsibility to feel and engage with the world in an empathetic way. While

poetry is often dissected into anthologies or inspirational mugs, poetry still has the power to impact the reader in ways other forms of media cannot. I was once told, “Everyone should carry a bit of poetry with them at all times.” As such, I have carried small phrases around like touchstones. These bits of poetic images, even removed from the context of the original work, echo throughout my life. For instance, even hundreds of years later, the line, “A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou,” has weight. These few words, even outside the original poem, now have a deeper significance. That is why poetry, despite its tendency to be fragmented and separated from its original source, is a powerful reminder of how language can rattle about in pieces that, like gold, hold more value even in smaller measurements.

Poetry has a way of haunting in few words that novels take pages and pages. Poetry is a deeply empathetic journey, particularly coupled with the tendency to have poems sliced and diced, anthologized and be taken as piecemeal works. Jonathan Gottschall writes in *The Storytelling Animal* that “Story, and a variety of storylike activities, dominates human life” (Kindle loc. 179). We are a collection of memories, stories, and cautionary tales. Our first instinct is to share what has happened, what we have heard has happened, while making connections to the stories we hear. Why then, do some stories have an enduring quality, while others fade into obscurity? The stories that do get passed down from generation to generation may no longer be comprehensible or relatable to a new generation of readers. However, the essence of the story (the “Spark” or “Cliff” notes) does get impressed upon the collective memory. When social opinions or viewpoints change, stories can fall in and out of favor.

For instance, the idea of happily ever after often meant stories ended in marriage. Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, most Disney movies (like many Shakespearean plays) ended with a wedding or the promise of a betrothal. The images of princesses marrying princes who ride in

to rescue them have (fortunately) begun to morph into strong women who don't need marriage. Or did they? Linguists Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer, noted that even though more recent Disney princess stories end without needing marriage, there is something far more insidious – with films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), women are in the minority and speak much less than in “classic” films such as *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and *Snow White* (1937) (Guo).

I grew up during what Fought and Eisenhauer would consider the “Renaissance” of Disney films – films produced between 1989 and 1999 (Guo). I also watched the “Classic” Disney princess films, ones where Fought and Eisenhauer observed women spoke at least half as often as the men (Guo). However, the entire premise of the plot can be summed up when Aurora sings “Some day my prince will come,” in *Sleeping Beauty*. Not only was my childhood marked by a marriage-is-everything narrative, but it also was when women's speaking roles in Disney princess films were reduced to as little as 30 percent of the screen time (Guo).

Now, I don't particularly recall wanting to be a princess growing up, but that doesn't mean the heteronormative messages didn't have an impact on how I subconsciously felt I should see my romantic partnerships. How these ideal stories are shown to children is important, because fairy tales as literature help prepare “children to deal with life effectively, realistically, and ethically” (Anderson and Sheay 2). If the stories we read and see tell us women should be passive, rescued, meek, then it reinforces systemic oppression based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. It creates an us-and-them perspective.

By using the same stories and reimagining them, we can create a new space. For instance, the television show *Once Upon a Time* has often hinted at true love not being bound by the male-female dichotomy. In season 5, episode 17 “Ruby Slippers,” the hints at love being more than

heteronormative were finally confirmed when Dorothy (from the Wizard of Oz) and Ruby (the big bad wolf) share true love's kiss. By taking these familiar stories and retelling them, *Once Upon a Time* both honors the original story and updates the narrative for a modern audience.

Why are fairy tales in particular spaces where we can re-imagine possibilities? For one, fairy tales are atemporal. In English, fairy tales often begin "Once upon a time." In Spanish, the atemporality of the start of fairy tales is captured in the imperfect verb tense: *había una vez*. While the imperfect tense does not exist in English, it does capture a sense of time of what has happened in the past that could continue (or be continuing) in the present. It is a past that is not defined, a past that is incomplete. Fairy tales are stories that take place in an undefined past, but also echo to the present moment. Their atemporality opens up the possibility to obliquely critique the present.

My fascination with mythology and fairy tales began at a very young age and continued through my first advanced degree. As part of my dissertation, I examined how representations of gender and family could serve as an allegory or metaphor for a nation. By examining how women used the fairy tale space for criticism, I began to think about how fairy tales shaped my life.¹ Fairy tales help explore myth, memory, and society. I thought of how, like Carmen Martín Gaité or Ana María Moix, I could explore larger social and cultural issues by rewriting old stories.

When examining how religion and spirituality form part of this cultural and social production, it is important to think about how faith is part of fiction. Entering the storytelling world of fiction requires the reader to suspend disbelief. The same is true when learning about

¹ The use of fairy tales in women-authored Spanish literature is explored in great detail by Sandra J. Schumm in *Reflections in Sequence: Novels by Spanish Women 1944-1988*, page 20.

the foundational texts of a religion, where stories are taken as fact. The multiple layers within religious texts create a metaphorical system for understanding the world.

At the heart of the art of fiction is a desire to communicate and contemplate the human condition. Part of the human condition is to try and understand where we come from and where we should go in life. Faith, spirituality, and religion serve as guideposts to shape beliefs and behaviors. In order to impart the values and traditions of a particular religion or group, a set of common standards and rules must be established. While there are lists of rules and expectations within religious texts (such as the Ten Commandments), many of the lessons and instructions with the most lasting power come from the stories, parables, and myths that demonstrate to the adherents the importance of certain ritual and the cautions against certain behaviors. Myths in general and religion in particular help explain origins and teach lessons about behavior or consequences. Myths and the religions around those foundational fictions are some of the earliest stories and experiences shared within a culture. As a result, religion and spirituality influence and form a large part of fiction.

