Witness & Incantation

by

Madalena Kingsbury Henning
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“She’s swallowed the key into the language of America. …She’s come from the dead to be remembered, and if she has to kill someone along the way, that’s poetry.” –Elizabeth Willis

“Desire is a question that has no answer.” –Luis Cernuda

“& the agony? When is it right to want that?” –Quan Barry
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Introduction

Out of an amorphous topic through which I intended poems rather than a defined project to come first, my thesis erupted and has become a body of work navigating the landscape of living in and through collective and personal trauma and human connections. Through the negotiation of conflict between abstract and concrete imagery, my poems traverse the emotional and psychological toll of a variety of traumas. My poems draw attention to sexuality, misogyny, race, non-binary gender, relationality, and the frustrations of having radical politics in a consumerist, late-capitalist, neo-liberal era. This thesis is unapologetically feminist and intersectional. It also engages with being perceived as a woman in a man’s world. This body of work developed organically with its own indulgences, pastimes, and haunts, without more formal poetic motives.

I have always questioned the validity of creating a body of work from a set ‘project.’ This reticence stems from my experience of the writing process, which is finicky and without censorship, and the feeling that Dorothea Lasky articulated in her chapbook Poetry Is Not a Project, that a “poet with a nameable project seems wise, and better than other poets with unnameable ones” (Lasky 9). In this way, my poetics challenge the academic pursuit of a thesis, in which a project is primary, and recasts this undertaking into an embodiment of my poetics and the way I want to see poetry exist and develop overtime. Diversity of thought matters. Truth telling and the disruption of normative assumptions and conclusions color my work. I am also an agonizingly slow writer who pores over words and recasts ideas dozens of times. This
is not to say that my poems are any less interwoven than those created through the lens of a project. My poems are connected by paradigm, preoccupation, and the liminal space of eight months time. The navigation of social landscapes goes hand in hand with the creation of poetry because poetry is a product of culture that is mediated through the self. It is not possible to divorce ourselves from culture. We are culture: we make it, reproduce it, feel its weight, and rage against it. We are not legible without it.

Over the years of teachers and peers reading my work, I’ve discovered that one’s expectations for readability (what one looks for and expects to take away) have a lot to do with their level of satisfaction with my poems. My work is cryptic, fragmentary, and lyric, driven by sound and image. Susan Sontag, in her essay, “Against Interpretation,” iterates that “real art has the capacity to make us nervous” (Sontag 5). To close read a poem in the traditional sense is to claim a certain digestion that fails to acknowledge the power and unruliness of poetry. I will not guarantee that my poems are edible. The question is, “what would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place” (Sontag 8)? I am interested in questions such as “what is at stake here?” rather than: “what is this poem about?”

Experiencing art is about the multiplicity of interpretation. My poems often present fragmented images and localities in close proximity. This can be jarring for readers who are not willing to take leaps. I promise my poems can carry your weight if you let them.

In my work, the stunning and gruesome are often in conversation with each other. Ideas and images cross-pollinate, become dissonant hybrids, and grate in their
proximity. In a way, trauma is the backbone of this collection. I write about it without even meaning to, which reflects my internal landscape and the social complicity and overall entrenchment of gender and sexual violence in society. It is significant that trauma in never resolved in my poems: poetry is not a locality in which to pretend that trauma is something one simply works past. This collection speaks to how trauma shapes experiences through time. I am deeply interested in using words to rupture a sense of safety in the norm, especially problematic norms.

