This Composting Body

by Riley Gabriel

English Department
Dr. Amy Smith

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts at Kalamazoo College

2021
My studies of poetry at Kalamazoo College (K) have included several creative writing workshop-based courses as well as various period literature courses. I believe the texts that I read in literature courses influenced my worldview and writing style in ways that I am not aware of. That is the power of language after all, it changes us. For succinctness’ sake, I will focus the attention of this preface on the courses I took which centered creative writing as they have the most prominent impacts on me as a student, writer, and poet. My very first term as a first-year student I signed up for Introduction to Creative Writing with the enthusiasm of a kid going to a candy store. My opportunities for learning about and trying my hand at creative writing were limited in school prior to college. I have always gravitated to creative writing, though. I recall my first taste of the creator’s whims in the second grade when I wrote my first short story about a green dragon and his gold. I will not embarrass myself by pulling from my pre-college poetry, but I had made plenty of attempts at picking up the poet’s sword, too. That first term at K exposed me to a plethora of new writing experiences. The ordeal of workshopping yours and peers writing made me nervous, but I had experience with group art critiques from drawing and painting classes in high school. I did not always find great joy in reading, but I luxuriated in ‘nerding-out’ about words, punctuation, and line breaks. I found my space in the classroom studying something that had previously been limited to a hobby.

Writing as a hobby for kids seems silly, but there are a lot of aspects of poetry that I love that drew me to it even when I was little. In one way, writing gave me a way to communicate when speaking failed me. As a student at a public school, which struggled, and still struggles, to identify and properly aide students with atypical social and learning needs, I sought refuge and
translation of what I could not communicate through writing. I found it extremely hard to relate to my peers and struggled to feel our experiences were shared because of a barrier in communication. In writing poetry, and other forms, it felt like I could speak a different language. I felt a drive to create things that people liked because it was a piece of me that they did not have to completely understand to appreciate. Creative writing generates a realm outside of real-world pressures where I can contemplate, grieve, wonder, dream, play, and share without limitations or fear of judgement. When my emotions feel indescribable, figurative speech gives me metaphors and similes to employ images to speak for me. When my mind is overwhelmed in memory, fixing thoughts to lines in a stanza is a way to slow down and create a physical place for that memory where it was not eating at my mind constantly. Most importantly, writing and being a student writer gave me opportunities to meet people who saw the world like I did and who could talk to me in a language we both understood. Growing up I was not raised in a religious community, I was never part of a dance troupe or sports team, I did not participate in boy/girl scouts (neither organization approved of my gender non-conformity), and I felt isolated from my peers at school. So, entering creative writing spaces in middle and high school, through classes and school clubs, was the first time I truly felt that the people on my ‘team’ were seeing me for who I was. I had found a home with artsy kids and weirdos, but even when creating visual art, I often felt incompatible with my peers. I attribute my growing hunger for poetry to my search for a way to connect with people and the world around me.

A particular step along my writing journey that I appreciate greatly involved Professor Bade, who instructed me in both the Introductory and Intermediate courses. When Introduction to Creative Writing came to an end, I wanted more poetry. I could not dip into a world of free expression and walk away. I met with Professor Bade, I declared my passion for
the craft and my intentions to continue pursuing it that year. I was lucky that he saw my passion and felt my writing backed up my zeal. He signed off on my behalf to allow me into the Intermediate Poetry Workshop class that Spring despite the requisite of no first-year students. I am ever grateful for the trust he had in me to engage at the more rigorous expectations of that class because it pushed me to write some of poems that became the seeds of my current SIP. During that first year at K is when I found that my voice as a poet is in the human experience and is part of the assemblage of poets who attempt to turn personal experience into readable art.

I read Jericho Brown’s collection *New Testament* and found beauty in pain and rebirth. Brown’s poetry portrays the evils of the everyday with ecclesiastical wonder and a weathered critique. I felt a sort of kinship with the dark optimism Brown exemplified in reclaiming the body. His poem *Colosseum*, from the same collection, narrates a struggle to find beauty and worth in ourselves and the act of continuing through life despite, or in spite, of our pain. I respect how Brown sounded healed. I wanted to emulate some of the aspects of his writing, like the theme of bodily reclamation, in my own.

Another body of poems that has seriously influenced me is *The Princess Saves Herself in This One*, written by Amanda Lovelace. To be honest, I only read this book to impress a guy I was crushing on at the time. But then I read it the whole book in one sitting, and again, and again. Lovelace’s poems struck me like hot spitting oil. The manner of fact way that she talked about her mother’s actions and illness fascinated me. I enjoyed how Lovelace’s poems placed value in simplicity in form and let the heft of the words carry the reader. She made simple images into multidimensional art that maintained my thoughts beyond the page. I yearned for the healing powers of written word.
After that first creative writing course, it was surprisingly only a few months later, during my first-year Spring term, before I found myself surrounded by juniors and seniors in the Intermediate Poetry Workshop class. This was an odd happening as the course is locked to first-year students to encourage them to broaden their studies before deepening them. Although I respect the benefits of students gaining more experience in life and writing before entering a rigorous poetry workshop. I was hungry and relentless to sink poetry into my being like an Alka-Seltzer tablet into a glass of water. This also involved a painful acknowledgement of feeling a sense of emptiness and injury. There is something about the form of poetry, the way it diverges from standard dialogue expectations, that allowed me to speak about myself more clearly than ever before. I saw potential in writing poetry for processing my experiences and expressing that course.

