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## A Million Little Griefs

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A MILLION LITTLE GRIEFS

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A MILLION LITTLE GRIEFS

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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MASTER OF ARTS

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## Preface

When you acquire a new lens to interpret the world, the old lens falls away and will never fit again. A youthful body is abandoned for stretch marks and cellulite as signs that the body has given of itself for another. The body holds memories with scars, left with no choice but to let go. A mother's days are filled with joy and sorrow that require a similar approach. Even the most treasured memories are tinged with grief as they are released into the past. *A Million Little Griefs* is a poetry collection, consisting of both fixed and free form poetry, that explores themes of time, place and identity through my experiences and observations as a young mother living cross-culturally in Malawi, Africa. The book is divided into the three sections, Embrace, Ground, and Release (EGR,) which create a cyclical trajectory that serves as a guide for walking through transitions and new experiences. This essay explores the writing process for *A Million Little Griefs*. It begins with the origin story and historical background. Next, there is an overview of the book including the project scope and the audience. After this, I describe my poetics and revision process, including the choices of organizational structure and story, and the poetic devices of repetition, imagery, point-of-view, rhythm, and voice. Finally, I describe several poets that inspired me, and conclude with recommendations for the future.

I began the Online Master of Fine Arts program to create this book. I was a stay at home mom, home-schooling my children and relishing it. But I was also a writer, and I missed the days of devoting time and energy to my craft. This is the challenge that many women face as they enter motherhood, and the self takes a new form. We renegotiate boundaries and integrate our previous selves into a new life. I chose to fully invest myself into the mother role, and to cherish every moment that I had teaching and growing along with my children. In the process of doing so, I discovered that I had created a false dichotomy between the art of motherhood and the art of writing. Furthermore, I found that when I did

not spend time and energy on my creative life, I abandoned a core part of my identity. The only way to be the best version of myself, and to live the example that I wanted to be for my children, was to remain faithful to my craft. This book began as a memoir to recollect my experience of cross-cultural life as a young mother in Zomba, Malawi.

I moved out of the United States after receiving my undergraduate degree. I was recovering from a major heartbreak when I received an opportunity to work in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya. It was in Nairobi that I met my husband, Ryan. A year after getting married, we moved from a city with a population of 8,000,000, to the town of Zomba, Malawi with a population of around 80,000. We remained Christian Missionaries, though our roles took different forms. While I had a full-time job organizing volunteers in Nairobi, my role in Malawi was mainly in the home. From the mbawa (mahogany) trees that lined the Main Street of the town to the daily outdoor vegetable market, everything was different from the fast-paced life of Nairobi. In addition, I was seven months pregnant and had to make decisions quickly to prepare for labor and delivery. I became a mother for the first time in a new country, with a new culture, a new language, and a new community. Sometimes, we get to choose the shape that our scars will take.

When my first child was born, I rearranged my former schedule of sleeping and eating along with my identity. Hints of this shift came long before the baby was born, as I researched things like “How many cups of coffee can I drink while pregnant,” or, “Can I eat deli meat in the third trimester?” This continued after I gave birth, as I meticulously read labels and scanned the shelves for triclosan in toothpaste that could pass into breastmilk, careful not to taint the fresh life that was in my care. Even with nine months to prepare, nothing teaches like experience. I explore these ideas in “Cognitive Biases.” This poem is inspired by an image of the four categories of strategies that the mind uses to process something that doesn’t fit into its former worldview. I connect these ideas with the image of

an avocado, my experience of learning a new culture, and my expectations of what motherhood would be like. In Fact #5 I write, “THERE: Do not consume: cold lunch meat, too much coffee, alcohol, NSAIDS, sushi. Do not clean the litter box, do not sleep on your back./ HERE: Do not talk about your pregnancy, do not wear tight clothing that reveals the curves, do not eat eggs, do not cook with salt.” (7) These descriptions compare advice given from the United States and from Malawi and reveal the assumptions and priorities of each culture. They are also significant things that I thought about as I prepared to become a mother.

As I grew along with my child, I found a new rhythm, and began the search for a new sense of identity. The combination of hormones and lack of sleep brought up emotions ranging from ecstasy to despair, often disconnected from a rational thought. Slowly I learned that emotions are my friends; clues to help me name and listen to the river underneath the tears. I explored this attention to my internal world in “Running Out.” The poem revolves around the idea of scarcity, and creates the image of a child inside of the mother’s body. It ends with the line, “The child in my chest walks around blindly, fears disintegration.”(31) This serves to show that many of the wild emotions that arise during the post-partum period often reflective of one’s inner child that needs to be attended.

Anyone who has lived outside of their home country knows that when you enter a new place, you discover a distinctive version of yourself. Who I am in Malawi is different from who I am in California, and different from who I am in Cape Town. This is diagnosable only as normal. When a new role and a new environment are combined, there is also a shift in purpose and in person. While most of us would like to think that we have an effect on the location that we are in, we are equally as shaped by the space around us. As I became a mother in Malawi, I was invited to discover who I was in that unique setting, in that particular season. I explore this idea in “Pre-departure.” This poem is based on a photograph

of my husband and I before we boarded the airplane to Malawi. The fourth stanza begins with line, “Does a butterfly remember/the long slender body of the caterpillar/pressed against the chrysalis//as enzymes consume its former self?”(2) The image of the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly symbolizes the anticipation of an identity shift.

Eight years later my family, which had grown to five members, moved from Zomba to Lubbock, Texas. This was our first move away from the continent of Africa. Away from the continent that people say, “gets in your blood.” This statement offers a whimsical view of Africa, views the continent as a whole, and speaks to the magic and mystery of how a place can make us feel alive. It is as true of Africa as it is of any location that you experience long enough to feel a remembrance of home. I wrote “The Space in Between” about this experience of leaving Malawi after working hard to feel a sense of belonging. The first stanza begins, “Spaces in between mark belonging like fire on skin./I walk away willingly from a place called home./Speak goodbyes to grocery stores and hidden corners/I thought no one had found.” (67) This poem explores how familiarity with space is part of what helps to create a sense of belonging. I began the Online MFA program a year before leaving Malawi, as I asked myself the question, “What strings could I use to weave together these fractured experiences?” As a writer, there are no better strings than words.

Every year I choose a word. Rather than a list of goals, or a list of things to avoid, my word serves as a plot line; a reminder of my path, and a way to focus. I stand on these words as sacred steppingstones as I participate in the unfolding story around me. The word does not always arrive instantaneously. Sometimes I don’t know what it will be until a few weeks into the new year. Three words from the last ten years are significant markers of my experience. More than just a memory, these words have formed a trajectory. Embrace, Ground, Release.

Like all stories, these pages are full of paradox. Full of experiences and images that mark a search for identity, a search for purpose, and a search for the Divine in the middle of

the very, very ordinary. I am continually followed by questions of space, time and meaning. What can I learn? Will there be enough? How will I respond? Will I see everything and everyone as my teachers – my children, the baobab tree, the Zomba dam, the tomato seller in the corner stall at the market? I explore these thoughts in “Solicited Advice.” This poem pulls together the advice I received about motherhood and missionary life, with my own observations on its effect on my identity. This first line of the second stanza opens with, “They didn’t say that it could stretch me open wide, long after the body has healed.”(14) These experiences have shaped and shaded the lens with which I view the world, broken down old understandings for newer, more expansive ways of seeing. Of course, there is always a choice as these lessons come: to resist or receive.

The scope of this book focuses on the EGR cycle that I observed during these experiences. “Embrace” focuses on the pregnancy, the birth, and what is commonly called the fourth trimester, the first season of the life with a newborn child. “Ground” focuses on smaller details and images, connecting the self to the land and the people and things around it. It is the central chapter of the book, making sense of the transition experience. “Release,” as the final section, re-introduces things beyond the control of the self, and offers the suggestion that letting go is the only way to move forward.

While my original purpose was to create a memoir for personal use, I realized through the writing process that there is a larger audience. This happened through conversations with my colleagues and professors, and through interactions with Vivian Gornick’s *The Situation and the Story*. I discovered that the experience I wanted to write about was the situation, not the story itself. Hannah Ardent, author of *The Crying Book*, writes that “The story reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events.”(2) The story was a journey of processing change and transition that anyone who has ever lived a new place would be able to connect to. This step helped me to identify some of the audiences as my



thesis committee, third culture individuals, members of my host culture (Malawi), and my own family, including my husband and children whom I mention throughout the book.

By the time I realized this, I had already put together a significant amount of material for this book. In addition, this was around the same time that I was receiving peer feedback from my colleagues in Thesis 1. Thus, the next task was to create a structure, revise existing poems and create new material that would help achieve the overall desired effect of the book. During revisions I worked on the organization of the book, the point-of-view, the engagement with poetic devices, and the development of voice.

One of the magnificent things about poetry is the way that it can gently guide the reader along a path from the concrete to the abstract, and back again. The way that an observation of a grasshopper can lead to questions surrounding the purpose of life. In addition, poetry is the perfect container for paradox; holding multiple emotions simultaneously to create an experience that mirrors the experience of life.