Stylistically, my poems are argumentative and resist resolution. I often draw attention to and question certain cultural assumptions. I partake in disrupting the thematic and tonal places where one might wish to land, bringing readers to a self-reflexive place of discomfort. A lot of people feel threatened by the way I think, and this, in itself, is a kind of preparation for artistic expression. Poetry is the conduit through which I can expose others to the type of thinking I use and discomfort I experience in navigating the world. I would rather my poems make you think than simply tell you what I think. As Lasky said, “poetry has everything to do with existing in a realm of uncertainty” (Lasky 19). Bodily integrity is at stake in my poems—by that I mean, who has the right to exist? I think it is productive to be made to feel insignificant and awestruck. For me, at the height of that experience, I realize how much I still have to fight for. It is brutal to feel othered in your own skin, for words to erupt and bleed and choke out of you. Poetry is one of the dirtiest works I will ever engage in. Poetry “is not intention, but life” (Lasky 21). My veins are shared and dirty and satisfied.
I came to college with the goal of writing a creative poetry thesis, but my labors this past year have done so much more for me than I could have ever imagined. This endeavor has challenged and uprooted me so many times. Here’s to the life this collection will have as a bound book and in your hands. Dare to have a poem knock the wind out of you.

Many books have influenced and affected my thinking about both form and content during the writing of this thesis, they are listed below:


Ecco, 2002.


Reprint Edition.


Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speaches by Audre Lorde.* Berkley:


Works Cited


Sontag, Susan. “Against Interpretation.” *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays.*

Witness & Incantation
I snag a fish,  
exact-o cut  
the long of its spine,  
bring the incision  
to my lips.  
Whisper inside—  
*I envy you drowning so visibly in air.*  
Floss stitches  
the body like a purse.  
When thrown back  
the tethering is quick,  
current a reaper  
honest in the coming.
Background Check

I can’t tell you I wasn’t raped
when violence is so close to universal.

Even this gesture is addictive,
daylight more restless than alive.

Touch where stitch marks bleed,
where the earth leans
and is mammalian again.
Hands and eyeholes—

if you don’t eat me,
I’ll eat myself.
Temper: white on white,
obliteration thereof.
All roads lead to the sentence I cannot write.
Promise I’m strong enough to break—
challenge over survival.

I’ve cried tears more stable
than your hands. Nothing
the birds ate killed them, but they died.

Be a witness. Arrest me.
Barbed Wire is Easier to Hold

Explain the abuse,
being cut through
because misogyny water travel bibles

never fed
butcher’s tongue.

My mother takes the ring out of her nose,
fits it to finger.

Can I be real if
dog sleeps in my bed and
has no words in the morning?

My Real Christian Truth is:
don’t talk back to white men because
history has been fair

drought took the cars but not the road signs.
Derivations of Trauma

I’ve never smoked a cigarette in a mirror before ≠ the will to pervert ÷ the sailor’s bed + I burned out of the nest young ± modulations, ontological cramp (the tree I’d grow opposable thumbs to climb) × I don’t know what my eyes told you ≠ even a dead body doesn’t stop experiencing trauma + nature ruins our things without addressing our stupidity + I offered my body and she sacrificed me every time = the things I see I’ll pick apart and bleed
Too Many Eyes for One Truth

Is this a vein or a state line, or a wound?

Breathing is stopped in my name.
White arms choke black necks—
getting off getting off getting off.

Officers could not be more intimate
with their guns — the constitution sweats.

Order is multiple contusions. Color is
how many guns are against you.

There is no more air between us:
the law’s delay, skin louder
than words — consistent elision.
Here where privilege and power do not translate.

Just look at the way we touch the earth.
Bodies owned and spoiled.
I’m the sour taste in my sister’s mouth.

White female cops do not use the same force
against people of color. How does one claim
self-defense when the gradient of violence is clear?
The white man will do anything
to disprove his rapability.

Time is thrown (patriotically) against isolation cells.

I’ve forgotten to change the bed,
my socks, the vacuum filter.
I’m waking where trauma becomes lifeblood,
like a skirt removed, sheets pulled over
another face, the last sip of coffee
rushing between the bottom of the mug
and lips. The way a body shrinks
under the touch of uniformed men and dies
and is so much more than a body.
Solo Climb

Out of your eyes
I salvage insistence.
To choose the instant
some father fucked me.

Be here. With your sheets and
prescriptions walking the multiplicity.