My advanced poetry workshop course served the purpose of teaching me writers’ cardio—by forcing me to write and read poetry for ten weeks straight. When I was taking this course, I was in my Junior Spring, far out from the poetry classes I had taken as a first-year student. I had not been writing consistently for over a year. However, I did have the advantage of more life lived. More life lived included a year of working as a resident assistant, roughly four weeks of wilderness medicine and leadership trainings, four months living with strangers in Scotland while studying abroad at the University of Aberdeen, and a handful of identity crises stimulated by extreme dysphoria and discomfort in living as a woman when I am not a woman. Poetry became a core piece of my being in a river in Scotland. I did not know it then, but when my mental health dived and I nearly killed myself, I found myself writing to save my life. I needed to expel my stories and manipulate my memories like earthen clay until I could own them, and myself. Poetry was starting to exist beyond the singular poem. Through some celestial
power of language, I started seeing these connective tissues bridging people together through our art and words in a way that gave me hope.

There was hope for me if all these people of the past have endured. In telling their stories, in crafting and manipulating language they compelled themselves into existence beyond the confines of a society that often dismisses the arts and those with creative, unusual minds. During my junior Spring, I wrote poems about myself and my experiences and sought feedback from peers and professor alike on how to make poetry about specific, often identity-based, experiences available for a wider audience to know them.

The most visible choice I have made in this collection comes in the form of the poems themselves where I have often written in free verse with little punctuation. This was an important decision for me when starting as the form informed my mental space when I sat down to write. For me, starting every poem in free verse with no line, syllable, or rhyme requirements meant that each poem could be as untamed and raw as possible. The personal nature of the poetry I have written for this collection demanded that I come to it naked, and for a poet how can you be more naked than without your poetic devices? Hence, I set forth to write each poem’s first draft without any form and to revise with form, punctuation, and other poetic components in mind.

Another major choice I made regarded how I would section out the collection to represent the three main topics I wanted to connect: nature, trauma, and healing. The initial idea was that my personal process of healing seemed to take place in those three categories, and I believed I could isolate my experiences into this configuration. As I set out to writing, though, I found myself stuck writing the same three pictures of a story, but unable to find the current of the story itself. I also found myself writing too literally, leaning too heavily on reality and not enough on
emotion. That is when I started writing as if each poem were a checkpoint of sorts along the journey through which the collection takes the reader. Some poems started functioning to show a scene of life while others were channeling the acts of processing that take place in both self-healing and memoir-esque writing.

One of the most critical choices I made while doing this project was to alter my original ideas for formatting while I was still in the writing phase. This alteration clicked something open in my thinking about the project, and I felt a flow that had not been coming out under the original project trajectory. By stepping away from my stubbornness to avoid a big format change, I allowed myself more flexibility and rawness that started manifesting in my poems. I began writing about the act of processing memories and the emotions around expression. I saw each poem as an opportunity to explore a feeling, one piece of human essence. I found pleasure, pain, and tediousness in the procedure of digging into memory. There was a rush within me as I wrote every poem, a need to expel the words and images that had been swirling in my mind for a long time.

There is a serious amount of foresight and organization that is required to make this sort of long-term project sustainable, productive, and rewarding. I dare not say that I employed such foresight or organization, but in my missteps and friction I see their importance. I struggled with intervals of feeling extremely motivated and focused on the project and the periods of time when I felt so drained by it that I had to walk away for a week to recharge. This speaks volumes to the strength and persistence required of writers exploring the memoir form. As individuals we cannot always produce at the consistency and frequency at which our writer title demands, recharging my mind and soul was necessary for me to continue producing work that aligned with my intentions and felt genuine to my experiences.
The depth of knowledge I gained about myself while working on this project surprised me. I expected to feel a modicum of confidence growth and perhaps a new sense of direction regarding my academic and professional future. I would wager both of those things did happen, to my contentment, but what I found most meaningful was discovering an artistic zeal compelling me to make. I found myself creating through all sorts of mediums—painting, sculpting, sketching—while I was writing this collection. I had always been creative and involved in art programs prior to coming to Kalamazoo College, but had been focusing my studies on literature, writing, and my Environmental Studies concentration. I unlocked a door that had been shut inside me for a long time.

