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Shades of Blue

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SHADES OF BLUE

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2022

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother who has done the work with me to heal the wounds of the past and build a better future.

SHADES OF BLUE

by

ALLISON DENISE THOMAS, B.A.

THESIS

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The University of Texas at El Paso

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Shades of Blue: Building a Confessional Narrative

Life Writing

Poetry is about both the seen and unseen, the spoken and unspoken, the concrete experience and the intangible emotion. If poetry is written with the language of tangible moments comprising the ephemeral and enduring pain and joy of living, then poetry is the narrative of life. *Shades of Blue* is a collection of poetry derived precisely from the unseen, the unspoken as it addresses personal and social experiences, interactions, and reactions of my life. This collection of poems is a narrative of life and discovery through the eyes of a girl who is often defined by the relationships she has with those around her. Her own identity is wrapped up in her existence as a daughter, sister, friend, and lover.

Her story is riddled with arrogance, self-absorption, domestic violence, and apathy. Her ability to know who she is, what she is, and her place in the world rest in the valuations of her relationships, therefore, there is heartache in the paternal relationships begat by narcissistic behaviors and misery made possible by involuntary fraternal competition. The chaos within her life and her relationships shades the world ominously blue for the protagonist's voice of the collection. What I am aiming for is for the reader to witness not only her circumstances but also her decisions about how to move forward in life; will she be bound by familial bonds of guilt or will she escape the cycle of cruelty and confusion to find placidity? Will she, in the midst of the suffering, find the calmer, softer shades of blue to break free and start anew.

As a young reader I was obsessed with the diverse forms of poetry that I found. I spent many hours flipping through thousands of pages searching for the perfect poem or rather the perfect words to convey what I was feeling and experiencing. I was mostly enchanted by the works of Emily Dickinson; her poem *Because I could not stop for death* spoke to me because of her

depiction of death framed as a friend triggered a change in how I viewed poetry and life. Poetry was no longer ornate musings about life but a compact way of communicating the complexities of life and bearing big emotions and reactions. This change in perspective created an urgency in me to be able to express intense emotion, dissatisfaction, suffering, joy, and contentment in a way that was conclusively soothing.

Later in life, I became interested in the author Ellen Hopkins. She used the poetic narrative form to tell the story of characters who have been through it all; while their experiences were not necessarily my own, the pictures she created addressed states of mind that I knew well. These narratives were built around raw experiences and were accounted for in words that were visually basic and ambiguously powerful. Though the books did not fit into what I believed poetry was meant to talk about they certainly matched the tone that I accepted to be poetry. Robert Furman would suggest that this is because young people use “poetry as a means of bringing order to their chaotic (...) world,” and he would be right (Furman 164). This encounter helped me to think of poems in terms of a larger collection, a story. These records of life unfiltered helped to uncover this collection of poetry; this is where writing the story of me and my experiences began.

I have sat down to write this book of *me* many times over, but the raw experiences that fed the passion I needed to write felt few and far between. Being a narrative related closely to my own experiences, the poetry that lies within relies heavily on hindsight, as Werner Wolf noted it often does, but the point I was aiming to communicate was lost due to an unwillingness to say *it* and to say *it* plainly (146). After years of stumbling through writing about only the big life-changing experiences, I happened upon a book by Iain Thomas called “How to be Happy”. In this book I found honest musings and pictures that spoke volumes about the world of emotions through daily

observations and simple reflections like, “Head towards things you love, head away from things you hate” (2)

Thomas expressed his daily struggles and qualms through observations, reflections, and interactions. This was a new look at the poetics of the world. Furman says of it,

A poetics of the mundane is far more honest than a poetics of the extraordinary. We live in a world of objects, events and relationships that are seemingly ordinary. The poet that seeks to document and bring life to the ordinary seeks to reach out and experience the world around them in an authentic way. They seek to bring their real selves into a dynamic, honest relationship with their day-to-day world as it really exists (Furman 165).

For a while I journeyed through the ordinary trying to make it more extraordinary with my own words. *Shades of Blue* seeks to combine both the extraordinary and mundane experiences that make life what it is. Consider the poem “Blueberry Mud Pie,”

If I could stop time
It would be somewhere between
Mud pies and homemade rosewater
Between Mommy look at this
And dad please stop yelling
Between falling out of trees
And calling the police to break up a fight
It would be some time
Between responsibility
And liability
Instead
I would be six years old and oblivious (22)

In its first life, this compilation of poems had no form or order, just a loose association with the color blue. The lack of order was of course due to various circumstances under which each poem was created. Some of the poems in the collection were sparked by my own experiences with various people in my life including my family and closest friends. These particular poems were composed more organically from emotional urgency. Other poems were created within the

confines of rules picked up over the course of my studies; many being carefully planned to bridge the space between two poems or to complete a section of poems. Still others were constructed with careful consideration from present day reactions to past memories. It is this unique combination of processes which helped me rethink this collection

While each individual poem functions in the realm of confessionalism and lyricism, the totality of the work finds its form in a narrative state. According to Werner Wolf narratives are comprised of objects and characters which exist temporally and spatially and “are implicated in actions and events that must lead to significant changes in the represented world (and the) eventfulness typically implies the overcoming of obstacles” through the emotional impulses and the interactions and reactions of the character or characters related to the narrative (145-146). This collection of poems is just that; the narrative of a person trying to find their place in the world through the exploration of everyday occurrences. Their journey is washed in blue shades of hope and melancholy as they try to make sense of the pain and suffering, they must endure.

Christina Shewell talks about the way we take in a poem; by exploring it physically and engaging with it internally, quietly, and externally, out loud we can see how the words affect our body in “how they breathe, how they feel (and) how they move through us to build connections in our consciousness with our emotions (146). The words of R.H. Sin and Atticus grabbed my attention immediately feeding the need to connect to the words on the page in a way that moved me. Authors like Amanda Lovelace, who rewrites fairy tales through a new critical lens to present the truth for real women, Nikita Gill who uses the universe as a guide to her musings, Rupi Kaur whose words seemed to know exactly what I needed to hear when my world was crumbling offered a new chance to engage with words; words so sweet like *milk and honey* that a reader can engage emotionally and physically with the poem. Studying the works of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath it

was obvious their words also allow the reader to engage emotionally and often musically in the matters of life.