Consent wounds
sliding in lube. Every touch
not leaf-shadow but accepted ground—
now origin now ballast

oil me, wet dream.
Though I touch
this is not a masturbation poem.
The prophet is waiting
the profit is here.
Master’s Tools in the Master’s House

*after Audre Lorde*

The king tastes himself
and rules. He sucks and sucks—
how good I taste
under my laws.

Under my hand it rises
and I am wholly fed.
Who Queers Whom

1.
You told me my blood
was blue, heart a whoopee cushion
and still you stay
like a stove or a bedframe.

2.
We chew horny goat weed.
Fall asleep with our erections.

3.
The self curves and tilts,
eyes foolish fishing pools.

4.
Your body is an accident. I see you
already aligned.

5.
The slower I bite,
the longer I’ll feel your pulse
through the thin enamel
of my front teeth.

6.
We are buoys choking in the surf.
Remember to touch my head
in the night. Feel for fever,
interpret love. Here we are not wasted.
Relationship as Retrospective Language

I am not my—everything I want you
to hurt—overalls around your ankles:

thought I saw you at the old picnic table
or with your nose in a jar of mary jane,
but I’m fleeing the type of youth we’d been promised—
apricot halves settling in vases, their pits
rock gardens on fire escapes.

Thought you’d never torture me. Perhaps
with pizza boxes and wine bottles, but your ankles—
you know I would have put them as neatly into drawers
as they were on your body.

Leave me a trace
or the address of your grandmother’s grave.
Action

scene one: the noose is inactive

behave as a fiction—
apart audioated

instead of gin, trap
instead enemas

scene two:
a racialized sun/hope.
the radical blue, remember
your eyes will water
as when choking
or near vomit

scene three: the noose is active

be you, tearing into death
Grief as Cosmography

open the manual

who can tell who inserts
the goodbye first? —gravity
tears like a sparrow

to eat is to testify

look into inoperative words

when isn’t the addiction between your fingers and your lungs

there are always barriers
find the enabler

first memory uncut grain

eventually a lover’s touch becomes
indistinct from the laps of clothing

answer me

I was returned once

the seasons betrayed and served as courses of a meal

I will be returned again
Lucid Dream

The heart is a pendulum, you say
over the blood coming from your leg.

I lower myself into the tub with you,
imagine a pendulum chasing blood
in and out of your chest.

I punch my nose to stay,
we are bloody fish.
I open to your terror — who am I
to keep you here? I say count the stars
when I mean the scars. We are salt
and salt marsh, dehydrated, crystalized.
My fears and dreams are as separate
and tangible as fingers on the same hand.

How is this what coheres?
I will be shamed and mangled
between your palms — how strange
that you are only a landmark.
How Do I Tell You

That i came alive
to die my parent’s death—
these are the veins.
I will beat a man
in your name,
here where a doctor
has his wife in the dark.

That organs surrender on streets.
Surface to surface.
I am a blind man
with a salt lick of a face.
I choose the boiling point,
home where it is not wanted.
My body. Aquatic formation.
Asylum beaten out. Poetry
wall to wall elbowing blood.

War intended to survive.
Each bone now
a white, narcotic powder.
Cement poured into drought.
This will cost you.
Mouse Trap

Confusion slips and winces—
below ice, terror. Below ritual, fear.
Wanting lies to clutter and perform:
pretty ruins ruined, weapons
in the scholarly sense
walking shapes like genius.
Gravity — the name of only three men.

Pay your imagination now:
the horizon a threat, weapons relapse
into grids of war. Touch your eyes:
probability chews, grief syllable-izes.

What currency is syntax? My eyes.
Where sum still suspends.

My eyes out-walk the knife.
I was temptation alone. Barstools.
This knife is a servant to the blade.
Swallow place — this avid carving tongue, untethers.
**Intermission**

Quench habit while the sea is raw. Excuses.  
Each calm and carnal notation  
is marred with vacancy.  
Inundated with secrets, creation limps like lovers.  
This is our vice—a plea for origin—  
we are gazelles under a lunging moon. Delete us.
The Long Way

Last night my body shamed me.
I had crutches and wings,
neither were attached
to what I understood as my body.
Sensation apprehended by thought —
my love for you, suspension.
Through us it grew
like a spear or sprout. In a way,
my love for you shames me,
our bite-melt a reactionary.