All writers, modern poets like myself not excluded, must grapple with the existence of our writing as part of a living corpus of texts that speak to other texts and authors around us, before us, and after us. There is a distinct lack of historical knowledge and present representation of minority voices in the field of creative writing. Part of my motivation to intentionally write pieces that will be shared is to take up space in a field where people of my community, by which I am referring to neuro-divergent folks and the LGBTQ+ community, have been denied space for a long time.

My work may not be profound or challenge the confines of the craft in any new ways, but it is genuine, and it shows a part of human existence that is often suppressed. In writing and taking up space, I can protest the systems that have sought to exclude voices like mine. And hopefully my stories can reach someone who relates or find something hopeful in them like I have when reading from some of my favorite poets. Working on this project has helped me find some personal and spiritual freedom through writing and poetry, and through those intimate discoveries of myself I have been able to see opportunities for me academically and
professionally that I otherwise felt did not exist. Some people would argue that seeking a bachelor’s degree in a language you already know how to speak and write in is a waste of my privileged education. I would disagree and argue that the essence of a liberal arts education is to find curiosity for our world and communities and critique norms from our collective past.

My project has put me through an immense reshaping process, as a body, as a being, as a friend, as a lover, as thinker and as a professional. Undergoing this feat of quantity of writing for the first time and the procedure of revising and distilling it into its current form have instilled me with new ways to approach my education, the value of my time, my professional and personal aspirations.
Acknowledgements

There are many thanks I wish to convey in this moment.

To my wonderful adviser, Amy Smith, thank you for consistently looking bits of light in everything. Your faith in the potential of even my least favorite writing pushed me to rethink the value of my words and the power of revision. Thank you for humoring my whimsical style and encouraging me to embrace my hippie practices to find the genuine shit.

To my father, thank you for listening to all my breakdowns and for always reminding me what really matters.

To my friend, housemate, conspirator, and SIP-mate Eli Barker I have a copious number of things to thank you for. For always being open to talk about SIPs, or anything. For listening to me brainstorm poem ideas or vent about academia. For chill nights and shared meals. Your presence and inputs were and continue to better me as a person and writer.

To Dave Demko, thank you for putting back on the shroud of K academia and helping me revise and crispen this collection. Your notes, thoughts, and questions helped me see my writing from the outside. I’m ever grateful.

To my partner Matthew Giguere, thank you for all the countless ways that you support me and help me be my honest self. For cooking meals while I typed away at my laptop for hours. For listening to me blab about poetry all the time, even though you don’t always get it. For reminding me to go outside, breathe air, and touch soil.

To my siblings for letting me flood our group chat with my whining and pleas for advice on how to finish a SIP. Your relentless love and encouragement fill me with so much joy. Thank you for stepping up when I needed some K familiarity amid the pandemic. And for being cool fucking nerds.

To Tristan Ferguson for giving me Amanda Lovelace’s poetry and unknowingly sparking a deep love for the craft. And for proofreading for me the day everything is due.

To my cat Eddie, thank you for being handsome, soft, and providing emotional support endlessly. I know you can’t read, but you have helped me through so much.

And finally, I want to thank myself for finishing this project. Amidst countless reasons to give up, I persisted.
This Composting Body
A Garden’s Wealth

I seek in my garden
solitude and silence
quench saliva-void
voice from flushed
green hose
chlorophyll
provides all with
sustenance aplenty
stuff your mouth with
leaves sink a few seeds
down
into your dirty soil
tend the earth’s
forces you will be
rewarded


**Gallery of Me**

Entrez-vous through my vine
door twisted monumental frame
my floors grow wild with clover
easy, take your time wanderer.

Explore my innards and tales
golden framed
memories line halls
of my stories
eat my paint until you are sick.

Don’t dance with the
statues my naked body
is fragile they’re old
selves solidified
I keep them in case of emergency.

Observe my bone white
canvas maze do not be
disgusted Fate’s threads will
lead
you to the exit. you
will find me carved
finally in salt.

Eat of my body and
sting your ravenous
cheeks
as salt from my hands
pours into your wounds
in probing we discover truth.
To Find It

I will pry my ribcage
open split hard bones
for a glimpse of golden
calm existence

Press my thumb at the
center of each of my
fears juice my own
psyche for each memory
I have left

My history spurts from the
wounds dripping hot wax down
my socks
I tiptoed in as a kid,
raw under scrutinizing eyes.

Ripened, I'll tear my skin wide
halves separated cleanly to be
eaten
properly—honey covered fingers and wine.

Covered in the stickiness of
rebirth I will suck each calorie
off my
bones. With myself, I will try
again.
Exploring Self

This boy’s eyes are like waterfalls
churning some hidden turmoil beneath black rock eyelashes.
I slip in for a dip and heavy waves greet
me my blues swirl blues and greens
glinting bright yellow hot sunlight
shines back—
I want to be the flesh that I love.

