



January 2013

This Is Only A Test

Laurel Lynn Perez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Perez, Laurel Lynn, "This Is Only A Test" (2013). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1465.
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/1465>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact zeinebyousif@library.und.edu.

THIS IS ONLY A TEST

by

Laurel Lynn Perez

Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2011

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May

2013

Copyright 2013 Laurel L. Perez

This thesis, submitted by Laurel L. Perez in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.



Heidi Czerwiec, Chairperson



Elizabeth Harris

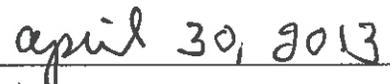


Christopher Nelson

This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



Dr. Wayne Swisher
Dean of the Graduate School



Date

Title This Is Only a Test
Department English
Degree Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work or, in her absence, by the Chairperson of the department or the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Laurel L. Perez

Date: April 30, 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | vii |
| ABSTRACT..... | viii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. THIS IS ONLY A TEST: AN INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II. SENSORY | 14 |
| Portrait of a Collector..... | 15 |
| Hunger..... | 16 |
| Deer Season | 17 |
| Zipper..... | 18 |
| Chocolate & Cigarettes..... | 19 |
| Splintered Glass | 20 |
| Music Man – Anything You Can Synthesize | 21 |
| Drywall | 22 |
| Self-Portrait as Venus and Adonis..... | 23 |
| Atomic..... | 25 |
| Permanence..... | 26 |
| End of Things..... | 27 |
| III. PERCEPTIONS | 28 |
| Double Exposure: Girl Feeding Deer With Hunter Father | 29 |
| Double Exposure: Ghost of a Girl With Woman Disguised as Self.... | 30 |
| Double Exposure: Girl-Child in Furs With Hungry Gentle-Man | 31 |

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| | Double Exposure: Daughter Sees Mother Mother Sees Happy Failure | 32 |
| | Double Exposure: The Girl on the Milk Carton Sees Herself | 33 |
| | Part II: Girl Examines Carton Family Still Searches | 34 |
| IV. | INVARIANT | 35 |
| | At a Party | 36 |
| | Unconscious | 37 |
| | If You Were Once Deeply Loved | 38 |
| | Suppositions of a OB-GYN Waiting Room..... | 39 |
| | Antiquated..... | 41 |
| | Endo Metra..... | 43 |
| | Tassomancy..... | 44 |
| | Wolves | 45 |
| | 46 & 2 Chromosomes | 46 |
| | Things Remembered, After the Flames are Gone..... | 48 |
| | To a Man on His Deathbed | 49 |
| | Touched..... | 50 |
| | The Weight Of | 51 |
| | Naked | 52 |
| | This is Only a Test | 53 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my husband, Nick, for supporting me through all my years of schooling, and for listening to and reading dozens of poems. Also, my family, Stephanie Culver, Jean Dentinger, and Grace Guinan for always believing in me. Finally, many thanks to my North Dakota family, Elaine Brinkman, Liz & Danielle Jessen for coming to all of my most important events, listening to my stories, and making me a special place in your family for the past eight plus years.

I'd also like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of my advisory committee for their guidance and support during my time in the Master program at the University of North Dakota. Specifically Heidi Czerwec for years of instruction that have improved my poetry immensely, and for reading and responding to many drafts. Chris Nelson, for always asking the difficult questions, and pushing me to do better than I thought I could. Liz Harris, for stepping in with wisdom on writing and attention to detail that helped me prepare my best work to date.

To: Nicholas

My struggle is harsh and I come back
with eyes tired
at times from having seen
the unchanging earth,
but when your laughter enters
it rises to the sky seeking me
and it opens for me all
the doors of life.

~ Pablo Neruda

ABSTRACT

This is Only a Test, a collection of original poems, explores perception: how we view ourselves both in our everyday lives and in our obsessions. My hope is to not necessarily to critique these moments or years in our lives, but to expose them in my aesthetic project, using free verse, form, and invented form to set them against the unexpected. By using and departing from traditional poetic forms I create new ways of reading the content. In writing about themes such as fertility, relationships, sexuality, and violence I look at the places we never meant to be in view of possible benefits and or complications to such themes. I will explore human reactions to these themes, and what we might see differently. I engage with forms and invented forms beyond how they are normally used, to create new ways of seeing the subject matter. With this project I set my work against theories of perception which rely directly on the information present in the stimulus, though many argue that perceptual processes are not direct, but depend on the perceiver's expectation and previous knowledge as well as the information available in the stimulus itself. I want these poems to engage on the critical level between the perceptions of the poems' speakers and readers, to discover what lies beyond their expectations. This project will focus on how perception operates as written, versus a purely visual medium.