For my own poetry, I wanted a speaker with a strong voice. The voice of any body of work is built in the diction, punctuation, tone and images created. Poetic voice gives a poem rhythm, it tells the reader to go slowly or quickly. The voice affects the tone of the work. The goal was to have this narrative voice vent violent and emotionally charged experiences almost like rants that could fly off the page and to have melancholic confessions slip off the pages in tears as the speaker conversed with the reader sharing every heartache and every joy. *Shades of Blue* is built on my natural voice and the literary voice invented to lead the reader on this journey.

In order for those experiences to meld into one strong poetic voice the poems were written from a first-person perspective. This was in part due to the personal nature of many of the topics. In order to make the voice sound authentic it had to be *I*. Even confessional poet Robert Lowell admitted that in his own work he invented some of himself, while trying to remain true to his own weaknesses and miseries (Uroff 105). The poetic persona is a voice all its own which acts in the same capacity as a dramatic monologue. This collection of poetry has markings of both Lowell's version of confessional poetry which aimed to "perceive the truth about the nature of his experience" and of Plath's which toes the line between immediate "sensuous and emotional experiences" which are created in a way that allows the writer to control the experiences and unrestrained venting sessions (Uroff 105-106). The poetic voice was developed through the variations in form. Some poems were written in a dialogic format to allow the reader to see how the speaker engages with other personas, such as "Rendezvous" (66) and "Lover" (58). Additionally, there were some poems that varied in their technological format; while the dialogic poems invoke a sense of youth, the letter formatted poems give the impression of an older more

reflective character. “Dear Dad” (86), was written in a personal letter form, while “A Note Left Unread” (89), was written in a technical letter form. All these changes in form add to the development of the character and collection.

Upon entering the MFA Program at the University of Texas at El Paso I was introduced to many authors including Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who are considered as confessional poets. Confessional poetry was a very autobiographical movement rooted in self-deprecation and themes like mental health and familial relationships. I was struck by this concept because it encompassed every poetic thought I ever had. Through my studies what emerged was the idea of the poet as the speaker in the center of their work; because confessional poetry was so personal the only way to communicate the points of the poem was through the “I”; the first-person perspective was essential. Confessional writing gave a voice to my poems and made the words more authentic because they reflected me and my own experience. Confessional writing is a performance of the “self” which requires an immense amount of introspection and understanding of universal concepts. Confessional poetry is about who I am or was and *who I was* was what I wrote about: the truth of my own life and existence. Writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton changed the way I thought about writing. Sexton said that whatever she was, she was because she wrote it and therefore made it so. She was most distinctly confessional if what confessional means is that there is a strong “commitment to recording as directly as possible the shape of private pain” (Molesworth 174).

In this same way writers like Natalie Diaz are deemed confessional poets. In her book, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, Diaz writes a poem, “Why I Hate Raisins,” which shares the revelatory truths about life and existence and the pain that the larger pains are endured each day in the most mundane ways,

I still hate raisins,
But not for the crooked commodity lines

we stood in to get them - winding
around and in the tribal gymnasium.
Not for the awkward cardboard boxes
we carried them home in. Not for the shits
or how they distended my belly.
I hate raisins because now I know
my mom was hungry that day, too,
and I ate all the raisins. (Diaz 10)

Diaz addresses her truth of the situation by sharing the simple details of a childhood event and is also able to reflect on the reality of the moment. In my collection I aspired to do just as much. The poems are created from the desire of confessionalism with a minimalistic style. The point being to report reality as simply and truthfully as possible. It is prudent to note that the memory is unreliable in proclaiming the truth, but the emotion of the moment is something the body knows well, as Maria Takolander notes “memory, particularly when it involves trauma, is unreliable (and) the self is also always not itself” (371)

In the progression of this collection there is evidence that the narrative voice is more concerned about the repercussions of naming the event and there are other occasions which reflect zero concern for consequences. Consider the lines from the poem “King Triton”:

Sitting on your throne
A self-anointed king
Giving, but mostly taking,
As you see fit
Shoving your expectations down my throat (40)

There is a sense of hesitation in the voice, which fits the work linearly, as I sought to call out the impact of the interactions with a particular person in the life of this character.

The voice changes throughout the collection between moments of greater and less hesitation in the narrative voice as the character moves to decide whether she is afraid to tell the truth of the experience and call it what it is. A poem entitled “An Argument, more or less” from this collection offers a small glimpse of that:

I'll never forget
My father tried to end an argument
By shouting in my face
Brow furrowed permanently
Spit spewing everywhere

“Your mother tried to kill herself.”

As if it wasn't his fault (41)

Piecing it all Together: Sectioning

The first section of this collection is focused on the early life of a young girl who is the main character for this narrative journey. The early life of any person sets the stage for all growth and development. It is what predicts our ability to face challenges and cope with stressors as well as our overall satisfaction with life. The first poem in this section, “A Beginning”, serves as a starting point for the character; it marks her place with respect to key relational figures throughout the text. This poem gives the reader a glimpse into how the character perceives her place in her family and in the world which will ultimately drive the narration of the text.

For three years more we lived
Like sisters everywhere
We were close
But we were separate

And in the Ninth year of my life
We became different (21)

In general, this section of the text contains narrative and confessional poems which allow the reader to catch sight of the difficulties the character faces in life and consider the ways in which each interaction changes who is read on the page. As a young person the character relies heavily on the presence of both parents for comfort and joy in life which we can see clearly in the poem, “Comet,”

Hope and wonder were infinite
In the world my parents were creating for me
There was nothing I couldn't have
No place I couldn't go (25)

When that reality no longer exists for the character, we see her enter a state of emotional disorientation as she tries to recover that sense of peace by reclaiming her place in her family and society as “a most admired possession” through her successful academic and athletic participation (29).