Focusing on the Western tradition of the intersection of faith and fiction, we find early stories that explain origins, rituals, and behaviors. Stories about destruction and salvation from that destruction appear in several Western religions, starting with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2500 BC). The *Epic of Gilgamesh* closely parallels the Old Testament story of Noah's ark. On a cynical level, the similarities in these two creation myths demonstrate that natural disasters are, were, and will continue to be commonplace and that these stories are ways of explaining natural phenomenon. The image of a man in a boat surviving the wrath of God (Nature) is an archetype of the faithful being saved from destruction. The flood is a metaphor for renewal and renovation. Water signifies rebirth and cleansing. The cultural socialization is that obedience to a higher

power and adhering to that being's wishes will protect someone during a disaster like a flood. This also appears in the story of Job, who loses everything except his faith and is rewarded for his faith.

Why do we return to these initial, fundamental, archetypal stories? In part, it is because these stories that form the compendium of a religious or spiritual belief system that they are also some of the earliest forms of text or oral history a person is exposed to. At its heart, religion and spirituality serve as guideposts for social behaviors. Thus, the language, archetypes, and metaphors we use to describe our lived experiences often come from these fundamental and foundational texts. These cultural references serve as shortcuts for larger backstories. For instance, saying a young couple is like Romeo and Juliet implies that they are very young and that their families don't get along (or that the parents don't approve of the relationship). Since religion provides a framework for social and cultural expectations, the stories that make up basis for those spiritual beliefs help define what the society finds morally right and wrong. Fables, parables, and folktales provide archetypes to guide positive behaviors and warn against unwanted ones. In part due to the fact that these are some of the earliest stories that are told or passed along, the basic framework or plots often show up, perhaps even unconsciously when someone writes fiction. In addition, the images that are part of the foundational stories come to have a deeper metaphorical system.

Metaphorical systems help create maps or webs of understanding using language, words, and images found in stories. Most often read to children, Aesop's fables serve as blueprints for morals and consequences. Many of the stories use anthropomorphic animals whose characteristics then become archetypal – foxes are crafty, ants are laborious, rabbits are fertile and fast. The result is that these animals carry more weight when used as images than other

things. For instance, putting a tortoise and a hare in a story would likely conjure up the plot from the fable. Using these animals as descriptors becomes a shorthand.

Likewise, the characteristics demonstrated by those fabled animals form part of the common imagination and may or may not be true. The expression “a bull in a china shop” means someone who is clumsy and liable to break precious things, but as the popular television show *Mythbusters* found out, bulls are far more graceful than the turn of phrase would have us believe. Conversely, the hosts of that show also discovered that elephants are indeed afraid of mice. Thus, when stories have these animals or describe people with animalistic characteristics, the foundational fictions spring to mind. If someone is like a wolf, it represents danger, aggression, and sexuality. These metaphorical systems add a depth to the literature that builds upon texts and cultural memory, creating an intertextual dialogue with foundational fictions and the present day.

In this way, intertextuality and the metaphorical systems that grow from these foundational stories create multiple meanings, sort of like when children’s movies have jokes for the adults in the audience. The same is true of fables and stories meant for children. Take, for instance, the Grimm brothers’ story of “Little Red Cap” (also known as “Little Red Riding Hood”). On the plot-level, it is about a little girl who goes to visit her grandmother and is almost eaten (or is eaten in some version) by a wolf and is rescued by a woodsman. On a deeper and more metaphorical level the story has three generations of women: the grandmother, mother, and daughter. This trio of women represents the archetypical roles of the gender: the crone, the mother, and the maiden. The color of Little Red Cap’s cape is symbolic of her budding sexuality and impending menstruation, and by extension, ability to become the mother. The wolf is a danger to the chaste maiden, who at the onset of menarche now risks pregnancy if she gives in to

the ravenous appetite of the wolf. Little Red Cap's rescue by the huntsman shows she is ready to move into her role as mother rather than maiden.

The women in "Little Red Cap" who represent the three generations of women also can be seen as the triple goddess or cycle of life with the moon, which in turn is the cycle of life. The three generations also represent the three phases of life: death, midlife, youth. But as every story builds upon other stories from a culture, it is hard not to think of the riddle of the Sphinx when thinking of the three stages of human life. The cycle of life also evokes the preoccupation with mortality that every person faces.

In part because life is finite, there is a nearly universal need to share one's lived experience with others. The need and desire to communicate drives social interactions. People are compelled to speak about their days and the stories they have heard. Think of a typical interaction between two people having coffee. While some might sit in silence, many more will share information about their lives and the lives of the people around them, that is to say, these two individuals will catch up by storytelling. More importantly, sharing one's lived experience is contextualized within the culture the person comes from.

Using metaphors based on cultural texts that derive from initial religious or spiritual texts allows those from within that society to have a shorthand to describe things. This idea that foundational texts create a secondary, metaphorical language within a culture is at the heart of the Hugo award-winning episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "Darmok." In the episode, the aliens known as Tamarians speak only in allegory and metaphor, which is impossible for the Starfleet crew to understand, as there are no written texts from the Tamarian culture. In order for the Tamarians to communicate, their captain takes the Starfleet captain, Picard, to a remote planet and demonstrates the story behind the metaphor, "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra." Earlier

on board the ship, Counselor Troi explained that the Tamarian language was as if someone said “Romeo and Juliet on the balcony” to someone who had never read Shakespeare. As illustrated by this episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the ability to use and communicate through metaphorical language is a way to unlock common cultural understandings through the images contained within a society’s stories.

Language adapts and evolves just as the human experience changes. The stories we share amongst ourselves serve as touchstones for a common cultural consciousness, allowing the transmission of complex ideas in the span of a few words or phrases. As oral culture has shifted to written and then to visual, our communication with respect to metaphor and story remains part of the chain of cultural transmission. It would be difficult to see a real person or fictional character suffer incredible losses without also thinking of the Biblical story of Job. Once more, these concepts are inexorably linked to our earliest stories because these stories are foundations of our culture and society.