I hear you, just brain and stem,
that night I became an elastic
for you to breathe into.
Vowels pile up like armor or laundry.
My poems cannot remember the lover in me.
Is risk enough? Do my poems love?
Give me something

I cannot do with my hands.
Resistance to writing is rigor mortis.
writing is rigor mortis — pulse and seesaw.
The lover and writer fight— heart a handgun
not knowing how to hold itself.

Finite over finite. Satisfaction is appetite too.
At the shore of your eyes, time is used, and loosens.
Posterity

begin the sentence already,
ensure erasure. my life. without infinity.
onions and unions. upon the good
cried tears. assimilate. dream
in my language. the cut and frozen
turkey neck. adams apple humiliates.
clump of. sickness is enthusiasm too.
transmission so interior. yeah, walk.
promise to hallucinate.
dearth a matter of grace. death is
not a matter of grace. dimes and gum.
chew my abandoned self. tools are organs are
selfish. endure the page. salt.
fingerpaint neglect.
Apprenticeship

A dog licks the blockage in my throat,
body an assembly line off the coast of Santa Cruz.

My eyes are the tourniquet to my mouth—
I don’t trust the holes you want me to fuck.

Nerves sex me, but I am disgendered.
Beyond. Behind. Exempt
tears crumbling like bread.

To want is not to ask for trauma.
Taste my mother’s milk.
Bathe my dog. Seed rhubarb
and garlic in my yard.
Peck me into moaning pieces.
Genderqueer

I so abstract. Would you know
if this were real? Do you make me
real? Wound to unwind. Taking off
the dress. I’m not looking to experiment
against experiment. Shot/teased/broke.

Would you have guessed
I was once a little white girl, so alone
I’d fill my eyes with toys?
Awareness always othering.
I cut off my hair
to forget the sores on my chest.
Dribble/shoot. There couldn’t be
just boys and girls. A chameleon,
I peered uneasily out.
My worst fear realized
when each side claimed the other had cooties.
I felt like the only one with cooties.

Humble frustration—
gender is a diversity like taste.
The body is trying to call home.
Crying on a Plane

Flying into the sunset for hours,
I know we will kill my childhood dog
in the same house where she was born,
that she will collapse right in front of us.
I outrun relief. The love I will not own
bleeds out, oxygen a cruel transport.

We will bury her before her mother,
with a clipping of dad’s boxers
and mom’s bathrobe pocket.

So you will leave the body’s cage.
Heart cold in spring ground. I will kiss you
into the earth we ran and peed on.

I narrate because I do not know how else
to help you die. We cannot talk about it.
It will just happen — one needle, then another
when you will not eat.

Forgive your mother for seeking treats
in the vet’s bag instead of watching over you.
Know that our tears gasp with your chest.
Know that we fought this too.
Untitled

sabotage. sabotage.
my parents bought
art before furniture,
the pieces gusted
through the house
like children.

sabotage. earlobes.
splints & splinters— thought
i said
— was—
mean did
your injections
your laundry.

my mother only
smiles now
when she’s meditating.

the ends
are not ropes
like your eyes are.
sabo—my limbs
do not enunciate.

laughter lasts, you know.

the busy,
free-bleeding air
hollowing hope.
The Patriarchy

When in doubt, remind me of your neighbor’s twenty-gun case.

You mansplain intention, power, the importance of physical and gendered limitations (forget ableism, think musculature), the self versus other blares — your right to take up space, my right to feel your insistent needle.

What are my terms when you have named them?