The poem “Memory Lane” which was inspired by Sara Kay’s poem “Montauk” begins to shift from the first section about the narrator’s position and role in her family to the more reflective nature of the second section. In this poem, I try to have readers whisked through time and introduce them to new persons whose existence will change the narrator’s opinion of herself and her function with respect to those around her. She goes from being a child in need of comfort and consistency to the caretaking constant for her siblings.

I am 13, my little sisters are 10 and 7
We are at our father’s house
Combing the hair of my youngest sister who is 3
While my brother, who is 4, and his other sister, who is also 10
Jump on a metal framed bunk bed
3 thunks escape the other room (30)

As previously mentioned, section two is a more reflective and revelatory experience for the character. This was a conscious choice I took because the character needed to experience growth in order for the collection to develop the way it did. The second section is not where the character discovers who she is and solves all her problems; this section is where she deals with the issues at hand and unpacks reality. While in the first section she realizes her father isn’t really who he makes himself out to be, in the second section she learns that her mother isn’t exactly mom of

the year. In fact, her mom goes from being a source of comfort in “Sleep Baby Sleep” to a being a lifeless figure who no longer has the capacity soothe and encourage her in “Denim Saint,”

There was no greater pain in my juvenile years
Than to watch grace and love pour out of her words
For everyone but me

Life isn't fair to the ones we love most
And the voices of her family spit how ungrateful I was

They didn't know her then
They didn't know that broken woman
who couldn't articulate affection anymore,
The woman who couldn't manifest the smallest shred of motherly tenderness (38)

In many ways the second section of *Shades of Blue* is our antagonist discovering that her parents are just people, flawed people just trying to make sense of the world as she is. This revelation does not, however, change her mind much about what she requires and what these adults in her life should give her.

The second section of *Shades of Blue* includes many revelatory thoughts and experiences as the poetic voice shares the verbal and psychological traumas she endured at the hands of her father. His narcissistic tendencies are highlighted in many poems in this section including the poem “Midnight Shrieking,”

I had a front row seat to screaming matches

In the front yard

On the back porch

In the living room

Out in public, for all the world to hear (40)

as well as the poem “Voodoo Lily,”

He misremembers the past
As if his future depends on it

While he ferociously denies his present

If you ask him if he's ever hurt anyone he loved
He'd lie like it was the truth (41)

The poem "Midnight Shrieking" takes the space of the page in a unique format. "The shape of things affects us," Christina Shewell notes in her article (154). This poem is designed in a sort of stair-step shape to show the movement of what the poem is saying, what the character witnesses is not confined to one space, it is in every space.

As the character makes her way through this revelation, she begins to lose herself even more in the sinking feeling of not knowing what to do about her circumstances. As the book heads towards the third section the poems give her a new life as she reflects and seeks to find who she must be now for herself. In the poem, "Making Peace" she urges herself "Don't revel in yesterday's destruction/ There's no room for you there" (48).

As the third section of the collection begins the narrator tries to understand who she is and what she wants in her new reality. The third section takes a sharp turn as our character tries to find her place within relationships outside of the family. Not yet healed she pushes through a relationship with someone who can only offer half of what she desires. The character believes that this new relationship can heal her wounds which is stated clearly in the poem "Sonata" in which our narrator asks, "heal me with your touch" (59). "Sterling Silver" shares an important lesson that she may not understand until much later as the poem describes the heartache in images of everything she did to feel as though she were loved. In this poem and the following the people being reflected on by the narrator is called *love* because in this moment of her life this is what she believes love is.

In the poem "One Last Word" the antagonist has come to a sort of peace which will ultimately lead to healing. The progression of the poems after this point are not a straight line to

healing; there is a back and forth between each poem and within each poem as the character struggles to find her balance in a world that does not make sense. The poems “Arabella” and “American Anthem” serve as reflective pieces as she catalogs the injustices done throughout her life. Like many people in the world, she wants to know if she is done paying her dues. She wants to know why bad things happen to good people and vice versa. She wants to know when it will be her turn to be happy and what her happiness will cost. The poem “Overcast” offers a glimpse into her mind,

Over and over
I imagine choosing them,
My family.
But everything gets cloudy
Judgments on what is best
Manifest the unfavorable
Convictions about what’s right
Prove wrong in the end
And we suffer beneath the veil
And find no relief
No release
From the guilt
When I finally choose me
For my own sake (81)

The last section of the collection is about making amends, offering grace, and finally choosing herself. In this section there is mercy for the role the parents played in her anguish and acceptance for the grief that was bequeathed to all posterity. The antagonist knows that some things will never change, but she can. She knows that the past can’t be undone, but she can construct whatever future she desires. The last section serves not as an ending to her story but a new beginning where everything can finally be what she wants. She finds a love that she would cross the universe for because she knows they would do the same; she finds her own peace and her own power. The final section ends in a resting state, “the water babbles over shallow rock beds/ I am free” (96)

Crafting Shades of Blue

In crafting this collection there were many challenges. The quest to make the mundane poetic was cut short in the wearisome lull of my own life. In that time, I was desperate for any inspiration, and I found myself scrolling through social media pages and consuming copious amounts of images of words, phrases and whole poems. I eventually began pursuing the different authors' written works to bridge the space between reality and the truth that I was searching for in my own writing.

how cruel i was to myself. giving you credit for my warmth simply because you had felt it. thinking it was you who gave me strength. wit. beauty. simply because you recognized it. as if i was already not these things before i met you. as if i did not remain all these once you left. (Kaur 2015)

In my own work I often sought to dig for the memory that was most closely related to things that I observed. This desire is what led this collection of poetry as an exploration of my own life through the inspection of the mundane and color, specifically the shades of blue that seemed to color my world.