The stories that form the foundational fictions and metaphorical systems inform and influence the stories that come after them. Even though Shakespeare’s characters are referred to hundreds of years later, there are older tales that also create a metaphorical system to communicate ideas and cultural values. Examining Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, we see many parallels to the metaphorical systems seen in “Little Red Cap.” Shakespeare’s play has an imprisoned witch (crone) and an orphaned young woman (maiden) name Miranda who is of marriageable age (menarche, pregnancy). Miranda’s father tries to marry her off (control her fertility) to the royal suitor rather than the “savage” (wolf-like?) Caliban. The descriptions of Caliban often revolve around how animal-like he is. Thus, animal qualities become cultural shorthand for untamed savagery and dangerous sexuality.

The myths, legends, fables, and religious texts that serve as vessels for deeper, symbolic meanings are meant to help understand the things that happen in life. As we understand more of our origins, our metaphors and stories have shifted linguistically to encompass our refined and redefined understanding of the universe. Understanding more about how the universe works means as a society and as a collective consciousness, we are less prone to turn to the divine as an explanation for the unknown. Instead, we turn to the new way of categorizing and ordering our world: science. Thus, as our understanding of the universe has expanded, so too have our metaphors and images. From Aristotle's concept of *atomos* to the Hadron Collider, the inner workings of human life have piqued the curiosity, language, and metaphors of storytelling.

While scientifically influenced language may seem to have top billing in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, the desire to explore the inner workings of our universe echoes the human need to connect and understand the world.

Why do we seek to create metaphorical systems? What is the purpose of metaphor and mythology? As Joseph Campbell writes, "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (3). Myths answer fundamental questions about identity and belonging in the larger universe. We ask ourselves: Why are we here?; What is our purpose?; and Where do we come from? In its purest form, mythology provides context and substance to explain human origin and consciousness. Campbell also sees the "prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (11). With this momentum, it is easy to see the appeal of myths. Animals can talk. People can fly. It is a complete suspension of disbelief.

Like science, the myths try to make sense of the world – why sailors were lost at sea, earthquakes, war. The purpose of myths is that they “generally attempt to bring order to disorder, to render comprehensible that which is incomprehensible, or to regulate what lies beyond one’s control” (Knapp xii). So too does using a myth to reimagine possibilities or to critique the dominant narrative. Two particularly useful books of poetry for my project were *Kinky* by Denise Duhamel and *Poisoned Apples: Poems for You, My Pretty* by Christine Heppermann. These books of poetry critique how women often see themselves positioned within society based upon their gender. They also are part of a body of poetry that builds upon the feminist history of rewriting or retelling tales.

Kinky uses the iconic doll Barbie to explore how women see themselves. These poems were published nearly 20 years ago. I found them interesting, but I also found them dated. As Barbie has lost market share to newer (sexier?) Bratz Dolls, the longevity of some of the poems has faded. As I began to write my poems, I actively sought to avoid dating them. While language and its usage will evolve, I chose to focus on the sounds and the words and how they evoked an image (much like Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”), rather than specific cultural touchstones.

In *Poisoned Apples*, Heppermann uses fairy tales to explore how young women are conditioned to hate themselves. The collection is mostly shorter poems. Many contain a turn where the poem goes from fairy tale space to present day, which is where the social critique within the poem lies. Unlike Heppermann, I focused on using more first-person perspective, although I do use third person. I found I wanted to make the reader uncomfortable. I wanted the intimate space of a conversation. I wanted my poems to be as critical of how women are treated

and boxed in within society as Duhamel and Heppermann. I also knew that I couldn't use myths that were too obscure or too cliché.

As I worked through mythology and Shakespearean stories, I decided I wanted to include formal poetry in my thesis. I've always enjoyed formal poetry. As I started writing poetry in elementary school, I liked formal poetry for its rhyme. As I grew older, I liked formal poetry for its ability to be a vessel that contained very emotional subjects. Through restriction, beautiful images and ways of saying difficult subjects is achieved. Additionally, I had loved Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's sonnets and found many of the lines haunting. I wanted to recreate that. I didn't want it to be a single sonnet or a few sonnets. After hearing the *Words on a Wire* episode "A Crown for Gumecindo," I began to seriously consider attempting a crown of sonnets as part of my thesis project.

It wasn't enough to attempt a crown of sonnets. I was going to ignore all the standard sonnet forms. I did away with Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and Spenserian. I wanted the rhymes to be further apart, but still wanted some coupled rhymes. I settled on a rhyme scheme of ABCDEFFEDCBAGG. Although the ending rhyme (GG) is a clear nod to Shakespearean sonnets, the rest of the structure is like a crescendo and decrescendo. I broke conventions about ending on nouns or verbs that were strong. I worked on playing with the words and the rhythms. I wanted to deemphasize the singsong quality sonnets can take when the rhyme scheme is more traditional. By moving the rhyme further apart, I intended for the sound of the poem to have a haunting echo.

However, as I continued to work on the crown of sonnets, I became concerned that I had placed too much emphasis on the technical aspect of those 15 poems rather than their place as a bookend of the manuscript. I returned to the sonnets with vigor. I turned to the images and the

feeling of myth and mythology. I wanted to continue to incorporate symbols and words that had multiple cultural meanings (and thus, added weight). Not only did I want these poems to work as individual sonnets, but I also wanted these poems to work in harmony with the other two-thirds of the manuscript.

I wanted the sonnets to be deeply uncomfortable – to go from loving and sweet to violent and skin-crawling. I wanted to play with perspective of what the lines meant. In particular, the line “Your handprints, purple. My frosted glass skin” (“IV”) turns to “your handprints purple my frosted glass skin” (“XV”). However, each sonnet had to stand on its own and still fit within the larger theme of the collection.

After working through writing a collection and breaking the fragmentary nature of poetry publication, I created a collection of poems that work individually and as a whole. I focused on using metaphors and myths to create a deeper meaning in the poems. I also worked to make them familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I wanted to question the idea of “happily ever after” while also questioning the reasons why these ideas are so powerful. Most poets write about love and this collection is a darker approximation of that emotion.