The dust will not settle. We are filthy, scared and everything you made us.
Articulations

I fit myself to so many bodies, the tethering of salt to the ocean. Cars die off, I pull dirt and tire from my mouth. The fertile, the redundant are overexposed — swordfish bones pushed through. This sober sex. This is the way you look at me, bent over another truth. Language is a terrain no one can move out of. Say this is spring as winter repeats itself. I’m trespassing, I’m un-tuned. The interval is blue. Don’t feel noosed while I strangle.
It’s Easier

It’s easier for me to want
what the white man has
‘cause I’m easier
for the white man to love—
easier for the white man
to dupe in his image,
with his white god, in his cage.

It’s easier for me to be angry
easier for me to jam a cock
in a white man’s ass
‘cause I’m beauty-white?

I don’t accept your imperialist
white supremacist heteropatriarchy.

My body is not guilty.
I am stained with self-love.
Headlines

bodies operate
another aqueous

if divide/spit/blow
oscillates— garage takes car,

if fruit flies’ genetic flux,
clockwork another.

donor override:
scars flaw enough.
Narration
for Abi

1.
I stand more than half naked,
in front of you
eating a red bell pepper
like an apple.

2.
Last night I waited in
the mirror while you slept,
imagined hips shaved
into a lean, androgynous trunk.
In a few hours, you will hold me
such that what I want
and what you see are both mine.

3.
You puppy-wiggle in my bed,
your eyes hiding within mine.
We don’t question this,
I am a concert hall,
embodying what is made.

4.
Even wrapped in panic, the way you
touch me, trauma surrenders.
What body is this
I tell to wait? How absurd
to give myself over at a time
you would never take me.

5.
I take away my lips. I will not
help you use sex
to avoid your thoughts.
Sleep atrophies against us.
I see your exposure to the wind.
6.
We gather together
as pillows or constellations,
our laughter trailing like sweat.

7.
I have never loved like snow:
quiet, accumulating.
You turn to solid in my truth.
Crime No Bigger Than a Lung

Define—some trees reek with light.
This morning you woke the poem, an informer.
How real this ellipsis. How real tight pants.
With you I mount the thematic see-saw.
Spell: picnic. The alphabet reeks and whimpers.
Ask me to be alone with you. Night capsizes
into bed. I walk off to where punctuation lifts.
The crime. Anthem. I have removed only one
of my breasts. Origin. To say empty.
Crime. To say empty without an accent.
The crime gives way.
Lightning Rod

I was told I should know better
the smell of justice. I say it is
like gasoline— scentless until altered.

Let’s take a fieldtrip, teach me
to unhook and dry my mind.
Tell me it’s not okay to linger and hunt.

This is not enough: a self I can bathe
but not be proud of. I’m not sure
if you said metabolized or metastasized—
normativity is a crude oil I rub my face in.

Give me more time to be alone with my lines,
to breathe when sleep is not, food is not,
pills are not— I tug my bladder
along by a leash. I wash without my hands.
There is no safety here.
Saved

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Identities

I’m picking up my feet with a shovel after rolling in something dead.

I’m changing the way I respond to my name, changing the expectation of a handshake—
    can I be and not touch?
    can mouthing words have meaning?
    are children meaning?

I’m guttural, cemented.
Drive your two-ton vehicles over me.
It’s not my body, only a sense, a pronged decision.

This is for the bubbling of memory, for morbid, ovular acts. The way a truth is told in pace with a tipped watering can or turn signal.

This is the rising and falling of a cat fitting into its nest.
Frame by Frame

To fall. To stand, to tape together.  
To playback, to store.

To reek of memory.  
To listen and understand too much,  
to incant. To tongue and forge.

To be the fool, to play pool.  
To win, to lose again.  
To use the over-salted peanuts for courage,  
to sweat when they don’t work.

To disclose. To double over  
the saturation point.  
To pillows on which a hurting head is hung.

To knot, to thumbs uncoordinated.  
To wishing you here and away.  
To retreat. To run empty.

To be visible but fluid-less.  
To close the cab door, to be yellow, then green.  
To feel feet in shoes, to know about wanting. To feel want.  
To reach, to clench.  
To show all the teeth that are left and pan out.