I’m in love with segments of
myself inner bits and bobbles
flowing through red blood,
rushing hot to my cheeks.
I’m in love with the boys I want to look like.
my gaze spills down the slopes of their jaws
I drown in their musk imagining unknown valiance.

Love is my envy: to consume bodies I yearn for.
flood my mind with idols of figure and voice,
form my body to their shapes in search of a
quench I’m fighting for myself, thrashing in
deep waves.
A particular kind of shame

wrestles in my guts
tossing misshapen
memories and insults
I’ve tried to forget,
self-selecting deletion to protect from
horrors traipsing from my past. spindly
skeleton
twirls in my chest, bags of ridicule in each bone
fist, tinder for the fire it’s building
thick flames. find inside
a colony of bronze wing butterflies
battering my body,
feeding on
repeating thoughts
spiraling through swiss-
cheese holes in childhood
memories too vile to be told.
Neighborhood Smiles

in my skin I feel peoples’
eyes flashlight beaming on
my face sharp eyes scraping
through skin scouring my
cheeks for softness
investigating their assumptions about me
my chromosomes—is this an
impersonation? they presume I’m one of
those queers pushing boundaries of a
system they like sneering stained teeth
smiles as I walk by
looking for truth in a stack of
library cards indexed in drawers of
dust, flicking through each with
a flash. memories zap through
my eyelids too fast like a brain
freeze.

drawer slams shut dusty years,
shut down the too-fast
remembering. too bad I don’t
want to remember,
I keep the flashes on ice.
in my brain basement for snacking on
when nighttime idleness leads to hungry thoughts.

aged wine stain memories of
losing you loved wine and
libraries, always a book in your
pocket.
now all memories dusty themselves,
pages mourned unread in the measures
of
time. I’ll move the urn to the basement too,
make room for someone else.
Forest as Sanctuary

I go to the green forest to feel my bones creak
trees line the trails and litter the brown ground
mushroom life pushing between decaying
limbs Every step comes with a slight sway of
my chest tits I bind flat, submit my body to
my mind’s shape weak muscles slouch off
cramped rib bones
trudge like a troll bent over to hide myself I
brought a blue hammock to swing way up
high touch my face to needles sticky with
yellow sap let it drip a bear’s beard across
my smooth flesh the crinkles of tree bark are
my sanctuary hallways of weathered beings
knobbed and bent this is where bugs live and
free birds chirp
and no one tweets that trans women are not women
save my seat on the couch back home, I’ll be here escaping
sweating out a lifetime of doubt
squishing fear into the mud with my toes
this is survival, walking off the
bullshit I am postponing my
withering
steady wings carry a robin over my
hunch I breathe in his red-tummy
musk
In the garden on a stone, I encountered a corpse
Saw it wink at me with crusty cicada eyes
threw me back in time, blinks of memory and loss
death reminding me what she already took
I am on the stone in a dry husk coffin
at six being beaten by a mother on drugs
at sixteen getting raped but nobody knows
The insect smiles at me with brown teeth
You still live if your heart keeps beating
Being Depressed Feels Like

So many days spent

in the bedroom lonely.

Others around see a

cave
where this stoic bear
sleeps, provokable but quiet.

Calm chaos builds

on the floor,

heaps of clothes
hills of half-worked projects
I am not sleeping calmly

ing pulls my words

y mouth at the tongue
y throat into a cauldron.

hache of what if?

edited plans,
d anyways.

atters when in...

unwashed neglected form.
Trash Cycle

Green tea cup
molded deep brown
crusty thing

I take it to the dumpster
and smash it against the metal

Leave the pieces to
cut open my garbage
later

So it can fall all over the
place just like I do
sometimes
To Do List

wake up before
10am brush your
teeth, stinky
wear something you didn’t sleep in
some deodorant

eat something that’s filling
add fruit or veg too
coffee first, makes things easier
hydrate—fill the Nalgene

smoke, maybe twice
change into something comfy
make a to do list, try to catch
up news is scary, read it
anyways

slip into
daydreams
maybe take a
walk tend the
plants drink
some caffeine
spend too much time in bed
soft restart again
scramble to finish
tasks
manage things to non-
emergency

escape with the Nook
nephews
some nighttime cocoa and cat
cuddles shakes come back?
smoke again sativa helps with
the chores

trudge through the
evening bake or cook
something, okay? warm
up with a shower
scroll on phone for hours,
sleep.
No Sudden Moves

I have a hallway of Polaroids, reminders of each outfit, every night I was harassed. This one stands out: long jeans winter coat. There is no barrier on the cis-het male mouth to catch the bullets from spitting out. On my flesh sticks words of lust for a body they prey on. That’s how men like us: quiet, sexy, and controlled.
What have I survived?

I survived the streets
consuming urbane mycelium.
composting flesh and fears,
grabbing onto my shoes like
bubbling tar pulling me—
to stop, to pause and
breathe. compost needs
aeration.