My own poetics begins with observation. Paying attention to the symbols around me, I notice patterns. I notice how the external reveals what is internal. This is the poet's eye. Years ago, I worked in a slum community in Nairobi, Kenya, called the Mathare Valley. One day, a young girl named Raheema, whom I had gotten to know over the course of several months, brought me an orange. Oranges were imported and expensive, and Raheema lived in a shanty with a woman who cared for multiple children who were not her own. As she handed it to me, I recalled a moment from the screen adaptation of the book *Little Women*, where Jo ate an orange while she wrote letters to her family. I remember the way that she savored the process of peeling and eating the orange, with every capillary bursting in her mouth. The connection of that, to this, and the lessons that we learn in the process. Though the poem inspired by this interaction did not end up in this collection, this was the beginning of my intentional pursuit of poetry. Or rather, the way poetry pursued me.

In this example there is the juxtaposition of economic levels and opportunity, and exploration of the things that influence our view of ourselves and the world. Where else can these things be explored other than poetry, without the need to wrap things up with a bow? While poetry can leave loose ends hanging, I am captivated by the magic of finding the final line. The way that poetry ebbs and flows in rhythm and cadence, leading the reader in a flow of energy that subsides, or makes its final mark, in the last image or line. One example is in my own work is in, "Release." The poem winds down the page as a river, and concludes with the last line running away from the river and off of the shape, "The fish swim away, the girl cries." (49) The placement echoes the meaning of the poem as the girl feels the conflicting emotions of letting the fish go to live a better life. This is also a shadow of the journey of a mother.

One of the initial things that I struggled with was the organization of the book. By the end, it went through three stages of transformation. To begin, I created three general categories of pieces. They were based on experiences of birth and early motherhood, places and objects in Malawi, and reflections on the deforestation of the forest surrounding Zomba dam. Initially I envisioned that the dam would serve as a metaphor and guiding image for the book.

To provide background, the town of Zomba is located at the bottom of the Zomba Plateau. On the plateau there is a dam, surrounded by a forest. The dam was created to provide water to Zomba and the surrounding villages. It was created under the condition that the trees would not be cut down, in order to prevent it from filling with silt. Because of the need for firewood and charcoal for cooking, as well as because of the demand and high price for wood, these instructions were ignored. During the years that I lived in Zomba I watched the trees disappear until the mountainside was nearly bare. I wanted to explore this image in connection with the breaking down of the self in motherhood. I envisioned writing about how

the old ways of life are broken down, and how vital it is that boundaries of the self are attended to. However, in doing so I discovered that it was only one narrative. While I included several poems from these earliest selections, there was no personal connection and they felt forced and out of place. The image of the dam became a strong image to use throughout the book, but was not expansive enough to provide the overall structure.

Next, I experimented with seasons as well as classifications such as “people, places, things,” to organize the book. However, this again felt too forced and arbitrary, and did not seem to connect to the overall message. During this time, I was introduced to the book *Blood Dazzler* by Patricia Smith. This book was inspirational both in its content and in its organization. *Blood Dazzler* is arranged chronologically, and follows the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. There are two poems placed towards the beginning and the end entitled “Katrina,” that give voice to Katrina. They are central poems of the book and offer a distinguishable voice from the other characters. In particular the last line of the second Katrina reads, “All I ever wanted to be was a wet, gorgeous mistake. A reason to crave shelter.” (91) The placement of the poems up to this point create both a logical movement as well as a swell of emotions that mimic the rise of the water and its waves. They are arranged to tell a story. While my book spans a larger period of time, I gleaned the power of placement in storytelling from *Blood Dazzler*.

Lastly, I furthered the idea of chronological organization by weaving it together with my chosen words of the year. This worked as a guiding structure for the book, because it followed the chronological journey of my time in Malawi, and my journey of motherhood. More than that, it mapped my internal experiences and the progress of moving from one point to another. I had eight words to work with, which was too many for the scope of this project. I whittled them down, grouped them together, and found the three that encompassed the rest: “Embrace,” “Ground,” and “Release.” In doing so I recognized a pattern that I communicated

in several poems: The consistent importance of being attentive to the present moment, while simultaneously letting go. Interestingly, this is the very thing that I attempt to incorporate into my own spiritual practice. Phillip Lopate notes that this is one of the purposes of writing as a whole, with his belief that “there is some organic thread to the things that happen to us, which lurks patiently in experience, hoping to be found out.” (79)

One of the central pieces of my spiritual life is a practice called Centering Prayer. As a meditative approach to prayer, one chooses a sacred word. This word should be simple, and not loaded with pre-existing ideas. For example, words like “calm,” “here,” or “now.” This word is set apart, and not generally shared with others. Once the word is identified, you sit in a comfortable position and allow yourself to be present and attentive to the Divine Presence in and around you. When thoughts come and you become distracted, you practice letting go of them by using the sacred word. A helpful image to ground this practice involves imagining that you are looking up from the bottom of a river. Every thought is a boat that floats by on top of the water. Rather than fighting the thoughts, you accept them and let them go, focusing back on the Presence. Eventually, the word becomes unnecessary as you become familiar with the practice of letting go. (Bourgeault 39) The mystical tradition of Christianity views Jesus as the ultimate example of this practice of release in his death. Similarly, practicing the art of letting go in our everyday lives leads to more awareness of our truest identity, and prepares us for the moment of our death. As I chose my words for each year, I was unaware that putting them together would create a cyclical pattern towards the same idea of letting go.

After I chose the organization for this book, I continued to work on revising the central story and themes. Several of the poems in this book began as diary entries. Even after writing half of the book, there was a focus on individual narratives rather than on the overarching message. In the process of identifying the central ideas I discovered that there was more than one story. There was a story of an immigrant trying to make sense of a new landscape, and a

story of a new mother trying to make sense of an identity, in the midst of a shifting interior and external landscape. These two things echoed each other, in the same way that our external situations frequently echo our internal situations. This was also a theme that I had in mind when I began the project. However, I had trouble figuring out how to get the individual poems to connect with the theme that I wanted to explore. It wasn't until I was able to articulate the story behind each situation that I found the connection between the two. The next step was to figure out how this would show up in poetry, and to choose what poetic devices I would use to communicate it.

The first device that I chose was repetition. Two examples of this are in the poems entitled "Two Days," and "Three Days." These began as prose about the first few days of motherhood. These can be the most challenging experiences of early motherhood as the body and mind adjusts to the shifts that occur. As I reflected more on their content, I found that I wanted to echo the repetition of feeding the baby, and the intermittent occurrence of sleep. It began with repetition of the line "again and again, I wake and check the time." I received feedback that this rhythm and repetition could be emphasized if the whole line was repeated, rather than the word "again." The poem morphed into repeating the lines, "Again I wake and check the time." In addition, I delineated the difference between time as the numbers on the clock, and Time as the container in which understand reality. To do this, I capitalized the first letter when referring to time as a concept, while time on the clock remained lowercase. For example, in the first stanza I introduce the image of a clock. "Stars hold the hours thin/as I wake and check the time."(28) In the third stanza, I introduce the idea of Time. "Cold air on the small hand that/grips my warm skin/brings my attention to/the presence of Time.//"(28) These two variations of time are used in the rest of the poem, and come together in the final stanza where both appear together. "The sun begins its steady climb/her body next to mine./Again, I wake and check the time. Again I wake and check the Time."(29)

The second device that I worked with was imagery. My journey of revisions led me from the general to the specific. Much of the imagery that I used came from the natural world. “A Contraction in the Forest 1” began with an image of the movement of the trees, and the competition between the indigenous and introduced species. The opening line was “Indigenous trees should have the final say.” However, using the general idea of “trees” did not add to the imagery nor to the meaning of the poem. Rather than beginning with trees, I turned to an image of a mango and a baobab tree that contrasted nicely with the pre-existing image of the blue gum (an introduced fast-growing species) guzzling water.

I also noticed that several poems had a wide expanse of imagery. While this can be done well in poetry, it only works when the images are intentional to create a cacophony or evoke a particular emotion or message. As I revised the prose poems such as “The Birth,” I found that having a consistent image was more helpful than too many contrasting images. Both celestial images and references to water seem to flow best with the rhythm and desired outcome. For “The Birth” I focused on the flow of water, on the traffic leading to the hospital, and on the language surrounding the birth itself. This was a natural fit because of the nature of birth and fluids. It also fit with the themes introduced earlier in “A Contraction in the Forest 1.” There was a battle for the access to resources that are necessary for survival.

While there are many images surrounding water, there are also many celestial images that echo the poem, “The Announcement.” In Rivka Galchin’s *Little Labors*, she often refers to her child as “the puma.” This creates a caricature of the personality of the child, as well as the effect that it has on her. It is a strong, powerful force that changes everything. I decided to use the metaphor of a sun, or a guiding light, to refer to the child in the series of poems surrounding the entrance of the child into the world. For example, in “The Birth,” paragraph seven describes the birth moment. “My eyes fuse with the North Star, and the current

stills.”(25) The North Star is used a symbol of my attention reorienting around my daughter. This image helped to take this piece of prose from narrative to poetry.

The third device that I focused on was the point-of-view. In the process of editing, I noticed how frequently I wrote in the first person. The central first person of this book is the mother as the lyrical subject. However, I also wanted to give voice to inanimate objects and to places. I wanted to hear the voices of things that the lyrical subject interacted with. One example of this is in the poem, “Chitenje.” A chitenje is the traditional African cloth that women wear around their waist, and use for many different purposes. The poem begins with the line, “Birds fly on blue across my cotton print as we dance and shake around the/room.”(19) It explores a birth scene and a market scene, and ends with the “Strong hands scrub, and I am wrung and wrought, freed by fire of water and wind that bind me together, ready my soul.”(19) In this poem the central item of the woman’s wardrobe finds a voice, and offers perspective on culture and identity. This was an effective use of the first person.