As I neared the conclusion of the project, I found a poem by Natalie Diaz that helped me realize how well mythology could be incorporated into a poem. Having read *When My Brother was an Aztec* (2012), I knew Diaz was a masterful poet. When I read “Catching Copper,” the lines “My brothers’ feed their bullet/ the way the bulls fed Zeus—/ burning, on a pyre, their own/ thigh bones wrapped in fat,” capture for me how mythology can add an extra dimension to a poem while simultaneously making it timeless. I wanted my poems to be timeless. I wanted them to exist in the now, in the past, and in the future.

I wanted to critique rape culture, patriarchy, and sexism. These concepts are all part of the continuum where a person is defined by their physical body. I wanted my poems to be about what is woman, but not only woman-as-body, but woman as a scream against the tyranny around her existence. “Daphne” was published weeks before the Stanford rape case became a national story and the rapist’s father wrote that it was “a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action.” I found no pleasure in noting the Olympic symbol for victory, the laurel, is a raped woman’s body and that the perpetrator was an Olympic hopeful. Again, like I wrote in the poem, “It doesn’t matter, didn’t matter, what she did.” A poem written in the summer of 2015 is still true in the summer of 2016. That is the bitter reality of existing in a woman’s body. Add race and racism and rape culture, patriarchy, sexism go from toxic to deadly and nearly impossible to find justice against. While the poems in this collection don’t talk about race, they should. It’s easy to write from your privilege.

**HAPPILY EVER AFTER AND OTHER LIES
MY CHILDHOOD TAUGHT ME**

Mythology

AFTERNOON ARTEMIS

I strung my boyfriend's compound bow backward,
forced the arc to arch like an inverted bridge,
unshorn legs pushing against the grip,
my mother's advice not to pull the arrow out
of a chest wound, to leave it pulsing, ringing
in my ears. The string snapped when his cousin
unstrung the taut resin close to cracking.

ECHOES OF NARCISSUS

He fills the tub, pulls my teeth until they become rubies
and emeralds tumbling against the porcelain curves,
making the same swirling sounds as quarters or ball
bearings dancing down a funnel, following the orbital path
of planets. I count the shooting stars, searing white lights
crack like flames draining down the side, silver faucet
sparkling like a diamond yet to be set in a gold coffin.

DAPHNE²

In a cloud of leaves; all that was Daphne bowed
In the stirring of the wind, the glittering green
Leaf twined within her hair and she was laurel.

“Apollo and Daphne” from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*

Apollo stalked her. He followed her every which way – he swept through the tree line while she took her dog for a walk. The dog turned toward the brush, growled. (The dog didn’t make it to the myth because what kind of a hero threatens to kill a woman’s dog to get what he wants?) She gripped her keys tighter, wound the leash around her wrist as Apollo emerged. There wasn’t any river by where he kicked her dog away. There was a yelp. Did she drop the leash? It doesn’t matter, didn’t matter, what she did – if she dated him for two years, if she had one cup of coffee with him after work, or if the Apollo who smashed into her like a wave was a complete stranger, she would still hear *If she hadn’t wanted this to happen, she shouldn’t have been alone. Hasn’t she heard of the buddy system? If she was so afraid, why didn’t she call the police right away? Did she even yell for help? I didn’t see any bruises. I bet she’s doing this, I bet she’s saying this, for the attention.* Sometimes people scream and sometimes they don’t – some freeze like mice or rabbits or feel their breasts become bark, their ears drowning with tears. Maybe there was a whisper or plea of *no* or *stop* or *please* – she’ll think of which word she said over and over, she will wish to forget the sensation of the deluge of thrusts she remembers when her own hair brushes against her lips like leaves. Her body was his victory crown. She became rooted, stiff, unmoving – a story used to tell women to plead to be turned into laurels, to shred the intestines of those who swallowed them whole.

² Published online in Issue 8 of [Crab Fat Magazine](#), May 2016.

METIS

Owl feathers flutter inside a skull,
nestled together, mother and child
curl against a prison of bone,
each separate and together.
Under his open-mouth scream,
pounding fists refusing fatherhood,
orb-like belly pulses like wings,
not believing she will escape
another night without stars.
This night will be different
inside these walls, fists unfurled,
marking the months made many
expecting daylight for her daughter.

IF THE FATES WENT SHOPPING

I hear them in the next aisle, giggling
passing around their one good eye
debating if the crystal cake dish
with palm trees will please the bride.
Her life's thread has been spun, measured
but not yet cut. While each knows when
they don't know the how, the weight
of the crystal, if it's uncracked inside,
or if she will keep it tucked away.
They measure her groom's life
like a tailor fitting a tuxedo,
cackling, haggling over the price.

HARPY

Vocal chords creak an arpeggio, fingertips spread
apart feathering the curls around my face.
I have tasted flight, men's hearts, seen Medusa's
eyes filled with sorrow. *Grief is a strange creature*
she said snaking through the checkout line.
Let me get you a coffee she hissed. Preening,
I insisted it was my turn. In the moonlight,
our breasts glowed from sweat we made.

SIRENS

Sing to me, I see pearldrops
in your eyes. They tied themselves
to the mast, thinking I could resist
songs of sunset, cinnamon, flicking
tongues' serpentine slide. I awake
unbound, to steer the ship
toward desires untold – penny
candies, articulated metal fish,
gumballs and plastic-jeweled
rings – things we don't admit
we love until we are alone.

CHARON

We bought time in quarter increments,
bouncing horses named Sadie, parking
meters turning red, medicines with laminated
labels and Latinate names, injections, pills

to hold off the boatman a little while longer,
to place coins in closed eyes; wax paper
crayons peeling, walls marked with measures;
we pressed pennies in machines to remember.

ODYSSEY

You are my Helen, the reason I cross
oceans, eyes lost when booking
passage between shores.
I am a miserable failure who built
ships to wreck and not sail,
countries to explore and not love.

THE DAWES LAUGHTER

On the phone, we sound
alike - back when one called
the house to speak, to hear
how things were going. Anchored
in the kitchen, warning the boys
to ask for me, not be fooled
the Narcissistic echo of my voice
in my mothers, her laughter sounds
like her mother's. As I grow older,
my laugh is hers, her laugh deeper -
a wellspring of grief, yellow daffodils
wilting in the winter of lost love.