I. *This is Only a Test*: An Introduction

This Is Only a Test takes its title from the final poem in the manuscript, because fundamentally, I argue that how we read life and construct knowledge is a test of our past experiences and what we've been exposed to. The title I hope causes readers to ask themselves throughout their reading of my work what the test might be, and where they might find the answers. This title then becomes a part of my project in terms of how it shapes the reading of the manuscript. I include titled sections with psychological epigraphs to further frame and alter the way that readers come to the text, adding new ways to read each poem within each section, while considering the whole.

The first section *Sensory*, is the most straightforward of the three sections, because as readers we rely on our senses to help us imagine and understand the world and the written word. These poems test how we observe situations in life, or bear witness to, asking readers to look again for further meaning. The test readers are then asked to take involves asking them to observe moments in new ways, while relying on their own past experiences, and in the end, what they see within these poems. The second section, *Perceptions*, asserts that we must actively create our own perceptions of reality, based on what we already know. The six poems of this section make use of a "double-exposure" invented form by Greg Williamson, I will discuss this form more later, to create multiple layers of perception.

The third section, *Invariant*, deals with textures that expand and change the patterns in the structures that we observe in any scene; these invariants are always present and change the way we see. The poems in this section of the manuscript are the most complex, in terms of theme, form, and speakers that note the various texture gradients in

their lives, or a moment in time. My aim in this third section was to use not only forms such as rondeau, an almost sonnet, and prose poetry, but also to add as much texture as possible by adding patterns such as repetition, rhyme, and layers of meaning. I have also moved into subject matter that is deeper, to give more space to perceive the textures. I work a lot with fertility issues in this section in what I hope are new ways, for example with my poem “Tassomancy,” which begins as a poem about a woman who is actually reading tea leaves. I use this uncommon space to move into difficult subject matter for the character and most readers, for example:

Tea leaves litter the counter,
hibiscus bits and kernels,
hand hovers above the mess,
pauses - *Should I be reading into this?*

The leaves then represent all that this character is not dealing with, and may create a space in which readers question their own lives, and test the limits of what we can know, and what even tea leaves cannot explain to us. Life doesn't give answers in tea leaves, or palm readings, but often one searches for meaning in those and other observations when we desire knowledge we don't have. This poem has been through a lot in terms of drafting, in order to help me explain as little as possible, and to give readers pause to interpret. This began as a prose poem, which had far too much explanation, and not enough suggestion to allow for readers to question. I then broke up the lines and found that I had to cut out almost half of what I began with so that I could create a poem that spoke for itself, but also could be read in a number of ways as a result of what I decided to cut out. Many of my poems went through similar cuts to achieve the sparseness, but details to resonate and help readers to read into each poem. As a result, I think this poem and others are much stronger and better suited for my project.

For this project, I have taken on some traditional forms to help me with different kinds of subject matter, such as villanelles, a rondeau, an almost sonnet, and pantoums. Each of these forms gave me a way to play with each subject by using repeated lines to change up the stakes. The sonnet, which is not a repeating form allowed me to be a little more ambiguous with my language, because without repetition I only had to grapple with syllable counts. Which I feel may give readers pause, to think about how to read it, and what ideas or themes to take away from what I was able to create in fourteen lines. When alternating repeated lines with small changes, the meaning changes as one reads, which helped my project's goal by adding different ways of seeing. This can also be said of the invented forms of Jorie Graham and Greg Williamson. I integrated prose poems into this project as well, because these longer, more elaborate forms gave me more space to enter into vivid description. The prose poem seems to be more elaborate because it has few limits, and because of the long lines I was able to enter a broad space with language, whereas in a traditional form, like a Villanelle I would be limited by space, line, and the repetition of the form. This description helped me move away from my usual narratives into other opportunities for texture and interpretation. I wanted to include free verse, because it gave me freedom to explore each subject as I felt might work best. Sometimes, I found that the restrictions of traditional forms would not advance my work in any way new, nor necessarily add to the context. Rather, I couldn't see a way of using traditional forms for the content I had in mind, or the goal of a specific poem. Free verse was how I could avoid using form just for the sake of using form. Free verse is also a kind of form, but the demands are different, this flexibility gave me the opportunity to make room for any kind of image or idea that I wanted to portray without having to force it into any kind

of tight package it wasn't suited for, which would be one of the dangers of using traditional forms. Beyond using free verse, and traditional forms, I experimented with line as well to shape my poems and draw reader attention in certain ways.