At other times, I noticed that the first-person repetition took away from the overall theme and message. While the use of first person is natural in a book based on my experiences, I looked for other ways to communicate the same message with a different point of view. To alter the use of the first person in the poems where the mother is the lyrical subject, I took out the repeated word “I.” This removal identified that areas that needed improvement. One example of this is in the Ekphrastic, “Maternal Silhouettes.” It began with a literal description of a photo that my husband took of my pregnant silhouette standing in a forest on the mission property. In the first version, one line in the middle of the poem read, “I’m wearing stripes, tailored to/high-light new curves. I am culturally bare, not shrouded/in a billowing cloud of bright African cloth, standing on the red packed/dirt road that winds between the maize fields, disappears behind me.” After taking out the first person and allowing it to become third person, the connection developed between the land and the

woman in the picture. The revised version takes a third person point of view. “A woman stands bare, shrouded in cloth on the red packed dirt road that disappears, like the old self. Seven feet tall stalks of maize wonder if there could ever be enough, dwarfed by the blue gum trees that guzzle a thousand liters of water a day.” (15) Both the woman and the trees were searching for sustenance. They both are also a part of the reproduction of life. The trees battled for resources amongst themselves, while the woman was about to step into a new journey that would require her to search for her source of sustenance and strength. In this process, the woman became a part of the landscape itself, and reflected the theme of connection and relationship with one’s particular environment.

As I wrote, I noticed that I tended to direct my poems towards the second person. This largely reflects my inclination towards the style of Mary Oliver. She often addresses poems to the second person. One example of this is in her poem, “Lead.” It begins with the line, “Here is a story/to break your heart./Are you willing?” (146) She continues to describe a narrative of a winter loon singing. The scene culminates with the loon dead on the shore. She ends with “I tell you this/to break your heart,/by which I mean only/that it break open and never close again/to the rest of the world.” (146) Her use of the second person in this poem speaks directly to the reader with her message. As I wrote this book, I was inconsistent with who I was addressing as the second person. Sometimes it was to the reader, as in “The Shot.” (35) In this poem I introduced the second person perspective, putting the reader into the place of the narrator as the mother. The first line says, “You have come to the right place, you have come for this: A long slender needle laced with a promise..”(32) This felt like the natural point of view for this piece, to engage the reader in the narrative. At other points in the book, the second person was directed to my child, such as in “Play.” The second stanza begins, “Warm blood pulses./My body a living cord/as I watch you there...” (53) This was used to create intimacy as it describes how the relationship between the mother and the child



constantly shifts. At other times in the book, the second person is directed towards the lyrical subject. One example of this is in, “An Ode to a Home.” On Line 17 I wrote, “It’s true, you won’t want to leave. You will run at the first chance.” (68) This poem is directed at the lyrical subject to show self-reflection in the journey. It steps away from the first person that most of the book follows and offers a perspective from outside to close out the book. Through these choices I learned that the second person point-of-view can be a powerful tool when it is carefully placed.

In the second round of edits, I focused on finding ways that the rhythm of the poems could echo the rhythm of Malawian culture. In “The Way to Make a Home” I included a line that read “the way that I greet and grunt to show that I belong even while I don’t.” (20) This phrase reveals how I learned the proper places to pause and to make sounds to show active listening. Conversation in every language has its ebb and flow, and part of the way that I learned to find my place in the culture was by interpreting the cadence of conversation and finding my place within it. In Malawi, conversation flows easily. A simple greeting is a series of long questions, and individuals carefully pay attention to the person speaking. The marketplace was the perfect scene to display this. The challenge was to take the images and words that I began with, and craft them to resemble the rhythm of a conversation. After working on this poem, I went back through the rest of the book to examine what rhythm was created and if it had the intended effect.

While some poems naturally found their rhythm, such as “A Contraction in the Forest 1, and “A Contraction in the Forest 2,” others required more effort to polish. These two poems began as one with a style shift in the middle. The shift was a natural place for separation. “A Contraction in the Forest 1” focuses on the contrast of movement between the grounded trees, the narrator that walks slowly, and the woman on the motorbike. It alternates between four-line and two-line stanzas, creating a rhythm that mimics walking. “A

Contraction in the Forest 2” focuses on the breath for its rhythm. I began with the repeated line “Breathe. One. Two. Three. Four.” This changed after several editing rounds to “In. Two. Three. Four./Out. Two. Three. Four.” (23) When read aloud, it echoes both the rhythm of the four-line stanzas, and the slow pattern of breath itself.

In the process of exploring these poetic devices and identifying the themes and story of the book, I discovered the voice of the book. This voice is a part of me, but as Phillip Lopate says of his own writing, “I could only communicate an aspect of myself.”(92) It was during the revision process that I grew to hear what the part of myself that is in this book sounds like. As I chose particular images of space and water in “The Announcement,” I learned to set the tone for the voice of this poem. Once I had these images, I was able to pull similar strains of images through the rest of the book. I also chose to leave out key details of the actual narrative in order to fully engage in the experience, like in “Maternal Silhouettes.” Ultimately, the way that I found my voice was in the recognition that this book has its own tone. Like a person, it could only develop as it matured in content, form and style.

As the book progressed, I encountered things that sounded accidentally colonial. Because of my role as a Christian Missionary, I am alert to the ways that colonialism pervades both the history and current status. While this book is not a commentary on Malawi as a country, I did not want my reflections to have a tone of colonialism. One example of this is in “Cognitive Biases.” The poem originally began with a reference to how I had moved across “African countries.” I wrote this to narrate my move from Kenya to Malawi. Instead, I observed that these generalizations subtly denied the thousands of cultures and identities by grouping them into one category. This led me to pay attention to avoid language that could sound unintentionally colonial.

The voice of this book developed alongside the story. Initially I focused on the narrative and had an unclear voice. In “*The Situation and the Story*,” Gornick writes about

her experience writing a book about Egypt while living in the country. She observes that her writing mirrored the culture that she was surrounded by, and that the book did not have a clear voice. She remarks, “The problem was not detachment; the problem was I never knew who was telling the story.” (20) It has been said that there should be a certain amount of time in between the occurrence of a situation, and the writing about it. However, Gornick writes that it was the lack of a clear persona rather than a short amount of passed time that caused the book to struggle. In *To Show and To Tell*, Phillip Lopate writes that he does not follow the advice of waiting for a certain amount of time to pass. “As I go about my daily life, I’m turning it into a story.” (96) While I felt that this was true as I wrote reflections throughout the past several years, the amount of time passed worked to my advantage. It has been nine years since the first of these stories occurred, and I have grown both in self-awareness and as a writer.

This book is strongly influenced by the work of Mary Oliver. An anthology of her works, *Devotions*, highlights her journey in reverse chronological order, taking excerpts from her poetry ranging from 1963-2015. Oliver highlights themes that I also explore in my own book, such as death, vulnerability, and humanity, and connects them with images from the natural world. Her style of telling narrative stories in poetic form flows naturally, yet maintains careful stylistic elements. One example of this is her poem, “Singapore.” In this poem, she recalls an event where she walked in on a woman in an airport bathroom washing an ash tray in a toilet bowl. She begins with the line, “In Singapore, in the airport,/a darkness was ripped from my eyes./In the women’s restroom, one compartment stood open./A woman knelt there, washing something/in the white bowl.” (326) She moves from this image to the contrasting image of a bird. “A poem should always have birds in it./Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings,/Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees./A waterfall, or is that’s not possible, a fountain rising and falling./A person wants to stand in a happy place, in

a poem.”(326) She returns to the image of the woman in the bathroom, and winds up four stanzas later with the lines “Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only/the light that can shine out of a life. I mean/the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,/the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean/the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.” (327) This is the style of many of her poems. The back and forth movement between the seemingly unrelated images create a theme and evoke emotion in a way that didactic explanation cannot. This is what I keep in mind when I write narrative poems.

One example of this is in “Ground.” I was inspired by Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day.” Her poem begins with the lines “Who made the grasshopper?/This grasshopper, I mean—/the one who has flung herself out of the grass,/the one who is eating sugar out of my hand...” She ends with questions of purpose and meaning, with the final stanza as a call to action: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild, and precious life?” Since “Ground” is the title of the second section of this collection, I needed a piece that would provide the focus, and move from embracing seasons of transition and newness, towards finding a way to connect with the earth and with the new self. I did this on by focusing on the image of the ant. The second stanza begins, “Pay attention to the ant that wandered from the train,” (36) and continues to describe the situation of the ant. The next stanza reads, “What do any of us do when we are lost?/When there is no going back,/and you wander through fog/picking up one foot after another,/looking for light.”(36) These two images contrast and ask what insight the reader and the lyrical subject can learn from observing the ant.