ALEXANDRIA

Even if the library burned bit by bit
or all at once, the knowledge resting
in scrolls nestled as fragile as cups
balanced on saucers doesn't change

what was lost. Even if copies arrived
at other places, we remember the heart
of things unpronounced, obscure, forgotten.
When I heard no scholar from before 1970

survived the killing fields in Cambodia –
teeth, bone fragments floating up (during floods,
marked by placards). When I think of the Holocaust –
trains, carts, (people stacked and packed in).

When I think of the civil wars – poets murdered,
children unborn, (art unmade, memories
not created). I imagine how the parched papyrus
disintegrated into powder, cinders, bundles

of bodies – each one a story unread, libraries
within lives, shelves of selves, catacombs
of cruelty. I wonder if Alexandria was really
a genocide, the books a metaphor of war.

Shakespeare

TEMPEST

Miranda never spoke to Sycorax, trapped
in a tree. Miranda slept when her father
commanded, married the prince, shaved
her legs, brushed her hair, had child
after child until she peed every time
she sneezed. Sycorax bent in the wind
because she refused to bow, to lie
on her back to keep her island.

JULIET KILLED HERSELF TO GET AWAY FROM ROMEO³

He spent the whole first day of our Shakespeare lit class stealing glances, looking away when I turned his direction. We formed study groups – he made sure to sit close enough to be in mine. My heart and hymen had been broken two months before by someone else, that someone who was in love with my best friend and was “never in love” with me. He told me I was the first girl he ever said “I love you” to. I was nineteen enough to believe “I jerked off thinking about you” equated a romantic gesture. In three weeks, he asked me to prove I loved him too – *tear up the dandelion your ex gave you, why do you have prom pictures with your ex on your dresser, your friends only call you when they need a ride*. When my excuses weren’t enough, I became too busy to hang out with anyone he didn’t like. He wanted me to keep my phone on me at all times *in case something happened to the kittens and I need to get a hold of you*. I believed the intensity of this love meant we were the archetype of romance – his screeching at me that I was a slut because he wasn’t my first, his fists punching the ceiling of my car for looking over my left shoulder twice because I thought I recognized the man walking down the street from class, how he changed his life plans to perfectly imitate mine. I ignored his stories from his time in the Navy of dating girls barely above the age of consent, no matter how much closer to thirty he got. I ignored the hackles on my neck when he first came over for dinner. I look back at that moment and scream at the screen *kick him out make him go make him go now say no trust that feeling it’s a bad idea make him go make him go* – then spent two years trying to understand why. The night I broke up with him for the third (final) time, I slept in my car on campus so someone would at least find my body.

³ Published online in Issue 2 of [Persephone's Daughters](#), March 2016.

COUPLETS FOR COUPLES

You want to be like me
so you lie about your degree.

I couldn't place a bet
on how long it takes a bone to set.

Let me pull the bottle out of my jaw
like a mouse pulls a thorn from a paw.

LADY MACBETH

Burlap bags wet with bodies hanging
one by one, pushing away children,
making way for power at all costs.
His hands are clean, so mine are not.

Nursery Rhymes and Fairy Tales

ONE FOR REGRET⁴

I awoke a magpie, dressed in black and white, blue eyes nestled
inside a cracked oyster shell. I shook off feathers, draped myself
in pearls. Dangling a glint of gold, you promised if I slipped
into fish skin, you would adorn me in jewels and marriage
would end the quarreling. *Shift into someone I could love.*
Broken dishes, punched pillows, unhinged shower doors
because I spoke when silence was the answer, looked
up when down was what you expected, screamed
when you pinned me in your friend's king-sized bed
at a party. No one said anything. No one mourned
the tongue you cut out of my mouth. Twelve languages,
no way to explain why a caress on the back of my neck
reminds me of drowning, how I feel as though I fly
about the room far above the two bodies below
me. *One for sorrow. Two for joy. Three for a girl.*
Four for a boy. Five for silver. Six for gold.
Seven for a secret never to be told.

⁴ Published online in Issue 2 of [*Persephone's Daughters*](#), March 2016.

HAYWIRE HEART

*Hush little baby, don't say a word,
Mama's going to show you a hummingbird.
If that hummingbird should fly,
Mama's going to show you the evening sky.*

A hummingbird lives inside
my chest, buzzes against ribs,
darts up and down, green-flashing

wings pulsating against the back of my eyes.
Its bobbing makes me feel as though each step
were between dock and boat. The nurse gushes

about how fast and high it flies. I say
the wings must be red because that is all I see.
The doctor wants to take its picture,

peer between my ribs, so we watch the flutters
together in black and white – feathers flapping
across the flickering screen. I wonder

if this is how rats search for cheese, whiskers
quivering, trembling, searching the dim unknown.
Their electric shock shrieks cry out to other inmates,

voices warning as they push against the bars, waiting
and wondering if tiny hummingbirds breathe
inside them. How many ways I can pronounce

its name? In how many languages can I say
slow down? I contemplate if my wayward bird
found the right nectar. Even butterflies die

in glass jars when forgotten. Do I hold a rose
against my chest to lure it out? Pour libations
of honey and sugar water? Would a hand
cupped against my breast make it grow still?

GOOD BIRD TELL ME

One night, the sea turned into ink,
ships shook until cherries fell
from their masts, red drops
like tears from the cuckoo's beak,
singing *whiskey and gin,*
wages of sin. We bathed in
moonlight, stained our palms
purple with boiled bark,
swallowed hagberry tea
with three shrill shrieks.

AFTER THE WOLF'S VISIT

My first heart was built of straw, golden,
bending, arching, aching for sunlight
until it dried out and snapped from fists
clenched around the valves. My second heart
was bundled sticks cracking like ribs.
My third heart was made of bricks
fired clay that crumbled. My fourth heart
became stone so no one could blow it down.