One of the free verse poems I included in *Sensory*, "Drywall," relies on the senses as a result of its sparse language and length of the lines. I have given only what is necessary in terms of description and narrative, to create a viewpoint of someone who hears her neighbor's violent argument. I have kept the lines and description minimal, to allow the reader to fill in the rest with their own senses:

She presses her ear to the
wall feeling the
vibrations of
screams pulsing
from next door.

In this poem, I have shown not only a fight behind closed doors, but the reactions of someone uninvolved, which causes the neighbor to perhaps think differently about her neighbors, violence, and in fact her own safety through such thin walls. This poem might be read differently, depending upon the reader, and his or her own personal experiences and insight into similar matters, or even a lack of past experience. Readers will have to rely upon their own senses, what they visualize, imagine, and perhaps even hear while reading may help readers to fill in what I have laid out. In my second section, I advance my project by adding in a second speaker(s) to each poem, which created another layer for readers to interpret.

In *Perceptions* I included "Double Exposure: Ghost of a Girl With Woman Disguised as Self." This invented form by Greg Williamson, shows my work with both free verse in each line, but still within some strictures, as by using end rhyme, and length

of line, as well as only twelve lines. This form has at least three ways in which one might read it, though I have used his form for my own purposes and changed his original use. On the left side of this poem we have an image of a young girl in a Polaroid looking at herself in a hand mirror with an unsure, and perplexed stare. The right hand side of the poem is of a grown woman, but it is not clear if it is the same girl from the left now grown up. The complexity of the poem can be seen in a few lines:

eyes wide, more unsure than most
Often, relishing in her imagined beauty,
perhaps she was just thinking too hard:
she wonders *who can see right through me?*

Reading just the right side of the poem connects us to the mirrored image on the left, and creates a reflection of possibly what the young girl saw, or didn't want to see, or vice versa. This might make readers uneasy because this poem in a way presents two reflections that are not fully clear, and readers will have to decide what they see, and what they don't. In line with my project, readers will have to construct the reality or truth of this poem, along with the others in each section. The difficulty in crafting double exposures is not only in using the form with the content, but further making two characters who represent the same woman at different points in her life, as another way to complicate the reading. Additionally, I had to work to make sure there was some sort of meaning, and that these poems didn't end flatly, or not leave room for readers to perceive who this woman was or is now, and how she views herself. In the third section, I continues to add to the stakes of this project, by complicating the poems themselves, and in the themes I discuss.

In *Invariant*, I included a prose poem, "At a Party," which is presented as a "we" collective voice to create the sense that readers could easily be a part of the poem, or

imagine others within the “we.” This offers readers the ability to have as many ways of reading as there are ways to imagine the various speakers at this party. This section builds upon the previous two sections in terms of basing our perceptions both on our senses and constructing knowledge on what we know from past experiences. I chose language to hook readers, but still allow them space to perceive what they know of parties such as this:

Our bodies are the things left unsaid.
Unsaid. Left things. We leave our minds outside, afraid the words will seep in.
Left things, things we left inside. Sweaty bodies seem a wonderful excuse to rub
and slide up against.

I chose to write this as an anaphoraic catalogue poem so that I could ground the poem in a unifying theme of “Things left unsaid,” and extend the statement into other more colorful descriptions of the people and things occurring at this party. This way there is more to take in and experience, and more for readers to connect with their own knowledge. This poem also began as something much longer, and heavily relied on the repetition of “The things left unsaid” as well as much more description. While polishing this poem it became clear that there was a point in which the repetition overwhelmed the other things happening in this poem. I drastically cut back, and mixed the words and punctuation around further, to make the meaning rely on how it was read. I further decided that the description, while important, was so heavy handed that it left little for readers to read into and imagine. There are other themes I address in a few poems that ask readers to insert their own ideas and experiences into the poem to make meaning.

I have four poems that deal directly with fertility, which was a choice I made knowing that readers could read into the work as Confessional. My hope is that I have readers who do not assume my poems are a confession, because I do not claim them as

my confessions. I believe it would color me as a poet, and my work in way that I do not wish to be labeled. But I felt this subject matter important to my project, and because I believe that good readers will not assume “I” is necessarily Confessional, I decided to risk it. In “This Is Only Test” I even went so far as to work from the male perspective, to further avoid anything close to Confessional. As I mentioned above, my goal is not to confess my own experiences, but to open up what I can write about by not limiting myself to only my experience. “Suppositions in an OB-GYN Waiting Room” is even written without much of a recognizable speaker, more of an omniscient narrator making assumptions about the kinds of people found in such a room:

Then there are those
older nervous or sad seeming women
eyes closed in hope or disbelief.
Awaiting any news --
Women that cleave tightly to their
boyfriends, fathers, husbands, or handbags

By removing myself as much as possible, I hope that it abstains from reading as Confessional, so that readers can find other ways to perceive my project. Simultaneously, I believe that by addressing many types of women present I can connect with more readers, and readers have much to ascertain.