With a different style of poetry than Oliver, Ernesto Cardenal also inspired this book through his exploration of existential and religious themes, and his use of line and logic to arrange his thoughts. I observed this in his book “*The Origin of Species and Other Poems.*” I noticed how he explored his thoughts and beliefs through poetry, integrating science, religion, philosophy and art. Though it is not considered “found” poetry, I took the phrase,

“New means something/that didn’t have to be like that” from his poem, “Gazing at the Stars with Marti.” (100) This line fit perfectly to tell the story of a spider bite, and to explore the possibilities of “what if” and acknowledge the gift of the way that things went. This line turned into the opening for “Brown Recluse.” Several poems in the final section of the collection, *Release*, are modeled after this style, exploring the combination of storytelling with images to communicate a message and trace lines of thought.

In Cardenal’s poem “The Theory of Language” he develops an origin story inspired by the words “We’re ready to leave.” (24) He follows the logic of his thoughts about these five words and explores the history of language in itself. He contemplates both the meaning of words and the syntax of language, and writes, “We gave a name to everything./Individual words came first./Names for the real and the imaginary./Naming made us human./Animals don’t name./Nor do they know their names...” (25) He links this to an exploration of how animals communicate, and of what differentiates the communication of people from animals, focusing on the evolution of the human species and landing on the larynx. “We have a ‘language organ’/it seems./Chatting over tea and cakes//nothing to do with monkeys.”(28) Next, he moves into a description of the Nicaraguan deaf mutes that created their own language in 1979, and marvels at its creation and structure. Shortly after he writes, “Miracle of the name made thing./A true mystery:/a sound and a thing./Names of things though/the concept of things.”(29) The poem ends with the repetition of the line “We are ready to leave./marvelous invention//if not/there’d be no communication among ourselves/nor with God.” (30) I was fascinated with both the structure and content of this poem. As a six-and-a-half-page poem, he connects logical thoughts with images of the body and animals to ultimately bring the reader to wonder at the metaphysical idea of the nature of language, and how we interact with the Divine. In *A Million Little Grievs*, I explore the world of birth and identity and a mother through this lens. I focus on bringing thoughts and images together to

present a series of metaphysical thoughts and questions. However, unlike Cardenal, my poetry focuses on imagery rather than direct theological questioning. For example, in the poem “Cyclone Freddy,” I explore the complex questions and emotions that arise when there is a natural disaster. I describe the scene that I read the news from in the fourth stanza. “I swivel in my chair and try to swallow./Can you hear the birds singing to the sun?/I know what it is to listen to the rain/pounding on the tin roof./”(60) The description of this scene serves to connect my experience with the general human experience of joy and life that continues even while people suddenly suffer from the result of the Cyclone. This poem holds this tension instead of attempting to provide an answer.

Looking back through the journey of this book, I can track these poems from their original versions to what they have become and can see my growth as a writer. While my knowledge and application of techniques in poetry have grown tremendously in this process, I desire to continue to study fixed forms to allow them to inform and guide future poems. Towards the end of this project, I found new ideas for content that lead me to believe I may break this collection up into mini books, and expand on them to create a three-part collection of poetry books. While this book did not encapsulate the culture in the way that I had originally imagined, it serves as a reflection of my particular experience.

While most of this book is free form poetry and prose, I also studied a wide variety of fixed forms while I was writing. I learned that when form and content fit together, it magnifies the effect of the poem itself. This is the area of poetry that I will pursue more after the completion of this program. In future revisions I would also like to see how I could take the image of the child and replace it with another image or symbol, to develop the character of the child alongside the mother.

*A Million Little Grievs* accomplishes far more than I envisioned when I began the Online MFA Program. The process of writing the preface allowed me to both reflect on my

growth as a writer, and to celebrate the people and places that inspire me. *A Million Little Griefs* is an exploration of the season of early motherhood and cross-cultural living, that centers around the themes of time, identity and belonging, reminding the reader and the author that every situation can be a gift to approach with three words in mind: Embrace, Ground, Release.

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## **Embrace**

## Pre-departure

The emerald green shirt loosely guards my belly,  
dwarfed by my upward turned lips,  
before my heart stepped out of my body.

One arm around my husband, while the other hangs,  
unaware of how a hand on the hip  
would make me look thinner.

Our bodies full of forced immunity to  
yellow fever, tetanus, typhoid and rabies;  
No questions in our eyes, only a resounding yes.

Does a butterfly remember  
the long slender body of the caterpillar  
pressed against the chrysalis

as enzymes consume its former self?  
Transformation begins as sacrifice  
that means nothing is guaranteed;

More comfortable with questions than answers.

## A Million Little Griefs

I am told that my children will grow up one day.

I don't believe it.

When every task requires an adult,  
and their favorite phrase is, "Mommy, come!"

Words land on my chest, soak the parched land that  
needs to be needed.

She took my, it's my turn, and please can I have some juice?

The wheels spin, feet pedal  
and she is off on her own.

Back and forth back and forth  
front back, back and forth.

Every letter has a sound, as she learns that MAT SAT.

Until I cannot keep up, cannot  
pre-read, cannot hear the stories  
before she tucks them away  
inside of her own imagination.

And then, I watch her face scrunch,  
crumble as we say goodbye to our home,  
our ginger cats and close friends,  
our yellow house, bright as the sun.

These days are filled with a million little griefs.  
The fresh flowers turn brittle, laughter cannot be bottled up.  
Our devices filled as we try to remember, to hold on.

To replay as she jumps on the trampoline again and again and again and again.  
To hold onto what we were never made to grasp.

# Cognitive Biases

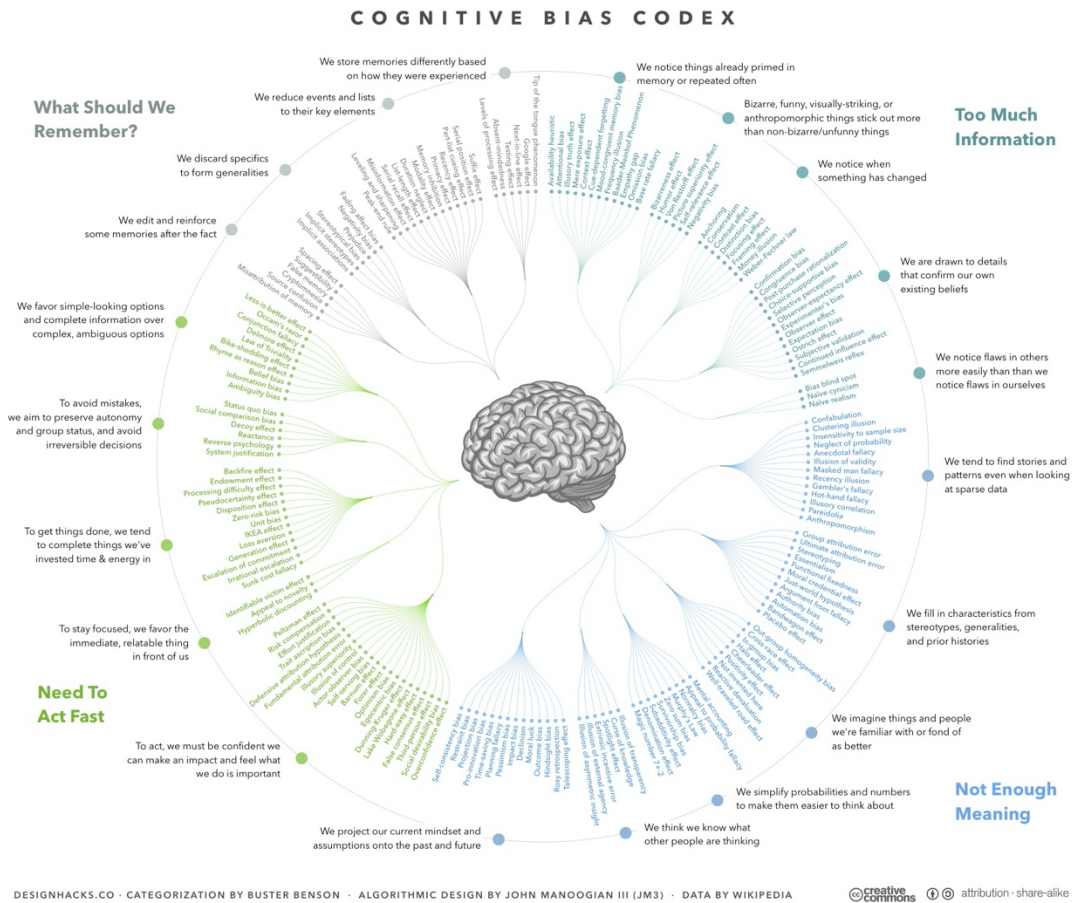


Figure 1: Designhacks.co Categorization by Buster Benson. Algorithmic Design by John Manoogian III (JM3). Data by Wikipedia. Creative Commons.

## Too Much Information

Fact #1

There are many types of cognitive biases;

a voice

that never rests. Judgements masked

as observations whisper under my

collarbone as I wander down the Rift Valley

to the Shire River, pointing out the familiar.

*Look at the tin roofs, it slithers,*

*See the brick walls! Poverty*

*isn't as bad here...*

*False!* I declare, and

the voice tries again,

*Look up, it sings,*

*Look at the trees!*

Purple jacaranda blossoms, pink tipped  
plumerias that are also called frangipanis.

(Pronounced: Fran-gee-pan-ees.)

And look at that - Avocados!

Fact # 2:

I am obsessed with avocados.