Initially many of the poems were created with the color blue top of mind. I had come across a book by Maggie Nelson called *Bluets*. She wrote,

26. After my friend's accident, I began to think of this lady of the bruised eye and these glittering white objects with more frequency. Could such a phenomenon be happening to me, with blue, by proxy? I've heard that a diminishment of color vision often accompanies depression, though I do not have any idea how or why such a thing is neurologically possible. So what would it be a symptom of, to start seeing colors—or, more oddly, just one color—more acutely? Mania? Monomania? Hypomania? Shock? Love? Grief? (Nelson pp.11-12)

It was this poem that changed the way that I read the rest of her book. It was this poem which also sparked the idea of addressing the way that color affects the perception of the world. In the process

of creating *Shades of Blue*, I gathered names of various shades and wrote about whatever observation or reflection aligned itself with that shade of blue.

Over time doing this proved to be more difficult as the name or shade of blue did not provide the amount of inspiration required to pen a thought. With inspiration lacking, I looked for any way that could help me in the production of the narrative I had begun. It was in this dry period that I was reminded of a class I took at the University of Texas at El Paso on constraints. Instead of waiting for inspiration, experiences, or emotions I turned to constraints. A constraint is simply a rule that moderates the poem; it is a choice made by either the writer or some other authority for the text. “Constraints are not ornaments: for the writer, they help generate the text” but they are not “visible to the naked eye” which can be frustrating for a reader who is trying to make sense of the text (Battens 613-614). The constraint-based approach gave me a way to actively write poetry.

Some of the poems in this collection were filtered through constraints based on the Antena publication “How to Write (More)”. Through the precision of words and the architectural structure of these constraints I was able to create meaning in some of the shades of blue. The choice to use constraints came after a few of my first readers suggested that the words were falling flat on my earlier versions of the poems. In my own reflection I realized that the reason the words were not making the impact intended could be traced to two places. On the one hand my words were too imprecise, and I was using a lot of them to say simple things. On the other hand, I was relying too much on the use of traditional poetic language to carry the meaning without giving the words a concrete, experiential base to create meaning. The constraints allowed me to focus my work on what needed to be said. I figured if I want to make real meaning for my readers, I need to say what I have to say without bogging the message down with superfluous measures. Not every constraint offered winners. For example, the following poem, based on an alphabetic constraint, once existed

in this collection, but has since been removed as the anchor for the poem did not hold true to the collection's purpose.

Planetarium

Zenith
Yonder denial ways
Vacuous undertakings take seasons
Raving guests provoke outrageous notions
My life keeps jaded indignation hiding
Guided from elusivity
Delicately carried beyond,
Afraid.

Other types of constraints proved to be more compelling, like the question-based constraint used to form the poem "Recollection,"

Does *love* remember Christmas under the lights;
Watching the stars dance
Through the moonroof of that burnt orange charger?

Does *love* remember the Easter Lilies
And the early morning dew
When we celebrated the resurrection?

What about the midmorning naps on the love sac?

Does *love* remember June Double weddings
And cold Colorado nights?

Does *love* remember Alabama? (62)

I aimed to explore the nature of confessional poetry within these constraints in everything I wrote for this collection, which gave many of the poems a life of their own and me a new life along with it.

The idea of confessional poetry helped me recall moments and people, who had a large impact on my life, into my poetry. The thing that I struggled most often with while writing about personal things that included loved ones was how to write without making them angry or disrupting

the relationship and progression of our lives. Though the real-world persons that may or may not be represented in this book have undergone growth, change and evolution since the recounted moments in time, there exists a concern about how the perception of that moment has shaped the people within. There was a deep concern in the development of the collection, that they would recall the interaction differently and that their impression of that event would clash with my own memory making the truth within the poem false.

Through the journey of creation and revision, *Shades of Blue* has come to be more than just an ode to the color blue and the way color can paint our perspective, although it still carries that first life deep within the heart of the work, it is an exploration of seasons of growth and stagnation in the midst of trauma. It is a reminder that two steps forward and one step back means you are still making progress. This collection has allowed me to reflect on my life and reconsider how I can take charge of my own future. It has created a guide through my past so that I can create a better future for those that I love most. *Shades of Blue* stands as a confessional narrative making way for more stories to be told and more truths to be known. While this version of *Shades of Blue* can rest easy in the genre of poetry, this confessional narrative proves to have the potential to be a novel in verse.

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Shades of Blue

Resilience

I am on a mission
To perfect my body
To refine my soul
To create a new me
And some things can't be changed
The marks I curse
Stretch across my body
Enmesh in my every memory
They are there forever
Scars, to remind me
Of the places I have been
The battles I have won
The life I have survived
Entrenched on my skin
Burned in my brain
A reflection of my soul
Damaged
Distorted

A reminder of my own resilience.

I

A Beginning

I am the eldest of eight

Three years after my own birth
A sister was born
She would be my biggest adversary,
My chief confidant

In another three years
One other sister was born
The strongest advocate
And most candid commentator

For three years more we lived
Like sisters everywhere
We were close
But we were separate

And in the Ninth year of my life
We became different

Blueberry Mud Pie

If I could stop time
It would be somewhere between
Mud pies and homemade rosewater
Between Mommy look at this
And dad please stop yelling
Between falling out of trees
And calling the police to break up a fight
It would be some time
Between responsibility
And liability
Instead
I would be six years old and oblivious
There would be play time and laughter
Daddy would kiss away the pain
Instead of causing it

A Grain of Sand

I was only four, maybe five
The day you left me behind

I had chosen to spend my evening with you
Daddy's girl that I was

But you called Mom to come get me
When I began to miss her as children often do

We had only made it a block or two
When she asked "are you sure"

I told her that I would stay with you
When we got to the house, you weren't there

And I cried

Sleep Baby Sleep

I cannot close my eyes
For the monsters that hide in my head
I grow weary and restless
As each day goes on
Awake I find myself
Trapped within their reach
Never able to escape fake I love yous
And forced laughs
When I close my eyes
I run only in place
But the tears I cry are real
The screams you hear are mine
My mother rubs my back
“It’s okay, sleep baby, sleep.”