I feed the fungi chunks of
myself as kin watch me yearn
for soil
or a log to rest on amid the
forest figures surround the
water and me with candles
held in dirty hands they crept
with mushroom heads
watchers morphed a hundred
times

rum-sharp breath spills in the
sunshine sour smiles on all our
faces
soft spongey cheeked
hopefuls churning our souls
in the dirt mountains of
struggles familiar to our feet-
soles and heartstrings trek
along cherry-lipped churners
May I find a peaceful night

There’s a boy on the porch sitting on the wall alone Inhaling a jazz torch eyes melted on his phone.

Across the street sits a bird pecking checking the soil after ten minutes it flew quick and dove some twisting coils down.

Sunlight soaks the rain drenched grass yard for three days plain the skies left the ground marred.

Tree branches reach out necks of dense oak flesh for light in the Sun’s drought waving to the boy in his smoke sesh.

The John Deere mower talks to the cat weekly with a mighty purr, just lower an octave, more deeply.
Dormant in My Aching

In the times when I am a black hole creation returns to god’s hands, as I lay dormant in my aching.

As the sun and moon invite me for meals or walks, any movement, I lay dormant in my aching.

When my caverns echo my cries for a spark of light, I lay dormant in my aching.
The Closest I’ve Come to Death

Wade into the river with me and feel its wet
surround you A dark hug
like a grandparent The closest I’ve come to death

Slide into her silky caress
blues, greens, wisps of fish color She is wonderful and quiet
The closest I’ve come to death

Drop yourself to the bottom sand filling your wool socks
Shoes left as a marker on the shore The closest I’ve come to death
I am convinced I can grow a new heart
to replace where mine wore out
didn’t stop ticking easy.
No, my heart clenched its last
pulse beating its fists on ribcage
bars demanding release, or room
to grow. Cinched tight down with
old shoelaces preventative
measures of dullness
he was scared of free love.
Chest-bound thoughts tightly kept
in a prison of sinful
yearning love of flesh.
And when his spite grew too big
and smothered my voice
I stabbed my chest with scissors.
I am convinced I can grow a new heart
to replace where mine was cut out didn’t
stop ticking easy.
Teatime

Brown morning
light sifting dust
from old
wooden walls.
Orange curtains
of sun drape
against the floor
where the cat
sleeps.
Ocean blue eyes
blink awake, purr,
and slip back to sleep.
Lead limbs are hard to
lift from numbed
slumber
in layers of
blankets. The rub
of last night
remains today
empty headed,
solid heart. Push
out to the prickly
air of the room,
slip on fleece pants
and a hat. Bring from
bed the coziness as
sweater sheathes,
wool socks.
Swim to the kitchen
through molasses will
sticking where I walk.
Click the stove on,
a pleasant black heat
my kettle screams to me.
Hear its
teatime and
pour the clear
thoughts of
caffeine
spiced
    wit
h    cinnamon.
Slowly wipe a
window in the
haze to see
to something, even
just the tea.
Navigation of Myself

There are places of my body I had once never explored. Some that were claimed by others, trespassing. Some that were feared by my own trapped self.

My skin reads like a map of my accumulated shit, of the marring the world lay. Deep footprint scars speckle my skin like rocks in the river.

I followed the trails marked black and red on my flesh. I walked past mountains of soft pink breasts with a warning sign posted: “Demolition starting soon” Swam through liquid salt rivers over the ridges of my face.

In the effort I saw beauty, and persistence in the marrow. The absence of crusaders, my body could be safe. A healing place, like waterfalls, and I am its only ranger.
Finding Trust

What comes before the easy beauty?
Before the clouds part from rain
or the tree line gives way to
pasture, what becomes of me?

In journeying, my
muscles break into a new
form and strength.
My shaky fears of being
new in this world and vulnerable
desist with every mile I move.

Each meal I prepare
for myself with food I
have grown,
I find patience in sowing
seeds and tenderness in
pulling leaves.

Trust comes last, perhaps as it
should, at the threshold of my
garden and the
world. When I reach my perch only then
can I know all that came before the easy
beauty
that I have painfully sought to surround me.
Where is anger this time of year?

Where has anger gone? she left me
drunken stupid
hunched dying
bush withered on a
driveway
and poisoned by winter salts.

Where has anger been? she fled and
lives lost thick
screaming wind
searching for me
too
and flowing through spring rain.

Where will anger come? she runs
steadily homeward
weary dripping river
following whereabouts
rumors and cycling into
my mouth.

Where will anger live? she burrows
intentions mucky
lifetime burdens
stored on ribcage
shelves and nesting
in my core.

26
I Don’t Like Stew, Anyways

I find myself peace in writing old pain.  
Words of sharp memories dulled with time  
may still cut if not smoothed through  
handling.