Fact #3:

Timing is everything. Pick them from the tree, set them on the counter, and wait. If you need them quickly, put them in a brown paper bag with a banana. Naturally occurring ethylene gas will kick-start the ripening process. The banana also ripens faster, no choice in self-sacrifice. This sacrifice preferred to the moment you slice through a dark form and the knife sticks.



Punctured flesh meets resistance and you bring the knife to your tongue with a sliver of light green. Taste the bitterness; swallow anyways.

Fact #4:

There are three kinds of avocados in Malawi, they are all known as *mapeyala*. I slice open an avocado, the size of my child's head.

Her brown eyes devour as I hold its cool flesh up to her face and reach for my phone.

Fact #5

There is an avalanche the first time I am pregnant - information overload, do's and don'ts.

THERE: Do not consume: cold lunch meat, too much coffee, alcohol, NSAIDS, sushi. Do not clean the litter box, do not sleep on your back.

HERE: Do not talk about your pregnancy, do not wear tight clothing that reveals the curves, do not eat eggs, do not cook with salt.

Fact #6:

Nobody makes guacamole like my grandmother, her greying hair set up in pins, her perfectly painted nails. There are three essential ingredients: avocados, Mrs. Dash's spice mix, and cottage cheese. I don't learn about other possibilities until college: mayonnaise, fresh tomatoes, minced garlic, chopped red onions.

## **Not Enough Meaning**

### Fact #7

I sit for hours, sweat glistening on my forehead, my neck, my belly button underneath my shirt where an infant rests with a belly full of breastmilk. Heat barely blocked by the cool grass roof, I look at the space where I think a clock should be as words ebb and flow, pause and grow, and I still don't understand any of it.

### Fact #8

Chichewa and Swahili are Bantu languages and maintain similarities. In Swahili, Kazi is work. In Chichewa, Mkazi is wife.

### Fact # 9

They are watching me too, the children more clearly than adults, and before I had an infant of my own to hold, I imagined one would be in my lap, would make me feel at home.

Instead I watch, torn in two and drawn in by the chorus, my body swaying like a field of maize ready for harvest.

### Fact #10

Rats are skewered and fried on a stick,  
six, seven, eight in a row. Rats,  
escaping flames of fields that burn. Fields  
that burn from fire to cleanse. Fire  
that consumed empty stalks of maize. Empty  
because it was harvested. Harvested

as the cornerstone of the plate, the meal,  
the family, the home. A meal without maize  
is not a meal, everything that I eat is *relish* -  
the extra, the greens, the beans, the proteins,  
and none of it, with all of its nutrients and  
nourishment, could replace the meal, replace  
the rats, replace the images that burn  
in my head as I lie awake on the foam mattress,  
churning inside.

### **We Need to Act Fast**

Fact # 11

“To act we must be confident we can make an impact and feel what we do is important”

Fact # 12

A child that is not mine shows up at my door, a face half swollen and puffy eyes. *Did you show your mom?* I ask. *Yes*, she replies. Through broken language I discover she was stung by a bee. I open my fully stocked medicine cabinet, grab my imported Benadryl, do a quick check on dosage and hand it to her with a glass of water.

Fact #13

Traffic slows and instinct has taught me (for better or worse) to reach for the door lock. Windows up, we inch along to see a crowd of bodies surrounding something that I am

curious about, something I do not want to see. Look away, I remember, as I recall the tires and the body and the scene I can never forget. Look away, look away, look away.

Fact # 14

All it takes is a phone call to make the heart race, the blood pump. Or maybe it's the other way around. The blood pumps as the heart races to know what to do when the toddler's wrist is slit at the veins, and all I can do is hold it tight. It will teach me the value of butterfly band-aids as we watch the needle stab over and over to find the right spot to close the wound. I wrap and unwrap the hand, praying healing and making a mental note to never do this again.

### **What Should We Remember?**

Fact #15:

In Malawi, I learn avocado should be eaten sweet; Salt traded for sugar.

Fact # 16

I learn quickly never to buy my fruit and vegetables at the grocery store, starving myself of the pleasure of walking through outdoor markets with their dirt floors, friendly sellers, and picturesque stands. The secret to any welcome is to always bring a child.

Fact # 17

Memory is faulty. My child's head is bigger than the avocado.

Fact # 18

My weekly to do list has become repetitive, the things I will never finish. The things I will finish and do again. I will cross things off to write them down with another pen on another paper, for another week: Go to the ATM. Vegetable shopping at the market. Pay the dairy milk bill. Keep up on cloth diapers. Research age appropriate games. Google child development. Wash the laundry. Hang the clothes. Apply for my driver's license. Set up the nursery. Organize the baby's toys. Schedule coffee with X. Brainstorm Brainstorm Brainstorm. Write a poem. Go for a run. Go for a walk. Make a friend. Practice Chichewa. Practice again. Practice Practice Practice. Call mom. Call dad. Call grandma. Call a friend. Top up my phone. Pay for the internet. Go for a walk. Cut fresh flowers. Learn another word. And another. Put post-its on my ceiling and doors, write a word for the year on my journal, on the wall, on my forehead, on my hands. Be present when I am breastfeeding, be present, present, present. Take pictures, make them last, share them with family. Where does the time go?

## The Announcement

Two small lines mark *beginning*

a galaxy

swirls of atoms and dark matter and

mostly

empty space.

All is quiet and dark,

mostly

water.

beans

and

tomatoes

and

avocado

and

potato chips

an elixir

filtered through the womb into

something

delightful.

There is something to that.

I am no longer a child because I am carrying a child,

potential

unwritten.

## Nebula

Swoosh and swirl as sheets  
of water fold around a spark.

Placenta, the god that saves her,  
feeds and sustains her, filters and fills  
her with glory, blood and pulse.  
The pulse, the whirl, the mother inside.

A flowing river ushers her in, or a dam  
to be prodded and emptied forces her  
to seek shelter. Or else,  
a perfect silhouette in an embryonic sac.

Can she know where the water will take her?  
When the fire will call her home where  
the dirt and mud and red embers fly  
from the axle to etch the word: home.

Breath announces her entry,  
silently grieves the womb.

## Solicited Advice

I was told that motherhood was one of the greatest joys that could be experienced.

I was told that you are physically tired when they are young, and emotionally tired as they grow.

I was told that I should paint the walls in my house. It was worth the extra cost.

I was told to indulge. Buy the two-rack dish dryer.

I was told to put words on my walls. Determine the feel of my home.

I was told that when you have children, a piece of you steps out. You will walk around forever with your heart in several places.

They didn't say that it could stretch me open wide, long after the body has healed.

They didn't say that I would need to draw the lines myself.

They didn't say that when you are tired, creativity is the first thing to go.

They didn't say that the medicine would be the canopy of trees; the antidote to a cacophony of desires.

I learn that it takes a while, that the journey of culture shock is not linear but cyclical.

I learn that it is possible to love another human, and another, and another.

I learn to be cautious; to walk on water.



## Maternal Silhouettes

It is a rare stage of life when people  
ask to be photographed sideways, preparing  
for the world to be turned upside down. A chin  
points down to the unseen ground. Stripes highlight  
shifting outlines of the self. A woman stands bare, shrouded  
in cloth on the red packed dirt road that disappears, like the old self.  
Seven feet tall stalks of maize wonder if there could ever be enough, dwarfed  
by the blue gum trees that guzzle a thousand liters of water a day. She hosts the  
galaxy, the perfect sunburst; a silhouette of the belly's growth in the low light of  
the afternoon. Tap roots grow from her calloused feet and mingle with the blue  
gum in the desperate race to survive. A reminder of the heat that comes,  
from below. This warm quiet space a sanctuary from eyes that always  
watch. The fields hold the breath, and cool sweat drips  
across the line that deepens between the eyes.  
In wild shadows, the forest watches.

## Yellow Book

Black ink sears the yellow book  
the minute weight was numbered and  
the very first needle scarred  
transcendental skin.

A shifting line of mass.

Every date: a nurse, a number.

Tracked and dragged along in case  
you lean towards the dark.

Who chose your name when you were born into the light?

Your mother, your uncle, your ancestors, the weather when you were born?

You who are called clouds, you who are called wind.

You who are called rain, do you long for a sunny day?

You who are called nails, you who are called trouble.

A name shifts things,  
disintegrates boundaries,

knits shards together underneath the sun.

Hasn't it always been this way?

Knotted on your mother's back,  
a golden promise.

## Hospital Packing List 1

Yellow Book	signed
Birth Plan	red
Towels	for after
Soap	
Mosquito Net	big enough for two
	keep her within eyesight
	hold your ground
Bottled water	
Juice boxes	
Snacks	include everyone
Coke	for that final push
Large nightgown	your trash, another's treasure
Fresh clothes (mom)	a different size
Fresh clothes (dad)	
Peri-Bottle	
Super pads	
Baby's clothes	
Baby blanket	
Baby hat	
Baby socks	
Baby mittens	
Cash	

## Hospital Packing List 2

Yellow book

Charcoal

you wait for signs of labor

come early don't wait. You will be fined if

you give birth before you arrive.