Comet

I spent days basking in sunshine
Soaking up rays of luminous joy
Great promise and glory filled my essence
And when times were dark
Light seeped from my eyes,
Sparkled in my smile,
Like a dandelion in the wind
I moved where life took me
Chaos begat joyous incidents
Making me invincible
Like only a 7-year-old can be
Hope and wonder were infinite
In the world my parents were creating for me
There was nothing I couldn't have
No place I couldn't go

Arctic Flight

Somewhere between seven and nine
I learned that crying was a bad thing

In our house
the worst mistake I could make was

Not acting out
Or messing up
Or talking back

Mistakes could be fixed
Misspoken words corrected
With a belt, or the threat thereof

But there were no tears in that house
Unless I wanted a reason to cry

As if there were no reason at all

Blue Pearl

Like the pearl
Taken from seas
Uniquely prepared
To share its own magnificence
I was forged in the bowels of my people
Made to shine by the imperceptible

It was
Given by the universe
To remind me
Of everything I am
Now and
Always

Stained Glass

I'm going to be somebody someday
A common name in every household
Forged in the fires of weighted expectations
Transformed by the dreams of others
Becoming everything everyone ever needed
Dying to grow into myself

Golden Child

A most admired possession
To prop their dreams on
Everything you hoped for in a child
Smart, gifted even,
Athletic, competitive
Best in show
Pushed to be perfect
In every facet of life
Sculpted to behold
Your masterpiece
Stitched like a fine Persian rug

Quickly I began to snag around the edges
Unraveling

Memory Lane

After "Montauk" by Sara Kay

I am 9, my little sisters are 6 and 3
We giggle in our room late into the night
And our father walks in
Quickly we move to our parents' room where our mother is crying
We giggle still because we don't know what we are supposed to do
We've never seen mom cry

I am 13, my little sisters are 10 and 7
We are at our father's house
Combing the hair of my youngest sister who is 3
While my brother, who is 4, and his other sister, who is also 10
Jump on a metal framed bunk bed
3 thunks escape the other room

What happened, screams
What happened, blood;
And more blood

My mother pulls in before the ambulance does

When my father arrives
His brow furrows into an angry line
Why did you call your mom he says
My brother clings to me with his small frame

I am 27, my little sisters are 24 and 21
My brother is now 18, my sister 16
And there are three more littles, 8, 7, and 3
The phone rings at 11:45 PM
I drive across town as sprinkles of rain hit my windshield
We need the rain so bad
There's blood on his shirt
A cut by her eye

I've never been so angry

Easter Egg

It snows, sometimes.
At Easter
It's rare- the snow
But she offers her face
To leave eggs unhidden
Doors shut tight
Spring dresses wrapped
In old fleece blankets
And you know
Like only you can when the world stops
It's just another day.
Maybe next year,
You think, will be different
Maybe Easter will have more to surrender.

Disproportionate Love

Who is the favorite child
The one who gains the most
Who earns the least

Who is the chosen one
The easy one
Designed to be the perfect one

It wasn't the one who cooked
Who cleaned
Who made their own way

It wasn't the one who
met every expectation, and
Raised every bar

For my mother it was
the most challenging

For my father it was
his son

I was neither

Glassine

A little light
Seeps through my armor
Shadows slip past my defenses
The smooth glossiness of my outer self
Proves useless
My effort to protect myself
Thwarted by wax paper

II

Blue Morpho

When I was perfect
It was not enough
Neither my father nor my mother
Had a clue what to do

I was everything they wanted
Every dream they had ever dreamt
And they hated me for it

In a blink of an eye
I metamorphosed
From Golden child
To black sheep

Envy drove them mad with rage
Leaving me to my own devices
Fending for myself
Figuring life out by myself

No guidance
No support
Nothing that I needed
To be enough

Kaleidoscope

My mind is madness
Darkness fills my eyes
Beautiful black

A window to my shattered soul
A void bearing aperture
Seeking color beyond chaos
A kaleidoscope

I turn and turn
Shifting in every situation
Waiting for life to fall into place
For this season of shadowy blues
To pass

Touch of Blue

A burden
Small glimpses of weakness
The shadows of desire,

Necessity,

The hurting
Painted the world.
Just a dash here
Where you cannot see

And there

Where it hurts most
Staining the world
Until blue is all I see

Denim Saint

“Your mother is a saint”
I’ve heard the phrase often enough to resent her

My mother is a good woman,
But a saint?

There was no greater pain in my juvenile years
Than to watch grace and love pour out of her words
For everyone but me

Life isn’t fair to the ones we love most
And the voices of her family spit how ungrateful I was

They didn’t know her then
They didn’t know that broken woman
who couldn’t articulate affection anymore,
The woman who couldn’t manifest the smallest shred of motherly tenderness

Snowflake Obsidian

My mother is a hardworking woman, no doubt
With 2 jobs, she now spends here every last moment atoning for her past
She is changing, growing, learning each day
How to be a better mother, and person

There is room for redemption in her story
As she seeks to love everyone

Except my father

And what redemption awaits him
What reparations will be made

Midnight Shrieking

During my adolescence,
Well into my teen years
I had a front row seat to screaming matches

In the front yard

On the back porch

In the living room

Out in public, for all the world to hear

My parents, each on their own, was a force to be reckoned with

It was no wonder

they were so drawn to each other

many years before

It made life
horrifically interesting,
To say the least

Voodoo Lily

My father is a proud man
But what he has to be proud of eludes me

He argues through manipulation
And convinces you, at 19, that
Not paying his rent means you are selfish

He blames his faults on robot programming
And insists that emotions are for girls
If toxic masculinity had a face it would be his.