Toss them under the minivan  
and pop a tire, cancel the family campout reunion weekend,  
it beckons grilling violence. red dripping insults flip like  
burgers  
among white paper plates.  
I ignored it then,  
chomping down more corn swallowed like painkillers. Mother  
boils  
us with criticisms, blistering skin  
she later delivers burn cream to herself.

I keep her on a DVD in a box in the basement.  
Not forgotten, controlled and  
contained, kept in a double-walled thermos.
Refurbishing

I’ve checked my journals, all their pages heavy with my ink life, for some knowledge on recovery that seems so fleeting to me. I found lists written in black tasks crossed off, some forgotten.

I saw the history of my daily struggle as brush teeth has been written at the top under “breathe, you are alive” sure thing but seems crafts are my strongest aid. Not breath, but working hands.

Either by wood working, hard sweat or slow-going clay molding, by reworking materials into new life I refurbish my self board by board.

I would create a thousand projects sweat buckets to fill the seas, imagination set free, rather than to stew in shadows. Dark work occurs beyond the mind, rotten roots can not bind me down, I must forge a home.
Mourning Plot

my garden has a plot reserved for mourning
plants grieving yellow stems growing drooped
leaves
I kill off the old versions of myself
sometimes and plant them in this dirt to
die as half selves like a tree dropping a
stunted gnarled limb
I chop my own limb holding images of my
mother red hot beatings in orange Octobers
at her place Idaho potato sized lies grow in
that wretched soil
sever the roots that have withered to allow new
growth I use the cuttings of brain stem as decor in
a glass vase beautiful reminders of the poison
others can carry
Time Capsule

I want to cut
open my body
and let fall out
all my fat like
silky white lies
pool,
around my bare hairy feet.
I want to slip
out of them,
and to push
expectations to
shatter. As they
hit the surface
and splatter my past
everywhere. It will
congeal on the
sidewalk, a
lard Jello time capsule
poised on browned-silver
platter that tastes like shit
to
me
I do not forgive you

When asked if I can give many times my heart
I reply, no.

When asked if I can build a home with gravel I reply, no.

When asked if I can force pigs to fly and dance
I reply, no.

When asked if I can forgive the sins of my mother
I reply, no.
Multipurpose Cleaner: Refreshing Lemon

I’m a soggy goldfish
cracker at the side of the
soiled sink.

Over there is some tomato
and there a drippy slope of soap.

Bits forgotten, accumulated
stress- soaked memories
uncleaned.

Spray liberally, lemon refreshment and start over
with a shine.

Apply spray to soiled surface allow to soak
up your muck

Most muck soften easily some need a
brush to loosen.

Rinse all clean with
water always rinse clean.
Identity Stock

When I am animal and raw alone, who am I then?
Skim the socialized fat from my brain stew and what stock shines clear in my ladle?
I chopped the potatoes and carrots, minced garlic and ground spices.
I poured the rich golden liquid and I boiled myself. The fat’s been skimmed—ready to serve.
And I will serve myself.
Suppose

Suppose I never touched my lips to foreign objects? No more straws, I’ll save the turtles, boycott food, you’re welcome waist, Chuck out health to fit in spend lunch breaks on toilet seats.

Suppose I never fit my skin suit again? No one would say I stood out anymore. Lose what makes my shape, reshape to a one size fits all key. My stomach once rolled like hills of pale white marshmallow cloud over a black wire forest.

Suppose I looked sorely pretty? Skirts twirled around my bones flash off smooth white skin. Walk around an out of tune tv set — my brain fritzed out.
When He Nearly Met Death

I was twelve or thirteen when my brother nearly
died by his own hands in the house we grew up in
he was my best friend whose best kept
secret was explained to me over the
phone so fast lightening shot from my
father’s mouth through the line striking
me into action
seek, cease, distract
those were my orders to avoid a funeral.
barges of baggage we bore as a family
but my brother held against his skin and his heart.
Leave me? I barely dared think, holding my selfish
tongue even then I knew my place in this shit
seeking found him half-dressed behind a wall of
mist the longest shower still haunts me
ceasing was the sound of my pleading
the thumps on the wooden door under my
fists distract was cut short by the swirl of
red and blue a cacophony of flashes and
bursting doors
before I could hug my brother’s pale skin
arms tied behind him to protect him from
himself cops swept him away and Dad left to
follow
my sister and I were alone in the silence.
Fresh Cut

I was sixteen
freckled by
summer giddy
for change
reform came
unwanted as a girl’s
flesh
a cage
inescapable
accept it,
exacerbate.
Even at bird’s size and
locked cage where he feeds
me compliments and
pleasure.
Imprisoned, my heartbeats
punched holes in his power until
it failed my pain was his pleasure,
put the
condom in my hand and said this was
my choice without giving me a second
glance
arms corralled me into his desired
position, his hands pinned me—now I
know
what the lawnmower feels on the weekends.
Nightfall Gifts