Chitenjes

sheets, towels, blankets and baby carrier

Baby clothes

Baby blanket

Baby hat

Baby socks

Clothes (mom)

Soap

hand-wash your bloodied chitenje and

hang it dry before you board the motorbike

village bound

### **Chitenje: A Cloth's Confession**

Birds fly on blue across my cotton print as we dance and shake around the room. Wind whips through my threads, and I move to the rhythm of her hips, sway to the summer song. Surrounded in ululation, patterns rub together in praise. In fear and reverence raise me up high above the chest, shrouding signs of new life.

Unwrap me in time, the miracle is this: I hold fast the infant to the mother, cleave them close, lull the child to sleep. At her first breath, I am there, wrapped around her body as she finds her mother's breast. Swing her to the back and hold.

A motorbike rumbles and carries her home to baked brick walls, the cool dirt floor. I lay here now, face flat underneath prostrate legs crossed at the ankle as she listens, sharing secret laughter. I hear the ground whisper, feel the thunder in my threads. I breathe in fumes and hold the memory of freshly roasted maize. I take in what she cannot bear. Go ahead and twist me as the heart is pierced with news and coins are traded for cooking oil. Strong hands scrub, and I am wrung and wrought, freed by fire of water and wind that bind me together, ready my soul.

## The Way to Make a Home

The way to travel is easy;  
lake sand under your toes.  
Where do they teach you  
how to make a home?

It takes time to notice the way  
the dirt under my nails is a bit me, a bit not.  
I greet and grunt, a subtle nod.  
Find the right words, eyebrows raise and drop.

I mistake *land* for *gland*,  
fill empty pages with passport stamps,  
choose to come, choose to stay under  
the shadow of a headlamp.

I walk outdoor halls: wicker basket, small bills,  
a folded paper of written words,  
eggplants and zucchini: a new sense of thrill,  
arranged in piles, I enunciate like a child.

Mangoes get under my skin and cry for more,  
the sweetest part of flesh always closest to the seed.  
A bunch of three beetroots; the way it is before

my fingers are stained, the way the heart bleeds.

Water drips from our faces, weeps  
into chests and armpits. Time  
notices the crown of light around the hijab  
of the tomato seller, the fresh paint on the store.

I wait for the three second gaze,  
the slowness of an uninterrupted greeting.  
*You have been missing!* I want them to say;  
to mark this day with eyes and words.

## A Contraction in the Forest 1

The mango and the baobab  
should have the final say;  
the blue gum resents this, resists,  
sticks down its roots, and guzzles.

My steps are slow, I take no care  
to hide my shape, unaware.

Unlike her, cloth wrapped around  
a swelling middle, tucked underneath  
the breast, zooming on a motorbike  
to usher in new life.

I hear the song the grass has sung,  
its face always towards the sun.

What was this land before  
foreign feet, settling fields,  
steamboats and airplanes?  
Sixty, one hundred, one thousand words before?

My steps are slow, I walk with care,  
transfixed inside the baobab's stare.



## A Contraction in the Forest 2

The back aches and the stomach quivers,  
I pause on the dirt path, steady myself  
on the rough bark of the mango tree and  
breathe: in the nose, out the mouth.

In. Two. Three. Four.

Out. Two. Three. Four.

All is well and I return to the green,  
return to the grass and lie  
on a bed of aphrodisiac plants  
that surround my child with love.

In. Two. Three. Four.

Out. Two. Three. Four.

What if I bleed, run out of time and  
am ushered into a crowded place, underneath  
a bed because there is no space, or worse:  
on the bed while someone labors on the floor?

In. Two. Three. Four.

Out. Two. Three. Four.

Come back, now, to the stomach as it tightens,  
the back that burns with envy:  
Take off my shoes, this is Holy Ground.  
Feel the dirt grind beneath my toes.

In. Two. Three. Four.

Out. Two. Three. Four.

Relax the jaw and slide  
into the swaying of the maize,  
its rhythm undulating  
to everything, in time.

In. Two. Three. Four.

Out. Two. Three. Four.

I am far from the plants,  
hidden from their healing,  
tangled in a web of injections and cords  
longing to bathe in the sunshine.

## The Birth

Dust clouds surround the car as groans escape my body that lurches back and forth on an ocean of potholes. Only one road leads to the hospital, teeming with taxis and trucks, cars and motorbikes. We open windows for fresh air, take the shortcuts and breathe in the runoff on the outskirts of the urban sprawl. Eyes open, shut.

I swim in a current of contractions, while the traffic stills. When the leader of the land travels, the waters will part. Never mind the cars rushing with places to be, the chaos left in its wake. We count eras by the minute, we breathe by the second.

We arrive after three hours, welcomed by our doula to the white walled hospital, ushered into the Mphatso Ward. Mphatso. Gift.

The head nurse instructs: *This is my hospital, you will do things my way.* We protest, show her the ink of the doctor's signature. *He is not here right now; You will do as I say.* My doula takes over, as I sail away until the current shoves me into the strong arms of my husband.

Back and forth, we rise and fall. There is no time outside of these walls, walking on sacred lines that blur eternity, where I learn to breathe underwater.

My eyes fuse with the North Star, and the current stills. I am mesmerized by blue that I thought would be brown. Ripples bounce off walls, and wet cheeks swirl in the warmth of our love.

This is the miracle, everything woven together.

Legs shake and the body refuses to stand. The nurse is tired too, washes me in the birthing bed and leaves with my bloody nightgown.

I am alone on the bed that holds my shifting weight. Relishing the victory, my body weeps in praise.

## The Recovery Room

The cold tile beneath my calloused feet,  
a soft sound slips from your mouth.  
My chest leaps in an ancient language that whispers, *you*.

I unwrap the net from around your crib,  
surround you with this shape shifting form,  
face the true north.

I hold this space between my toes,  
feel your flesh with my fingertips  
until we melt.

Eyelids close in a cove  
I will come to again and again.

I refuse to lose it to the waves  
that threaten to toss us  
over and over and over and out.

We stand, for now, safely on the shore  
where I whisper secrets that I heard  
from golden weavers in their nest.

Words that will call you back here,  
where you will not recall the chilled tile.

You will not see the blood I wiped away,  
barely remembering the first welcome song.

## Two Days

I lie near her swaddle  
our bodies aligned.  
Stars hold the hours thin  
as I wake and check the time.

At 10:03 she chimes with  
her quivering chin.  
Again I wake and check the time,  
again I wake and check the time.

Cold air on the small hand that  
grips my warm skin  
brings my attention to  
the presence of Time.

At 12:15 blurry bodies  
meld a paradigm.  
Again I wake and check the time,  
again I wake and check the time.

Perfection is framed by  
tendrils of brown hair,  
while sparks fan an ember

beyond its welcome Time.

At 4 a.m. my eyes are blind

to boundaries and lines.

I close my eyes

and reach out for Time.

The sun begins its steady climb,

her body next to mine.

Again I wake and check the time.

Again I wake and check the Time.

## Three Days

The concrete is cold.

A newborn cries for milk; Breasts leak on the bathroom floor.

I receive the welcome rest from sitting upright on the toilet.

My chest caves under an invisible weight, keeps me on  
the concrete, cold.

*Is it always like this?*

An engine rumbles.

My eyes close, searching for a compass; a sign.

My body that bore a star is now a silent void.

Squeezed into the backseat, they hand me a swaddle as  
the engine rumbles,

*Who knows what to do?*

Her hand is warm,

wrapped around my finger, she pulls me to the present.

I hang on and draw shapes in the stars,

the chilled outlines of bodies feel

her hand, warm.



## Running Out

The power has been out for two days, and our clothes smell like mildew. I sit on the khonde, and rock her in my arms. I am invincible before the child is born. Now she is outside of me, and I am running out. I cannot do enough for her in a world where the tiniest bugs can kill, and she is absorbing everything about me. My love for books, my two webbed toes and my worry.

I cannot control my body, my child, the mosquitos, the water. It is postpartum depression and a Urinary Tract Infection – both unidentified, untreated. A bacteria ravages my body, laughs in resistance at improper treatments. For more than three months, I walk in a fog and see scarcity everywhere.

A small child staggers inside my chest, I can't do this. This is the sign of a woman entering the transition stage of labor; signaling to the birth partner that the moment is near. But what does it mean once the baby is born? The child in my chest walks around blindly, fears disintegration.

## The Shot

You have come to the right place, you have come for this: A long slender needle laced with a promise. This would make sense, if you lived in the village. This would make sense, if you planned to pass your child from arm to arm, back to back. This would make sense, if your brain was not filled with fog, if your body did not seep blood and your breasts were not engorged.

You walk down a white hall, past a yellow bucket and a broom with a wooden handle that wish you well.

You hear it before you see it, IMMUNIZATIONS.

A snake of mothers and babies winds around the room, leads to the throne where a woman opens an ice chest, and carefully peels open plastic. An infant screams, you are in the right place. The snake's tail winds to the middle of the room where women sit on blue plastic chairs, and wait for their turn. Their firm jaws are set. Their eyes reveal nothing, unlike yours which give it all away, wet and warm. You hand your baby to your husband and walk away, wondering why you moved somewhere with Tuberculosis. Scuffed floors blur, and your body heaves. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Your baby is brought back to you as you wait, listening to words and hearing nothing.

Notice the scar on every woman's body. See your own child's arm, still innocent, smooth.

Your choice today will leave her with a scar.

The air is still, and the scent of surgical spirits wafts over your body, into your lungs.