DAISY PETALS

He loves me,
He loves me not,
He'll marry me,
He'll marry me not,
He he he he he he
I thought you and I
would be we we we,
can't you see see see?

Hollywood Reflections

ATOMIC FORCES⁵

In my high school physics class,
I learned about quarks and tau leptons,
how nothing ever really touches –
the world is empty space filled with electric

fields and the electrons around my atoms
repel the electrons circling the atoms of the world.
I wonder if death is like a white spark of lightning,
if all the negative forces pushing me away

and pulling me down in a constant dance
with gravity will converge as a singularity, a black hole
where time passes faster as I reach the moment
when I am without covalent bonds. I am afraid

my life will be inert. I wonder how many oranges
I could slice open, how closely they would match.
Is the orange aware its rind has been split
and its bitter pith lies forgotten on my counter?

I don't want to be made from rib,
let me be made from sun-kissed syrup
dripping down a broken orchard branch.
Let me be equal in the empty space

of oxygen and carbon and hydrogen.
I have forgotten the Spanish word
for tin and I search my memory
for the periodic table's letters

and say Sn. Essay n-ay.
Like a snail's shell or Nautilus,
first there was zero, then one,
then one, then two, then three.

As I think in a borrowed language,
I find another way of being.
How the vowels of *dime* shift
to become dime. How I am obsessed

⁵ Published online in Issue 8 of [Crab Fat Magazine](#), May 2016.

with the roots of words like varicose veins
in my memory. How some words
are masculine and feminine. If I think
in French my fork is female

and in Spanish male, but I wrap
my tongue around both and taste
the tines in English. I see a fork. Metal.
The only German I know was passed down

like subatomic particles. I say Gesundheit
and my children repeat the elementary
parts of words without the components
or substructures of their father's Portuguese.

Every night before bed, I say
"I don't want to die,
I don't want to have to die."
If there is a God,

why doesn't it look like me?
If there is only one true God,
does that mean others exist?
What does death feel like,

is it like when the lights go out
in a thunder storm, is it a moment
of darkness and not knowing
if there will be light again?

I cut a green apple in half, then in half again,
each division one step closer to *atomos*.
Dipping each section into sodium
and chloride and water, I sob and say

Why do I have to die?
Why do my parents have to die?
Why do I know I'm going to die?
Bones break like hearts.

Then there were five,
then eight, then thirteen.
I feel the ground,
but I am not touching it.

PHANTASMS OF LOVE⁶

after William Carlos Williams

I pity my neighbors, three curious souls who must think I
unpacked a ghost alongside my belongings. I have
wandered down the hallway, howled into a pillow, eaten
delivery food because the gas still isn't connected. The
bruised beating of my heart is like the summer plums
we gathered – fallen and split. Remember the ones that

we sliced into halves for sugared tarts? I wonder – were
we always tumbling from branches? Did we plunge in
aprons secured with strings tied by wrinkled hands? The
stones in our palms were as dark as fisheyes in the icebox.
We hoped everything would remain unchanged. And

even when we buried the plums' pits, nothing sprouted, which
made us wonder if squirrels had excavated their graves. You
loved the jam, but never scrubbed the pots and dishes. Were
there too many spoons clattering to the tile? We probably
should have finished the jar before parting – we were saving
it for a special occasion – those holidays during the year for

when we both had a Monday off and time to share breakfast.
Our meals had become as silent as a tomb. Please forgive
me for forgetting your last birthday. The date had escaped me –
I had hoped that when we planted seedlings the next week, they
would make you smile, that one day they would grow. Were
your doubts like pips within a wax bloom shrouded by delicious

flesh and fresh juice? Alone at night, these memories boil so
bitter and brief – I roam the kitchen, the half-eaten jam sweet,
sticky. I want the branches outside to burst into blossoms and
take me back to our last vacation in Japan where we were so
happy together, bundled up against the early morning cold.

⁶ Published online in Volume 8 of [Dirty Chai Magazine](#), Fall 2015.

BY THE WAY

Tell me how Cinderella pays taxes after Charming
goes away. Do the little birds flutter and find
receipts, balance sheets?

The price of a glass slipper is picking shards
out of your feet when everything tumbles
down, pumpkin-round heart rotting.

FINAL PROJECTS

Your grandmother spent the whole day calling us
Maggie and Millie. You begged me to go
with it, not to point out her sisters
were long dead. We dug through

bins and bags of plastic flotsam and jetsam
for your senior project. I burned my fingers
gluing green Army men atop decoupage faces –

“You are better with the gun,” you said
using the same friendship logic
that had me walking headfirst into the woods

to clear spider webs. We dreamed aloud
of a shared house with a bay window banquette,
reading and falling asleep together painting

your thick nails, I promised to carry
your children. You pointed at what you hated most
– for years I thought you said key scar because of its shape –
that you lived because a little boy didn’t.
I said you were my light in the darkness,

the reason any clouded night I could look up
and know in the dark there were still stars.
I wanted to touch every part you hated
and give them new names. *Cygnus, Lyra, Corona Borealis.*

I needed to kiss you somewhere other than the forehead
while we gathered years of garage sale junk.
I sucked on my blisters and bandaged
translucent thoughts to avoid the uncomfortable gap
between old and new skin.

MOVING OUT

“A jug of wine, a loaf of bread – and thou” *Quatrain XII*, Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Going through each room in this three-bedroom house,
I cut the tape on boxes packed in Georgia, never opened
in Texas. Each cube contains things we thought we’d get
around to using. In the box marked “X-Mas” I paw through

what is yours, mine, ours. I bought you movies, CDs
I thought you’d like – they’re still wrapped
in cellophane. I never knew what you wanted.
I examine the caramel-flavored cocoa mix,

the cartoon characters dancing, a crinkled bow slapped
on top – you always did a half-assed job of shopping.
All the embroidered kitchen towels my family mailed us
that year for our new house, your new job, are mine.