There’s a pull in me at night when the cicadas are on full volume loudest neighbor on the block
Stars pull me towards the sky a magnet in my chest to yank me Keep sitting on this lawn of clover grass-feasting eyes and soul on Nature’s nightfall gifts
Riot on This Body

Thrashing spirit
writhe pain
growing up another
find freedom in change

Woman, girl, female
enforced at birth for me
always reclaiming

Flesh mind and spirit still
proving existence for unjust systems

scream louder small primate or forever hold your peace let’s start a riot on this body
Sleep Softly on the Forest Floor

At night when that prickling fear
fight or flight strikes with heavy hooves
Even in dreamlands the air is thin
black tissue paper, a gagging midnight.

I flee to a forest faraway in my mind
forged for safety, a trail lined with
trees flowing river fills the air, lively
and drowning to any fear.

Flick through a catalogue
of Pixar-esque shorts of nature
find refuge in unbridled trails
think goodnight to the smelly pine trees
sweet dreams scared child; the plants guard you.

Pull up your clover covers and
rest your rosy cheeks on moss
pillows crisis quelled and
breathing stabled, sleep softly,
the nightmares have left.
Sandcastle Dreams

As a child I watched my mother build a sandcastle under the clouds “for you,” she said and handed me keys of glass that cut my palm. She furnished the house with sharp shells algae paintings and rock floors. She wanted me wistful in wonderland comfortable in her making of me. I saw her pull on and off a mask she said helped her breathe down in the ocean of her lies. Yet when I invited her for tea in our sandcastle of dreams, Her mask split off, smirk underneath tentacles grabbed my trusting flesh raked me on the stone floor and left me there to drown.
Reflections on Time

Time is nonstop.
Looped friendship bracelet
progression of beads on a string,
shared between me and the
universe.

She ties new knots with pretty strings.
Mine include gnarly big ones,
a few dainty twirled ones.
How could I not get tangled up?

She started my bracelet too early.
When my wrists were delicate
and fine, she wanted something
for me to cover and distract from
ragged skin.

Threaded with starlight
my beads gleam in a
row carried around
under the sky
wherever in the universe I explored.
Evaporating Screams

Burning, clenched stomach pouring up the esophagus, stinging throat and tongue destructive through my core.

Flaring, erupting out of the throat scratching vocal cords like knives, covering tongue and teeth relentlessly in muck.

Noiseless, I scream from open mouth, yet there is no sound.
Get Angry!

pages of blue lines stare at me
notebooks full of half chartered
plans three lines here
abandoned two stanzas who
have each other but no future
there is sadness in my heart
which burdens the weight of
my pen its tilt keeps lingering,
sad
worries rotating like Lazy
Susan’s tray
there is no hope in repeated ink
stroke and losing hope pisses
me off
fingers latched around my pen
open nib on the page, get
angry.
Let’s talk about oppression.

Start our investigation about constant correlation between our community afflictions and our government’s diction. They are feeding us fiction about black exclusion and gay-only infections—this not just a prediction. It must come to the world’s attention that being queer is not a decision or a heaven-sent defection.

Our leaders keep us down with delusions guard a country run by sedation. The 1% will pay for their transgressions their dirty money police nation. This is not a gross inflation, there is proof from thorough inspection: cops don’t work for our protection.

Heed our rage in our chanting inflections, backing down is out of the question. We can riot with compassion, don’t compromise until all have their portion, fight with resilience and education. Truth and love are our bastions.
In language I teach myself new definitions of love. Respecting myself comes easier on the timeless, inviolable page alone. With myself I can be curiously whole and shaking excitement for existing in joy. There is hope for me after all in paragraphs and stanzas. Words take my breath quivering from the past sharp glass memories become stronger in the naming. March out an army of times new roman soldiers with the strength of tongue and cheek of mind craft a story of balance protected from peering eyes.
Fantasy

I like to play in my thoughts lose myself in wonderlands fields of boys in skirts and girls with bubblegum hair wrap me in hairy arms blue nail-tipped hunks tree trunks lifting me up we fall upon weeds in meadows and dance sweaty in dark havens find release from flesh traps hummingbirds touch tenderly on flower hips May I sit and drink of you?
My Friend Toad

I found something at the bottom of my compost bin
   a small thing squished, fully covered in mud, makes me spin with a smell so loud
   searing nostrils, my worms do make me proud wrist deep in rot, I closed my fist softly
around the slime-wet tummy of a toad’s roughly three-inch body. They croaked a protest like a cat
   meow-pleading innocence during mischief, I sat plop on the ground on a green moss seat
to inspect my friend toad from nose to feet, such a small guy could get hurt in this bad
   world, especially lounging around, where they had no bumps or cuts visible, my smile pushed wide
another croak and a wink convinced me to bring them inside
I made them a blanket fort where we slept warm and cozied
   we shared stories and cackled, vulnerably exposed Toad and I shared everything, best of friends
until three weeks later when they said bye and left.
Ballerina Boy

There is a wooden music box small in my hands which plays a lullaby I once sung myself asleep to.