*Ali tsikana* you answer when asked. *Where is your yellow book?*

Incorrectly answering the question, you receive stifled smiles.

With 500 Kwacha you could have purchased an orange Fanta. Instead, you bought the second most important document your child will receive. The health passport, the yellow

book, that tells you what to do when your child has diarrhoea, worms, malaria. How to balance a heaping pile of nsima with protein and greens.

The minutes move with the line and it is your turn. You swiftly hand her back to your husband and turn your head away. They laugh as you cry, but you can do nothing else until it is over and her warm body presses against your heaving chest.

You walk back through the halls where broom and the mop have disappeared. No one notices as you walk out the doors, climb into the backseat of the Pajero, and think about what you have done.

## **Malaria Test**

*“If your child has a fever for more than 24 hours, immediately test her for Malaria.” – Doctor’s advice upon moving to Malawi*

It is 9 p.m., and her body is fire. Paracetamol races through her but not fast enough to keep the numbers down, to cool the cries and soothe a mother’s shudder. We buckle her in, again. Another finger prick, massaging the hand until it releases a single drop of blood.

We wait on cool metal chairs, swatting mosquitos with our free hands.

With no nets around us, we are exposed. What will fall underneath to catch us if there are parasites hiding in her blood?

We hold out breathe as they examine, twisting knobs in and out. Focus and blur, hide and seek for tiny marks in minute cells. *Plasmodium falciparum*.

They call us in, and hand us a paper. “Malaria - none detected.” We breathe out, rub the bandage on her tiny finger, drive home in the dark.

She falls asleep while we carefully open the door to our yellow house. The net is lifted up and tucked around her crib, as we check for bugs and holes. We can sleep without knowing why her body is warm. The medicine has kicked in, as cortisol runs out. I get a flashlight and check her crib again, look underneath and behind the posts. The worst is ruled out only for tonight.

## Ground

## Ground

Can anything be learned without  
the hands turning brick red?  
Pulling weeds by their knotted roots,  
discovering where the earthworms sleep.  
Slowing yourself into the soil.

Pay attention to the ant that wandered from the train,  
that devours everything in its path.  
The one whose job is to protect, keep the others in line.  
The one separated by ash that I have spread.  
A barrier drawn with the memory of fire.

What do any of us do when we are lost?  
When there is no going back,  
and you wander through fog  
picking up one foot after another,  
looking for light.

It takes time to listen to the whispers of the earth.  
To hear it above the winds roar,  
to fold yourself into layers of love  
that ground your calloused feet  
into believing that you belong.

## Nest

The dried grass  
of the sparrow's nest,  
tucked in tightly  
to the cactus crevice.

Meticulously mangled  
reams of grass  
woven into shelter  
for five fragile eggs.

Engines roar  
and sirens wail  
unaware  
of the dried grass  
of the sparrow's nest.

Gentle crackling,  
a rest and a pause.

Force and shove,  
and a chick is free,

heard only by  
those who listen.

Protected by

an artillery of thorns

from the monkey's grasp,

from the mamba's jaws,

from the curiosity of

the mischievous child.

The toil of weaving,

the struggle of birth,

the magnificent effort

to see a bird fly.

Five fragile eggs

defy the odds,

a mottled mess of

grass and leaves.

No announcement

welcomes them home,

Save for the rustle

of passing cars.



## Outside My Window

Two sunbirds flit effortlessly  
amongst shrubs and branches,  
dance on a precarious limb.

She bolts and he stops,  
pleads loudly for her return.

High chirps call an alarm,  
woo her to return,  
She does not reappear.

A floating foundation  
sways in the breeze.

## Cellulite and Scars

With each child  
the body bears new marks –  
wrinkled skin,  
a darkened shade.

Every life, a fresh spot.  
Behind the shoulder, on the chest,  
all a reminder:  
there is no separation,

isolation

an illusion.

Marks demand me vulnerable,  
pigments call beyond  
the body to do the work  
as if life depends on it.

What is work other than  
washing and mending, scrubbing and soothing,  
The harder work has always been  
tending to the child within.

Sud-covered hands comb the hair,  
braid the soul for tomorrow,

tracing scars that sear  
the skin with yesterdays.

## A Sacred Word

Choose your word carefully.

Don't start off with sandbags.

Water cascading,

washing you, burying you,

take a deep breath and dive

to the bottom,

where you can finally

look up.

Hold your word

close to your chest,

A treasure to

bring you back,

keep you here

when your patience runs thin

and your bones feel

too big for their frame.

Colossal sounds from tiny

bodies ignite a fire

you never dreamed to fear.

Eyebrows pull together,

dig a crease on your forehead,

cast an anchor on your chest.

Breathe your word  
when tiny bodies wail  
and tears are inconsolable.

When you can't find the source,  
and what you see in your child  
awakens the child in you,  
greet her  
with the sacred word,  
your hand on her heart,  
as she lashes out.

There is space for her, too.

All of this, in the darkest hour,  
when the power is out and the heat  
builds from rain that refuses to fall,  
when you've tucked the mosquito net in,  
and kicked the bedsheets off.

This word will let the salty water  
hold your weary limbs, will  
comfort you and give you grace,  
and what else is this, other than  
a gift?

## Legs

Shape changing legs on a dirt track.

Expectant eyes look to the sky

on the road to Golgotha.

Femurs move women side by side

in salwar suits that soak in the heat and

the smog on dirt paths that lead to black.

Asphalt, tender, for the windy ways

it winds up the mountain surrounded

by sunflowers, to keep the city wild.

All eyes on legs that burn in their covered cloth,

an object of desire. I shield them from the world,

find new shortcuts, stay alive.

Thighs stretch while calves harden,

make friends with scars that bear a mark:

*mosquito, spider, black fly.*

The body swells with new life,

past the turtles in run-off mixed

with sludge and silt, oil and worry.

Knees buckle on winding paths through  
the blue gum and acacia, bathed in a bed of leaves  
that I cannot name.

Shape changings legs carry me  
up this hill with babies on my back,  
one, two, three.

Babies that make the journey with me, every time I say yes  
to life, say yes to greeting my brother my sister,  
whose roots run deep beneath the mountain's fire.

## A Mother's Fear

It was around the witching hour  
she heard the mighty scream.  
The oil was hot inside the pot  
the rice began to steam.

Heart pumping hard, she raced across  
to find the screamer's woe.  
Her thoughts unfolded rapidly  
to ascertain the foe.

Was it a mamba black as night  
that snuck out from a rock?  
Did superman attempt to fly  
and find he could not walk?

A spider's bite, a monkey's hiss,  
A rabid creature's blow?  
Or something stuck inside an eye,  
sliced straight into a toe?

Who thought that it would be superb  
to build inside a tree,  
a place to play for tiny ones



beyond where mom could see?

Perhaps it was a bicycle,

a helmet lay forgot?

Maybe a beehive barely bumped,

a blister rising hot?

What did she have to treat a sting,

to quench the body's fire?

Surely she had some Benadryl,

if it was not expired?

A downward spiral of the mind,

she smelled the scent of ash.

She bellowed out "I'm almost there!"

sprinted the final dash.

She picked the child up at last,

and asked between a pant,

"Tell me child, what happened here?"

Oh yes, I see,

an ant."

**Release**

## Release

Three tiny catfish grow

as big as their home,

black plastic tub,

broken water pump,

sparse synthetic plants,

a crevice to hide

darkness, damp, thrive.

Food and water,

survival, still

the fish refuse

to grow.

An orange net,

A disposable cup,

wriggle and squirm,

the cost of freedom.

Lush green branches shade the path

for the legs that carry the vessel

that holds the fish that

move in irrational circles.

a quiet spot, legs climb over rocks,

careful not to slip,

slide the lid off the top,

tip the brim into the water,

ripples upon ripples.

The fish swim away, the girl cries.

## The Mountain's Cry

A pile of wood to keep the kids fed:  
an elegant crown balanced on her head.

Layers of cloth on a bicycle seat.

Lumber tied tightly, he pedals as feet

move forward in circles – no turning back  
to what could have been, to what he may lack.

A heedless collision. Squeaky brakes fail.

A lorry gives in to its infamous tale.

Clad in her clouds, the seduction of climb,  
curves of the mountain will win every time,

Cracked lips reach out as the water is drained  
and her ransacked body gives without gain.

Charcoal burns underground, silent and still,  
unearthed by the hands still wet from the kill

that fires the stoves, and satisfies pleas  
for high blood pressure and false guarantees.

## **Dam Bed: An Empty Vessel**

We walk on jagged edges of  
cracked ground that whispers  
the memory of water.

Empty promises protected boundaries  
from being plundered by power.  
Streams carefully mapped to guard  
the spring deep within the land.

Erase her lines and  
the thunder of the falls  
slows to a trickle.

Our feet crunch the ground as if  
we have discovered a secret passage.  
There are no lost keys or wedding rings.  
This is only a reserve.

The land remembers water  
like the body with scars,  
tells its stories in dried clay,

What is left of the trees?

A fiery shadow echoes

failed battle cries.

No one is left to pull water from the sky,

keep the current in its place.

There is no vessel for her tears.

Cracks like cellulite on loose skin,

the only gravestone marker

Life grew here.

## Play

A stone in the pond  
The water ripples without end  
An impossible wish.