The new apartment in a house built in the 1920s – mine.
This mansion – yours, this photo of the dog and Santa –
ours. Two weeks of sorting and twelve boxes are half-full.
The bottle of wine we uncorked soured, the bread turned stale.

EVER AFTER

Have another drink, fall asleep
and dream yourself into a dress
puffy, pink with sequins gleaming.
Pull the corset tight - forget me,
I'll remember to pull the strings
lace the bones together, crush
your heart in its cartilage cage.

FATE AND LUCK AT 7-ELEVEN

I buy the lotto tickets, you buy the sodas,
Alex gets the ice cream sandwiches, squished
together half-melting in the sun, we pull out
pennies and dimes to flake off the scratchers
waiting to see the numbers bubble up
the money already spent. We suck sweet
air between sips, thinking of fate as stones
in jars already measured, gonna win
gonna buy every flavor of everything
gonna not worry about rent. Plucking
luck out of the vases, knowing
we can't change the outcome.

LOGGING BACK IN AFTER AN EXTENDED ABSENCE

First names now paired with new last ones. Bellies ballooned,
faces flush, I no longer recognize the eyes looking back. I lost
who now belongs to whom, the traditional of changing into white,
signing away twenty, thirty years of identity. After five years
we couldn't convince each other why I had to be erased to become Mrs.

(Untitled)

The beauty of blackberries is they are bitter
thorns that dig into my hands, scratching like kittens
drawing blood into a spot between thumb and forefinger.
hands holding purple blood and sticky lavender,
childhood offerings staining white shirts.

STORIES I BELIEVED

1. You will be like your parents and marry your high school sweetheart.
2. You will be like your mother and go to college for yourself.
3. You will find your husband in college.
4. You will stay with your college boyfriend and follow him around the country.
5. You will regret getting engaged after less than 24 hours because your family will express objections you didn't know they had for the three years you'd dated.
6. You will be single the year you thought you would get married.
7. Your sister will get engaged a week after your engagement ends.
8. Your brother will get engaged a month later.
9. You will start dating again.
10. The first suitor smells of clove cigarettes, studies physics.
11. The second never calls again.
12. The third gets stoned on your date and stops calling you back.
13. You stop counting the number of dates and one-night stands.
14. You will find happily ever after.

TIARA

I

My memories of you are a soft bruise
from once upon a time. I forget you,

recall the fights so loud the neighbor turned
up the volume. How I changed bathroom locks,
listened to Babs who said you were kind

but I learned why when she screamed and I called
the cops, shaking after seeing her hauled
by her hair, blood as red as one would find

from smashed roses. She now lisps when she talks.
Whenever you screamed, I wished you'd hit, learned
I could outdrink you with tequila, true,

like an empty shot glass, dripping with booze.
These brisk nights when I look out at the stars,
I search my arms for brown blossoms, not scars.

II

Squeezed against teeth like pomegranate seeds,
berries burst, lips drip, stick against cold glass.
You paint circles around our saucers, break

bread crumbling in your hands, dusty flurries
like Kansas storm clouds off in the distance.
The electric air sizzles like pancakes

on a griddle. Your maple bark kiss makes
me search for your soft nape, no resistance
along fingertips, blue veins. No worries
about dishes drying, breathing the ache
of gravity-heavy body of bass

wrenched from cool lake. Among the russet reeds,
lightning, drowning grasshoppers by our tent,
we wait for the June downpour to relent.

III

Our heartbeats beat the meter of winter –
dormant bulbs in the garden, snails shrugging
the way trees burdened with snow snap from ice
wrapped around branches of swollen moonstones,

bows of willow leaves dancing with a sway
like those musicians with broken fingers
searching for a fading note that lingers,

the way wind blows grass when farmers make hay,
grind up rabbit warrens, upturn loon bones,
plow through soft nests full of baby mice,

each slumbering unaware of chugging
metal breaking earth, blades that splinter.
We lie here in silence while barn owls scream,
breath frozen on windowpanes as we dream.

IV

Your handprints, purple. My frosted glass skin,
cracked at the knuckles. Tongues burnt from cider,
we kiss noses and toes. Hands touch by rote,
heads with ceramic doll eyes blink, bob down

as bears in dens sink under tree hollows
sleeping, knowing orange sunlight will rise
when whispers of finch feathers fill the skies.

Dusty crows dance with a flight of swallows.
Rain turns to snow. Grey frost covers the town,
we walk, breathing pine, my hands in your coat.

I brush back your hair like a stray spider.
We spy cars passing by, looking to win
the race against the blizzard's icy streets.
We turn back for the warmth between our sheets.

V

Fingerprints bloom in fields of red flowers.
Trailing the edge of the curling newsprint,
we tapped out a ring of fiery foxgloves.

“My mommies live there in the fairy house
where everybody dances ladybug jigs,”
my niece said, scratching at calamine spots
from planting poison oak in painted pots.

On checkered blanket, we laid down, picked figs
soft and smooth. Smearing the juice on my blouse,
we watched predator and prey fly - hawks, doves,
owls, starlings - in the sky turning blue, mint

smell turned to sulfur, clouds dropping showers.
We gathered rusty toys, dove underground;
after the storm, the world a battleground.

VI

My heart tumbles down, an overripe pear,
a peach waiting for a thumbprint from you,
fruit no one would want, not even for pies.

Fresh honey-brown sugar words burn and boil,
rising with the heat from thread to toffee.
Those sweet notes meant to be caramel turn

brittle, sticky and crackling, and churn
the way rivers of creamer in coffee
curdle because the milk began to spoil.

Let me soak my singed maple in your lies
that smell like burnt sap in a smoke-filled view.
Blistering with the things we do not dare

to say aloud, lest these sounds scar and sear,
I wash the pot of our love with a tear.

VII

From the fall, we were an imperfect pair
of mismatched shoes, worn with broken laces,
the kind you keep, wear again, place aside,
toss in the deep back of the closet.