In here I found a way to kill myself and keep living by placing this female corpse here to dance forever.

All the diy first-aid lessons and self-elected ribcage splitting stands tall in tulle, preserved.

She’s a lady and I am not she dances an obituary tune in my wooden treasure box so that I can walk the world in quiet.
Nature’s Nurturing

If you listen through the family
bicker cricket choirs sing behind tree
stumps upturned leaves nestle their
trumpet legs a pounding between
my temples traps me soft silence
watching thought-wing moths
hear the hum of cicadas past the
light’s glow vibrantly vibrating little
wings of lace

the best sound of my childhood was cicadas
once in a while a brown frog croaked between
cars passing an upturned nest of humans
rampant like rabies mother infected the hive
with
chaos her love chewed you like barbed wire
poison foam-covered skeleton genetically
stuck to a widow with eyes on her prey
Cracking Body, Unsound Mind

I'm not good at having a body. Or a mind.

These bones lace themselves together, with self-deprecation, cartilage, and caffeine.

Neurons fire at each other until reflections turn into nightmares;

Nightmares came stomping, night after night. Shocked at my pleading.

Air like toxic rum. Tripping cracked ankles mauve melancholy around my eyes.
Grow up, family is
magma unpredictable
blaze, scaring small and
non-small children.

Wise parents bickered
in ocean tides and hurricanes
drowning us oysters in our beds.

Blue flame flare ups
family movie night
blazing
horror films on play doh minds.

Love is a tornado
scattering red-slick children’s hearts
on muck-tiled kitchen floors.
Why Nature?

I am permeated by nature. Infected by its spores which grow on my skin among the arm hairs.

Nature is what birthed me, the real me. Beyond fire and brimstone of home were my trees, big trees full of leaves juicy bursting berries staining feet palms and chin.

When I found myself alone I found myself in nature. I made the backyard a castle saw it as a forest or beach, playing with fairies bee and squirrel besties.
Berry burst under bare feet, a child died inside me.
Too young exposed to pain, won’t play again or eat again among the varied trees.

I found childhood again reclaimed
years lost memories that haunt discarded
forest ghosts nature holds me and evils
healing is not linear.
This Big Woman, Earth

I don’t believe in a
god— or a goddess.
Science explains the
structures of the world,
and magic
fills in the lines.

There is one higher
power who exists
solely for living and
that is my Earth.
This big woman
holding us all at her breast.

In the hymns of her
throat you see
images of grasses
and trees housing
animals wild chaos at
ease.

She provides us
answers, and wonders
untamable.
Wind passes through me like a spell
each time I see her, I am devoted.
Nature’s endlessness
containing all things known
and unknown science
explains what it holds,
not all things are can be captured.

The insects and orchids teach
morals and history, cooperate or
die soil and birds breed
wanderlust
I wonder forever, learning
from imperfect horizons.
Easy Beauty

It is easy to see,
when they wave in the
breeze, how friendly plants
can be.

Sweet tomatoes live on the ledge, plumping in
an orange box,
they blush deep red in the rain.

Lettuce grows in the yard dancing their
curled green arms,
I join them when the moon is out.

Water drips from the leaky hose on a lawn
like a meadow,
left to grow.

Ants crawl on dirt with their snacks to the porch
where I eat mine
for afternoons of gossip over tea.
Why I Eat Words

to fill my stomach
savor sweetness crunch loud
to sink into sadness
ignore my emotions quench some
loneliness
because I was taught to
eat emotion
  eat
celebration to taste and
throw it up again
lose weight get fit
become more
appealing grow big and
strong try something
new
to share with another
silence thoughts
shit it out
again to cook
a meal

  satisfy a craving finish that
  last bite
The following poem was written by Lucille Clifton. Please read it and find a response poem that I have written on the next page.

*Song At Midnight by Lucille Clifton*

...do not send me out among strangers
Sonia Sanchez

brothers,
this big woman carries much sweetness in the folds of her flesh. Her hair is white with wonderful. She is rounder than the moon and far more beautiful. Brothers, who will hold her, who will find her beautiful if you do not?
friends,
this changing
human carries
much sweetness
in the folds of their fighting
flesh. their hair
is cut with
resilience they are
scarred like
the moon and
far more
faithful
friends,
who will hold them
who will find them
beautiful if you do
not?

won’t you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into
a kind of life? I had no
model. born in Babylon
neither man nor woman
what did I seek to be except myself?
I made it up
here on this bridge between
stardust and sugar maple
forests. my one hand holding
tight
my other hand; come
celebrate with me that
every day something has
tried to kill me and has
failed.