Warm blood pulses  
My body a living cord  
as I watch you there

a cup in your hand  
slowly pouring out the sand  
never looking up.

A tug on the line  
and we swim in waves of light  
reeling in my soul.

I learn how to watch  
take my rhythm from your pace  
always enough.

Still I ask questions  
How to let go and hold on  
while the last grain falls.

## **Malaria**

I begin to shake; parasites  
scream inside my blood.

Aching joints and body chills;  
parasites in blood.

Prick my finger, pour me onto  
glass that holds my blood.

My body breaks from inside out,  
What is inside in my blood?

Listen to the accusations,  
Who gives the right to blood?

I swallow down a bitter herb  
to kill and cleanse the blood.

They don't surrender easily,  
entitled to their blood.

Plasma flows and gushes tears  
circulating blood.



Weary body can't conceal  
the way it feels like blood.

Regeneration. Rest for now,  
in fragmentated blood.

## **Brown Recluse**

*New means something which didn't have to be like that.* A small scab could be anything: Mosquito bite gone awry, the larva of a mango fly. Pay attention to the color, the shape, white pus underneath could be anything. On this day, a shadow creature was unseen. Felt only in shivers and chills. A glowing orb surrounded the scab that changed and morphed into something that could really use a name. It didn't have to be like that.

Were it not for the late-night phone calls a hundred time zones away- the privilege of access to people trained in naming enough to prescribe a drug for every new symptom that crept up the foot, the leg, the mind.

Were it not for the friend of a friend, I would have gone on in ignorance of necrotic tissue - the black hole with no remedy but the scalpel. At first, I am told to go home. "Come back in three days, when more pus crawls along the edge."

I walk chalk white hallways, where eight years before I carried a tiny person in a flannel blanket dotted with pink silhouettes of birds to a room filled with crying babies waiting their welcome to the world: A vaccine to protect them from some forms of tuberculosis for a short, determined, amount of time. *New means something.*

The call to a friend with direct access to the surgeon, privilege, my friend again. A fresh set of eyes on the dying tissue "that needs to come out now." Thank God for irreverence to improper equipment. Even the corner of a razor can cut through dying flesh. A thick white burn cream fills the black hole. It didn't have to be like that.

There's no time now for things to stay the same. A spider bite takes at least six weeks to heal, longer. One thing I know, of new and old. A leg can only be elevated for so long before it tingles. Whether from the venom or the position, no one knows. But ask anyone who has been bitten by a brown recluse and they will tell you how the skin sheds for weeks. Healing, dying.

You find a new way of being, temporarily, you tell yourself as you crawl into bed, terrified your foot will slip off the pillow into darkness. What can you do but trust that something is happening underneath the purples and blues, reddish hues of swollen skin? New means something in tissue, in time.

## Methyl Bromide

This day was like any other except for the glazed eye,  
the leathery hand pulled a plastic lid, lay me bare.

No choice but to comply, my chalky cylinder crushed, swallowed.

Bitterly I burn like blazing fields of maize.

A whiff will take your breath away, steal the heartbeat from its cage,  
leave your tongue languishing while I descend into the bowels.

This day was no different except that the child  
walked in while the grown man crawled on the ground.

*I have seen this before.*

*This is what I was made for:*

I am a magician, keeping out weevils and flying creatures  
that creep into kernels to devour and survive,

I am created and crafted, chemically engineered to prolong life.

“Warning, keep away from children,” and desperate men it should say.

This day was no different as the man gasped for air,  
clutched the child and begged to not be left alone.

I entered the body, felt the significance of a second  
as the child called for help, searching for a saviour.

Ash and milk, a gift from the gods, my compulsory exit as the bell rings.

Today the child will not pick up a lead pencil to answer any questions.

*And I?*

I long for my cradle, a cold tin can,  
nestled on golden kernels of maize.

## **Cyclone Freddy**

There is a river instead of a bridge.

People line up on one side,

watch the water flow.

When I say line up, I don't mean line up.

We talk about destruction. What else can we do

other than tell the story of the mudslide?

Shhh, the children might hear.

I'd trade comfort for certainty

as numbers rise

with the inches of water

with the money raised,

with empty desks.

I swivel in my chair and try to swallow.

Can you hear the birds singing to the sun?

I know what it is to listen to the rain

pounding on the tin roof.

I hold my children close, breathe in  
the lavender from their freshly dried hair,

tuck them in at night and pray for no nightmares,  
while nearby winds whip away metal sheets.

The next day they load a truck with  
transparent bags filled  
with 3,000 blue plastic cups  
that will land in hollow hands and sing,  
holding on to life.

Tell me what you would do  
awake at night,  
listening to rain on metal sheets,  
thinking of your daughter's best friend,  
wondering if she has learned  
how to swim?

## Transplant

A spider plant hangs from the curtain rod in my bedroom,  
its clay pot cradled in twine.  
Given to me, I forget to water it.

I have instructions to repot,  
the previous owner telling me that  
this is why she is giving it away. I forget.

I hang it up, water it every now and then,  
but mostly, it keeps on living.  
It takes effort to de-pot.

A shovel acts like a lever,  
raises it abruptly  
to the morning sky.

All I see are thick tubular roots  
winding around and around  
until there is no dirt, only roots

with nowhere to go.

Roots surround and strangle each other,  
Compete for absent space.



I learn gardening tips at a conference on transitions.

When transplanting a flower, you turn the pot upside down,  
cut the roots a little, send them searching for water.

Or the pot shaped universe  
will search within itself  
for water it will never find.

So I pull. Rip the form  
until it shreds. Ask the question:  
Is this enough?

## What Keeps Us in a Place?

an opossum nurtures her young  
in an abandoned refrigerator  
in the garage

this place is just as good  
as any other

it's a miracle  
any of us survived  
without choking to death on a pebble  
in a toddler's hand

we  
compare oceans to deserts  
and everything in between

in the end, not even people  
can keep you here.

## Settling Down

I am a monkey living in the home of wild geese,  
wandering in the grass, looking for a mango tree.

It turns out Newton was wrong, on the quantum level.  
an object is only at rest when watched. Unlike me.

I remember swinging in the branches, before I learned to walk.  
How long does it take to feel at home in the body?

Wind cuts through fiber, begs to play with my skin,  
rips buried bones from this beautiful beast I have slightly tamed.

This is as good a place as any, the glassy pond,  
the dove's nest balanced in the oak tree,

the turtle that doesn't bother to hide,  
while the duck scans the murky bottom for life.

During winter even the geese fly south  
screaming, "The world is my home."

## When Time Runs Out

I'm sitting on the backyard porch when time runs out.  
The alarm has been ringing for five minutes.  
My daughter comes in to tell me to turn it off.  
Back straightens, alert, aware of time run out.  
Five hours of sleep at best, at midnight I close my eyes,  
hold the thought close like a soft worn tiger, I will not get enough sleep.  
Will we be late? The oldest asks, rushing  
to my side with bobby pins and bun-form.  
Aware that things keep moving forward.  
What did we do before lines ticked in tandem,  
before we first asked when?  
Before we demanded answers in stone-like time,  
that took longer to form than our own brittle bones.  
There are times, we like to say,  
referring to an expression, one of the many,  
that may be the same as yours, walking a different path.  
Like me, sitting on the khonde, under the tin roof,  
a newborn at my breast, fresh across the threshold of time.  
A thousand droplets draw me into the rain  
that pounds on tin, nestles on jacaranda trees  
and lulls me into believing I can stay.

## The Space in Between

Spaces in between mark belonging like fire on skin.

I walk away willingly from a place called home,  
speak goodbyes to grocery stores and hidden corners  
I thought no one had found.

I thought no one had found the rock  
where plants like heads of hair  
hide our warm bodies absorbing the sun  
until I hear a man singing just beyond the slope.

Just beyond the slope he saw me too.  
We pause in his sacred space  
hold the air in our fingertips  
until an effortless smile stands up.

He stands and waves and walks away  
unlike my hesitating feet,  
my clenched chin,  
my hands pried open.

## An Ode to a Home

Babies never left my eyes.

Children's height marked line by line.

Dragonflies ran from the weather and carried the storm in their wings, and

Everything in between.

Frogs attracted snakes, Pregnant frogs, that hid in the

Gutter and every child was enamored, until the warts took over their hands.

Have you known the place where the wind carries seeds and whispers

instead of jarring you I will be

kind. I will care for you in paradise,

leave you with

more than enough

no, more than that. Everything in between is

only an inch of the

plentiful pulp - plant and prune away as much as you can but you can't

quench this land. This place that

ruminates gossip, and tricks you into thinking that you are

special. It's true, you won't want to leave. You will run at the first chance.

The time comes, eventually, to leave. Was it ever your home?

Until then, you live in ignorance that the

very place you've given your life to,

willingly, you will

exit. Only to find that

your roots are intertwined with the

zinnias that reach up to the sky, the sun numbering their days.

## **Curriculum Vita**

Justine Hayes is a mother, wife, writer, birth doula, and MFA candidate at the University of Texas El Paso. She is an adjunct professor at Lubbock Christian University, and a home educator for her three children. She relocated with her family to Texas after living in the countries of Kenya and Malawi for 13 years. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Communications from California Baptist University, where she graduated Summa Cum Laude with Honors. Her poetry has been published in the Rio Grande Review.