He misremembers the past
As if his future depends on it
While he ferociously denies his present

If you ask him if he's ever hurt anyone he loved
He'd lie like it was the truth

King Triton

Sitting on his throne
A self-anointed king,
My father,
Giving a little,
but mostly taking,
As he sees fit
Shoving his expectations down my throat
Forcing my feet to toe his line
Wielding his sandcastle authority
To overpower my sovereignty
How dare he
Attempt to command my body
To control my mind
When the ground he stands on
Washes out with the tide

An Argument, More or Less

I'll never forget
My father tried to end an argument
By shouting in my face
Brow furrowed permanently
Spit spewing everywhere

“Your mother tried to kill herself.”

As if it wasn't his fault

The house went quiet
Gasps from little ones
Were interrupted by
An eruption of tears from sister

“Yea, just run away.” He shouted from his porch

What was left to say as his wife grabbed hold of my door.

“He didn't mean it.”

“Of course he did...”

Blustery Day

It's another
Blustery day
Stormy skies
Howling winds
Fall

On

Deaf

ears

Easily avoids
Blind eyes
It's exhausting
This bitter
Violent rain.

First Frost

I remember
Vividly the deadened
Pounding in my ears
The pressure in my chest
Building

How could you,
My protector,
Look at me this way.
Speak to me this way.
Words like knives
Powered by manipulation
Shred my soul.
You made me
Worthless,
Useless,
Pointless.

It was so cold
Drowning in your callousness

Iceberg

I've been thinking
About the way my heart skips beats
My mind skips moments
My lungs beg for air

I've been thinking
About the way I can't think anymore
How each moment is crowded with infinite possibilities
How each second is bound by a million obligations
And there is no time for breathing
No time for being

I've been thinking
About the way that

Hope
Can't
Float

While I'm sinking

Suddenly Sapphire

Clarity arrives each day
Growing hope
Awaiting the torrential flood
Of insults
And fake apologies
I find a stillness within myself
I know I am not broken
I care not for the words
Of broken men
Or the actions of fools
I stand affirmed by my own existence
By the sound of my heart
Pumping blood through my body
I am awake
And everything is a brighter shade of blue

Making Peace

Do you recognize the rain when it comes
Do you let the drops wash over you like waters of rejuvenation
Like new birth
Do you let the experience transform you
Or do you wallow in muddy water waiting for the world to dry
Don't give in to the storms
Don't revel in yesterday's destruction
There's no room for you there

Daring Indigo

Beautiful is she who knows her place
Bold, the one who builds her dreams
Fiercely protecting her throne
And me?
Is my place where you set me
Or where I find myself
A house with no foundation.
Fate weaved in this fabric
My allegiances bend,
Breaking.
Knowing what I know
I embrace the day
Adorned in daring Indigo
To be as she

Blue Opal

Reflecting rainbows
Rousing dancing lights
Embracing originality
Inspiring bliss
Even under darkened skies
Natural brilliance sees the day,
Seizes the day,
Heals.
Like sad songs and movies
Your voice pours forth the truth
I can see clearly
How the world changes for you
Giving back what you need
Strengthening your claim to the universe

Singularity

Was it harder to love me
Because of who I was,

An athlete
And a scholar
Working from _
Not necessity
Moving about
Planning a life
Childfree
With no obligations
To anyone
But myself

Was it harder to love me
Because of everything I could be, or

Because of what you weren't?

III

Set Adrift

The day I was set to come home from college for the first time
My family said they had a surprise
Imagine my delight when I discovered I had no bedroom
I guess I don't live here anymore

A few trips back to my spot on the couch later
I was met with distant words

“Why are you here?”

Blue Beads

I've given myself over to torment,
To the pain.
Little blue beads hug my cheeks.
Leak from my eyes.
Fall like glass
Shattering more of myself
On the ground
Breaking down
Scattering in the dark.

Pageant Song

It began with a few college classes
18 hours of highs & lows
I jumped in the deep end of teaching
300 miles from home
I was building a career and a life;
I tried to get ahead of the game,
Running face first into the unknown,
Eyes wide open.
Grasping for a future I could never own
A husband and babies and a six-figure income.

I was getting ahead
Degree after degree
Mile after mile
Pushing forward
And falling behind

Americana

Life handed me long days and sunsets
Asking me to give her everything I had
Should I have known the days wouldn't be long enough
Should I have seen the sunsets weren't rewards
But deadlines, orange and purple streaks
scratched across the plans of my life
Time slips between my fingers
Each day closed on the horizon
Me, blinking away progress in the last wisps of daylight
Unchecked boxes filling page after page
Making longer days and shorter sunsets

Sentimental Lady

Call me emotional
Call me weak
Media portrays a life unbroken
A life renewed
Stitched and whole
It makes me weep
Life is tragic
And I am enchanted by the thought
Of being happy
If only for a brief hour

Lover

I wish you could have stayed longer.

...

Sure, I would love that.

Absolutely. I make a really great shrimp pasta.

Me too.

Hey. Guess What?

I love you.

Goodnight!

Me too. I enjoy spending time with you.

How about I come over again tomorrow?
We could watch a movie or whatever.

Maybe we can make dinner together too.

Sounds fantastic. I'm looking forward to it.

...

What?

I love you more!

Goodnight Beautiful!

Sonata

Play me softly
Sharply, like a violin.

Play me tenderly
Barely, like a piano.

Play me slowly
Delicately, all night.

Never stop.
The music must go on.

Ease the pain of what was
Mend my wounds.

Heal me with your touch.

Blue Bows

Silhouettes
Made for long legs
And thin waists
You insist
Blue is better
Better
In the moonlight,
With the music,
And I compromise.

At first, on the small things
Like blue bows
And white flowers
Which city
And what job.
Then the big things
Her bed
Or mine

Sterling Silver

I remember crying,
Screaming on the bathroom floor

“Can I have a pillow...”

I placed the pillow against my face upon the ground

At the top of my lungs,
In between hard sobs,
Choking on my own breath,
I scream every lunch date,
Every video game,
Every love drunk kiss into the pillow

Forcing every hour drive
Every long goodbye
Three years of love into the bathroom floor

I remember the sound of *love's* voice

“I’m so sorry...”