As mentioned earlier I have adopted Greg Williamson’s invented form “double exposures.” He writes a sequence of poems purported to describe an accidental double exposure of film, to see what comes of describing two photos that have been blended literally, and the resulting effect. His project uses alternating lines of two stand alone poems, that can also be read as a meshed whole. In this he has made a whole new way of seeing, by showing ideas and images that change depending on how one looks at it, or in this case read.

Superbowl XXX. And see, strung-out and thin,
The skeleton has been exposed against
The Domino's Pizza man, enveloped in

A black felt background. Poor Bones, he's been flensed.

His form creates a little twelve-line glimpse of two aspects or viewings of a literal double exposure of film, it attracted me immediately for my own project. I felt that accessing a form that offers two aspects that are separate yet interwoven would be a perfect form for creating ways of seeing. In using his form, I have written my own variation, by setting up two speakers on each side of the poem to add more levels in which to perceive the same event. For example in “Double Exposure: Girl Feeding Deer With Hunter Father” I set up a father speaker in one half of the poem, and a daughter in the other. Both speak to part of the picture. The father looks back on the event depicted in the photo. The daughter looks back on how she felt at that time in her life. When the narratives blend, readers are given a fuller picture; this allows more for the reader to perceive and imagine, without actually having a picture to look at.

Jorie Graham has an invented form, a fragmented self-portrait, that I have also tried to use, that creates and questions portraiture in her collection *The End of Beauty*. This form gave me the ability to tell a story that could be read in different ways, I see this form as a portrait of one or even two people, which changes a reader’s ways of seeing in such work. Moreover, she creates a portrait of the self but as a wordless gesture between them; these gestures are mirrored in her use of fragmentation in the narrative. This poem goes on for thirty-three stanzas, or as I like to think of them, glimpses of a larger portrait. In this way the work seems to culminate into a larger picture by adding up the parts, and also by setting them against one another.

In my poem “Self-Portrait as Venus and Adonis” I have used her form to revisit a mythological story, in fragmented stanzas from a different time. In using this form I have added to my rhetorical project by catching bits and pieces of two people, which gives a fairly straightforward story, but one that could be read in a couple of different ways. Her wordless gestures between the two characters gave me space in my own work to tell a story of two people, but also to create gestures between the poem and readers. There are places within the poem where words are replaced with algebraic “X” and “Y,” to create space to allow readers to fill in the blank that lets readers become a part of the text by filling in their own words. This helps readers to be further immersed in my project by asking them to call on their own previous knowledge, and makes new interpretations of the poem itself. This poem was very long at first, as I felt I had to tell the whole story, at least the majority of the details because not all readers might know the mythology. Yet in revision, I decided that the mythology mattered less, and how I could make space for readers to fill in the gaps was much more interesting and fit my project of perception by doing so.

I have not fully stayed away from my own knowledge and experiences in my poems, but I have chosen not to claim all of these experiences as my own. This allows me a way to deal with subject matter that may or may not be personal without becoming too cliché or emotional; it has also allowed for me to abstain from becoming too confessional. In this way, I could write from a position outside of my own experiences, thus making a space in which to create different possibilities for readers to perceive from my project. “Chocolate & Cigarettes” is an example of one of the few times I have used the first person; this poem does contain elements of my experience, but I chose to zoom out on

some of the bigger personal issues, and focus in on childhood loss, so that readers might be able to relate. Whereas, by focusing on only personal details would likely push readers outside of the poem. For example:

He always took my side when I was at odds with my mother; and every day after school he took me to Kewpie Kone for chocolate soft serve, always chocolate, always on a cone, always all over my face.

I also made it not just about the loss of the parent, but the loss of the silly kid things like missing chocolate ice cream trips, to steer clear of what could become an emotional trap by moving into the sentimental. Focusing on only the death would have made this poem only about death and grief, I wanted it to have a few more layers and not be so sentimental. Further, by comparing sticky ice cream to the sticky nicotine of the cigarettes that took away my father's life, I have extended it into a larger metaphor about childhood and Cancer in general, thus allowing me a little more distance from the "I" I am writing from. I hesitated using my perspective, but I wanted to reach readers from many speakers, and by avoiding "I" entirely, I was doing my project a disservice. Not to mention, when I sat down to write this, there was no other voice that was going to work in my mind.