We scooped each other up. Bundled our lives
like photos developed, tucked in a box
discovered alongside toys, shells, rocks,
bobby pins, postcards, medicine for hives,
price tags, blue sequined dresses, deposit

slips – all things we held and crumpled. I cried
looking down at our engagement faces
staring back at me, smiling without care,
memories added to the garbage bag,
feeling as though my whole life was ragtag.

VIII

Dragged into darkness, I counted the hours
when I was awake and the world asleep,
the neighbor slammed his children against the wall,
birds against the glass of their father's fury.
Unsure if the thumps were head or body,
livers plucked daily or infrequent stones
rolled up the hills of his frustration, bones
snapping like spinning dresses so gaudy,
ruby sequins dripping in a flurry,
all the doors screwed up tight in the hall,
I waited to hear something make a peep,
tap code on the tiles between our showers.
Silence. No whimper. Not even a yelp.
I reached out for my phone, but sent no help.

IX

Until I could breathe where the air was thin,
you waited at the top. Crystal water
drops on metal railing echo tin cans
littering porches after dust blows through.
Mouth dry, searching for saliva in sucks,
back damp, feeling our collective weight sink
into my shoulders, watching you stop, blink
from bright sunlight. People below were ducks
in a green pond of town against the blue
mountains, carrying maps, train tickets, plans
to lean on fence posts, watching lambs totter.
You stood by the waterfall with a grin
unaware all my world spun as I snapped
you at the waterfall, me feeling trapped.

X

Your words dug in as soft as a splinter,
visible beneath the skin's surface, pricked,
a pierced tendon where you held onto me,
robbing me of my immortality
for the brief glory of a summer love
that lasted for autumn after autumn.
Lilly-scented letters in the bottom
drawer, not-my-color lipstick, a glove
fitting no one's hands – a formality
behind why I returned the well-worn key –
the way each Sunday-casual lie clicked,
the extra footprints outside in winter ...
When our frost-nipped fingers were the coldest,
your indiscretions were at their boldest.

XI

I picked out the fragments, ignored my needs,
put boxes in storage, mattress by curb,
gave away the dresser my aunt painted,
the one with blue jays circling the teal knobs,
glazed teacups in triangles, mosaics lost,
ungluable cracks, missing pieces, shards
of the past, decks short of several cards.
Small bits we keep in kitchen drawers, tossed
among treasures and clutter no one robs
yet these mundane things we are acquainted
with, we are most hesitant to disturb
because it might be like unsowing seeds.
We haven't the heart to forget our start,
these pieces from which we can't bear to part.

XII

Now I know what we love is what we lose,
like the colors of the flowers I picked
for my grandmother along her terrace;
or the crayons left behind on the sill
melting in the sun, smearing wallpaper
with candle-wax drips over pink daisies;
or her finger pressed down on middle C;
icebox cookies wrapped in parchment paper;
or snickerdoodles that began to spill,
like macaroons we savored in Paris,
cradled between powdered fingernails licked
clean; bowls full of salt water taffy chews
in grownup flavors I bit in, spit out.
Now she's gone with so much to talk about.

XIII

I taste an apple, look and become salt,
sink to the seafloor, elbows right-angled
dissolving as pluses and minuses,
positives, negatives, cyanide pips

swallowed, mother-swaddled stone children fled,
red water drops of dragon snaps, devoured.
Turning back somehow makes me the coward,
you told me not to taste or see. I dread

these lost senses, hands lingering on hips,
the smell of hartshorn in the sinuses,
memories burning behind, in mangled
splashes of heads bobbing in deep cobalt.

Stopped in a moment forever, looking back
not moving forward, a sail without tack.

XIV

Because of this body, it's all my fault.
I dared to exist. I opened my eyes

looked at smooth palms, nails, forearms, hairy legs,
counted the freckles, measured my skirt's hems
to hide knees. I wondered what my femurs
looked like next to yours. If without a skull

they would know who was who. I mull
rules meant to make me a modest dreamer,
think of my hips, thighs as rough and cut gems.

Oval cheekbones crack with slaps, broken eggs
against hands, how must palms look like to flies,
softly buzzing wings coming to a halt
staying somewhere too long before parting
sensing the smash above but not darting.

XV

My memories of you are a soft bruise,
squeezed against teeth like pomegranate seeds.
Our heartbeats beat the meter of winter,
your handprints purple my frosted glass skin,

fingerprints bloom in fields of red flowers.
My heart tumbles down, an overripe pear
from the fall. We were an imperfect pair
dragged into darkness. I counted the hours

until I could breathe. Where the air was thin,
your words dug in as soft as a splinter.
I picked out the fragments, ignored my needs.
Now I know what we love is what we lose,

I taste an apple, look and become salt
because of this body, it's all my fault.

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Vita

Dr. Rachel Anna Neff studied English and Spanish at Washington State University, graduating in 2007. From there, she attended The University of California at Riverside, earning a master's in 2009 and doctorate in 2013. Her dissertation, directed by Dr. David K. Herzberger, "Weird Women, Strange Times: The Representation of Power through Female Gender Portrayals in 19th and 20th century Iberian Literature," is an exploration of power and family structures, specifically women, as metaphors or allegories for authoritarian governments. She then earned a certificate in Technical and Professional Writing from The University of Texas at El Paso in May 2016 before finishing her MFA in Creative Writing in August 2016. Dr. Neff taught Spanish conversation courses and English-grammar-in-context courses at Washington State University; beginning and intermediate Spanish at UC Riverside; and introductory Spanish at Georgia Military College in Columbus, Georgia. She later worked as a copy editor at The University of Texas at El Paso and currently works as an executive assistant to the CEO of Funnelbox, Inc. She published "Poesía y Paz: Politics in Pablo Neruda's Late and Posthumous Poetry." in *Tropos*. 34 (Spring 2008): 51-65. She has poems published or forthcoming in Dos Gatos Press, Hyacinth Girl Press, *Dirty Chai Magazine*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, and *Persephone's Daughters*.

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