Recollection

Does *love* remember Christmas under the lights;
Watching the stars dance
Through the moonroof of that burnt orange charger?

Does *love* remember the Easter Lilies
And the early morning dew
When we celebrated the resurrection?

What about the midmorning naps on the love sac?

Does *love* remember June Double weddings
And cold Colorado nights?

Does *love* remember Alabama?

Windswept

Breezes

Push
And
Pull
Me
D
E
E
P
E
R
Into
The
Sea.
When
I
Return
You
Find
Me

Windswept.

Body Language

Family is a funny thing,
And *love's* was stranger than mine
A group of outsiders dragged across the globe together
Made to feel at home with my people
Too preoccupied by the people inside your screens
To be present
To show care
Every word spoken bites
Every breath sucks the air from the room
At least my family has the guts to say they hate me out loud

Waiting in Winter

Love's absence disturbs my soul
I have to get back.
A longing,
Deeper than Mariana trench
Wells inside me
Tell me how can we progress to a time before,
When you loved me
As in Pablo Neruda's "Sonnet 17"

Rendezvous

Could you come over? (I beckon to *love*)

Absolutely

Let me know when you head this way.

...

Let me know you are okay...at least do that.

...

Maybe we could get together soon. I'm free tonight.

...

Every time we hang out it ends up like this.

Let's talk later.

All I'm asking for is some kind of acknowledgement.

...

Text me back please.

...

Even you can't be this cruel. Please just call me.

...

Really sorry to take up your time. Bye.

Hey.

Slipping

Before it all hit the fan,
Love could see the trickle,
The steady stream that, slowly
Sank our ship

Calls were few and far between
Texts in one word as if there were no room for others
The day I found out you were possibly dying
Everyone on Facebook knew before me
“Why are you here”
The first words I heard you speak in weeks
And then nothing
Until *love* called one lonely Thursday Night
“I think we should take a break”
I agreed

One Last Word

I love you

The words fall off my lips like an invitation
Silence fills the spaces between the space
sucking life from a room already dead
Charred by flame licked memories
Love is waiting for more

For The big *but*,
For The pleading tears,
For the raging violence of unrequited love,

And I'm waiting for nothing
Not words dripping with passion
Nor actions stained with lust
Not a single sigh
I need no reply
Just know

I love you

Aster Petal

Bright beginnings of spring
Falling open to the world
Ready to start
Luring *love* with her beauty
Love plucked her from the earth
Given as a gift to be forgotten

She is abused, mistreated
Wilted, *love* discards her
Hitting the road-
Is love always this way

Empty Vessel

Hollowed out by pain
I echoed back what you could hold
Where you once offered joy
There ceased to be light
Where you once offered friendship
There could be no peace

Withering from the inside out
A husk of who I used to be

Indiscernible Burn

like a cut on my finger that you can't see
or an itch in my eye that won't rub away
There is pain, and I
will cry until it doesn't hurt anymore

But my patience wears thin
on this tedious track of time
a monotonous film clouds my view

what could life be
beyond this moment
will time carry me beyond this point

Freedom's Comfort

I long to breathe again
To find refuge amongst fireflies

Misery swarms around me
Like mosquitos in late summer

Fear clings to me unrestrained
Joy, a victim of entropy

I ache for the calming darkness of starry nights
And slow-moving water

I yearn for a gently nipping breeze
And sweaters around a fire

Where is the peace?

That deep inhalation of comfort
The slow exhalation of pain

Elusive Blue

Disloyalty destroys,
Unfaithfulness haunts,
And perfect peace
Finds its place
Within the elusive.
Barely within reach
Hovering between now
And the hereafter
Waiting, watching.

Arabella

I listen closely, giving Attention
to the sound of Rain that soothes
to the vibrations the Air voices
and witness the Breaking
The tear-soaked pillows greeted each dawn
and in my sorrow, at 10,
when chores pile up and 6 capable hands become only 2
I wondered if it was enough
At 19 when I paid the rent that kept a roof over their heads
I questioned, was I enough
for every year between and after when you, father, hurl your insecurities at me,
shame me, blame me, attach your failures to me,
while I raise your children
I want to know haven't I done enough

Even in sorrow
I want to let the Light in
To cry until I can Laugh
To say that I am enough

one day, maybe someday
I will know, after all,
all prayers get Answers

American Anthem

I got stopped the other day
On the way home from my weekly dopamine boost
It took its toll

“Did you know you were speeding?”

I calmly handed over my license

“Do you have insurance ma’am”

Of course

“Was there any particular reason you were speeding”

No

I couldn’t gather my thoughts for a reasonable excuse

But what the man didn’t know
Is I’m getting married this year
In three months
While I am trying to finish grad school
All while I work
I’m a teacher
A coach
A youth minister

He didn’t know that I had a fight with my mother and sister because my father is a terrible person
He didn’t know that I wrote down the due dates of every bill yesterday and paid the ones that were coming up this week only

While I prayed that 50 dollars would feed my family for 2 weeks
I didn’t know I was speeding
I was traveling on autopilot
Trying to put the pieces of my life together hoping to make it through the week

Frozen

I am distraught with anguish
I would tell you the tears have yet to cease
But it would be a lie
There is still pain
But no tears left to cry
I replay the days
In a mindless fog
Looking, even now, searching for what I did wrong
Pushing for signs that I missed
The waiting froze me in time
Anesthetizing my desires
Numbing my sorrows

Blue Flame

Anger chokes my fragile mind
Wispy tendrils crushing my voice
Pressure building
I hear blood rushing
Muffling the sound of peace
Boiling into rage
Whispers become shouts
Breathing, an irritation

The need for isolation
Grows so strong

When did it become like this
When did I become like this

Calvary

When I sit
And put pen to paper
I search for something profound to say
I search and come up empty
Why do words evade me
Escape me
When the profound consumes my every waking moment
I wake up each morning
In spite of the world
In spite of myself
And it means nearly nothing
I carry people through life
Entertaining
Educating
Building better people
To ferry themselves through life
And it carries virtually no weight
In the grand scheme of things
The most profound things
Are ordinary,
Everyday acts
Of living

Filigree

So much of this life has been dressed up
It's hard to know what was real
Were you really proud?
Did you really love me?
Were you happy at all?

The veil between truth and reality is thin
It shines like crystal in the light
But shatters quickly with a stiff wind

Serene Sea

So much of the time
I have to convince myself that
My own existence is essential
Consistently assuring myself that
My presence is indispensable
I have to remind myself that
I can choose all of me
That my demons
Have a place amidst this sea.

Overcast

Over and over
I imagine choosing them,
My family.
But everything gets cloudy
Judgments on what is best
Manifest the unfavorable
Convictions about what's right
Prove wrong in the end
And we suffer beneath the veil
And find no relief
No release
From the guilt
When I finally choose me
For my own sake

Stormy Ridge

There is a moment before every storm
Clouds build
into the dense night of blue
A wall of chaos awaits
But right where you are it is still,
There is a charge in the air,
Mounting thunderous power,
A wild rage seeping slowly into the air

Blue Odyssey

A long journey lies ahead
Much harder is the one behind me
Anguish recites history in gray hues
Trials shaded in deep blue
Buried in the cracks are
Flashing specks of white
Beacons that guided my ship
Tethered to the shallows now
I am frightened of the wide-open sea
To continue on this way.
Afraid to begin at all.

IV

Reconciliation

My mother loves me better now
It took years of therapy
Hers, mine, ours
And distance, space
We built a bridge between who we are now
Shaped by the sins of our past
And marked with the trials of our lives

Bravely we embrace each other
A rock for the other
We press on
In love

Dear Dad

I spent a lot of time in therapy
Making peace with my past
But the man who was supposed to love me most
Was haunting my future
So my therapist told me to write him a letter
I remember wondering what I would say
Until the day I sat down to write
The pain, the heartache splashed words on the page

Dear Dad

I wish that I could tell you all the things that you did right, but they get lost in all the things you did wrong. I wish I could tell you how you are supposed to love your kids unconditionally, but I know you think you already do. I wish I could tell you that you aren't supposed to cause us pain, but I know you won't remember it the way I do. I know you won't remember shouting in my face, tears running out of my eyes, to get out of your house when I was just trying to stop a fight. I wish I could tell you all the things I need to say, but I know you don't care.

But most of all I wish that you could have been the type of father that everyone talks about and every girl dreams about, but I know you can't change. I hope there will be enough time to make everything right, but I know it's already too late.

Magic Wand

Fairy Tales
Fair maidens
Handsome princes
Fairy godmothers
Happily ever after
And magic wands
These are the things
that little girls' dreams are made of

Paid bills
Greek Islands
Wooded mountains
White beaches
Cool breezes
Vacations on
Saturday, Sunday, and
Monday
Are what real dreams are made of

A Note Left Unread

To whom it may concern:

Stop asking me to “do it for the kids.”

I’ve done it for the kids. I’ve stayed awake for 20 hours for the kids. I’ve spent hours on costumes, activities, and nonsense for the kids. I’ve driven hours and hours, miles and miles, to rescue the kids from places I didn’t want to go. My whole life is “for the kids” and not a single one is my own.

But it's those kids I worry for; the ones who have not yet ventured earthside. The ones who have no idea who they are yet or how much they are loved. I am scared for those kids. Because when I have done everything I can “for the kids” what will be left for my own.

Nothing but a husk of a woman. The woman they are supposed to call mom.

Prelude

I was nothing.

With you,
I am zero plus infinity.

That's everything.

A Place to Rest

In the midst of discord
I found a calm in you
A pure heart to hold my own
You offered the peace of authenticity
You provided love without fear

You waited for me
Pursued me patiently
Endured every crying fit
Indulged every silent afternoon
When no words would come

You stood by until I was ready
To let you love me

Ask the Cosmos

I spent nights searching the stars
In the dead heat of summer
Searching for the words to describe the feeling I get
When you pull me closer while you sleep
How you hold my hand at every backyard bonfire
How you caress my back during every midnight brunch.

I would cross the universe, scour the seas
To declare the forever of my feelings
If I only had the words

Bit of Heaven

Melt me into your arms
Hold on a little longer
Let me breathe deep into your chest
Resting in your warmth
As you cradle my head
I soften with each passing moment
Dissolving into this piece of heaven

Baby's Breath

and roses. White roses
When you walk down the aisle
In the dead of winter
How warm the fairy lights will be
The baby's breath like
Flourishes among the wooden benches
Draped in burlap, wrapped in lace
Suits pressed and perfectly set
With white handkerchiefs
And baby's breath
Always baby's breath
To remind you
How precious this moment is
How delicate you are
How new life is.

Complete

Tú eres mi otro yo,
My other me,
The reflection of myself that I love

We are bound to each other
Made for each other
By the universe

We are two halves of the same being

I can't wait to spend my life loving us.

Blending

Agony and joy
The fabric of the universe
Eternally woven together
Each a stronghold all its own
A haven from the other
Bliss lusts for the chaos of torture
To give her essence life
Misery cries out
Desperately seeking alleviation
We are a portrait
Of hopeless grief and expectant cheer
Pointless shame and auspicious praise
Bind us together
An amalgamation of tragedy and fortune

A comedic existence

Kimono

I take my tea in the garden
The Sakura cherry blossoms dancing
Delighting in the wind
Petals falling all around
The enlightened lotus sits upon the water
The water babbles over shallow rock beds
I am free

Allison Thomas received a Bachelor's Degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Texas A&M in 2017. She received a Master's in Education from the University of Texas- Rio Grande Valley in December of 2022 as well as a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from The University of Texas at El Paso. Allison taught 4th grade Writing in Oklahoma City from 2017-2019. In 2019, Allison returned home to central Texas where she taught 4th grade English Language Arts and Reading for 3 years. She is currently teaching English at the High School level as well as coaching.

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