A poet, who has greatly increased my work in terms of not only how I write, but what I write in order to offer different ways of interpreting the meaning of my poems is Lee Ann Roripaugh. Her work constantly brings in unexpected animal imagery, such as insects, fish, and octopi. As I have been crafting my own work, I have kept in the back of my mind how I might think differently about my own chosen subject matter, and bring in the unexpected as she does so well. I may not have a ton of animals appearing in this project, but I think I have stepped outside of expectations in some of my work. Adding in

content that seemingly has nothing to do with the rest of the poem, will create a new interest in my work. I hope that readers will be caught off guard, and become interested by what I have presented in these poems, so that they see the connections I made by the end. By adding in the unexpected as Roripaugh does, I believe that I have added ways to read my work, which helped my poems avoid being seen as too impassioned, which I think would take away from the work. A specific example is “Endo Metra” where I discuss a woman who is diagnosed with endometriosis, her reactions, and thoughts:

presses her fingertips into her abdomen
tries to feel and picture each organ,
the web of her uterus and ovaries suspended.

I needed a way to talk about sensitive subject matter in a new way, and wondered how I might describe such an experience. Here is where the animals come in: I described her sexual organs in terms of spiders eggs and webs. This gave me the ability to write about fragility in a way that provoked many startling images. In fact, this focus helped me to see that original versions of this could be cut down to rely on these images. This poem at first began with the speaker being spoken to by her doctor, and her internal reactions, instead of showing what I could with gesture and description.

The title poem “This is Only a Test” also incorporates the idea of animals, or rather monsters, that can be created by genes mixing into special-needs children. This is not exactly how Roripaugh uses animals in her poems, but it is a nod at ways of seeing. I knew that I would need other ways to talk about this subject matter, ways to provoke many different images in keeping with my perceptions project, such as a focus on genes that might be transmitted:

His genes, blood-warm in his hands
seemed radioactive --
incandescent reactor
replete with malformed mutations.

By providing images for readers I hope to incite different emotions for them as they read, thus changing the way they might have read without being startled into new perceptions or thoughts. I think that many of the ways I have approached my poems both in form, punctuation, epigraphs, and content will cause readers to think about the subjects in new ways. In this way my project continues by changing the way readers may or may not be persuaded to read and interpret in many ways.

While working on each and every poem, even the poems that didn't make it into this project, I have learned many things about myself as a writer, my voice, and where I know I am still learning how to best craft a poem. I have always known that I generally write more than I need, both as a drafting strategy and as a way of figuring out what I want to do and say in a poem. I worked diligently to cut back the unnecessary and while trying to be conscientious of what really needed to be focused on for the purposes of allowing readers to perceive the rest. I have had to make decisions for what made my poems better, even if it meant cutting lines I was attached to in the beginning. I now think that I may have been diluting my own voice previously, with so many extra lines and even pages to create a moment, to prove something, or to describe, what was already there in few better crafted lines. This project isn't perfect, and I still see places that I will continue to lay awake at night trying to work through, but I know where I am going from here. Now, that I have learned a few things about myself as a poet, and my voice I think if I were asked how I want readers to come to my poetry, I would say that I want them to

come to each poem as I have, without knowing where it might go, and come to the final line and be surprised.

T.S. Eliot once said that “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.” In this project I have worked to create poems that can communicate fragments of lives, truths, and ways of seeing, before they can be fully understood. Even then, I hope that more than providing definitive answers, I have caused readers to question which answers might be the right ones. In trying to be as genuine as possible, I believe that in working within theories of perception (which have always interested me in terms of what art can do to the perceiver), I have taken this collection to a new level. It is my hope that after reading this collection, that readers will continue to look for how they construct what they see each and every day, because I know I will be.

II. Sensory

The formation of incorrect hypotheses will lead to errors of perception.

Richard Gregory on Top-Down Processing 1970

Portrait of a Collector

He collects butterflies, you know --
keeps them in his office, framed;
pins their wings like so.

This insect anthology began long ago.
They keep him entertained.
He collects butterflies (did you know?),

their pressed wings beneath glass glow.
His wife peers at painted moths, her eyes pained
as he pins their wings like so.

For days he hunts, net swishing to and fro.
Do you understand what he has gained?
He collects butterflies, he wants you to know.

Glass shatters, wife shrieks "you have family, you know!"
Surprised, he clasps her arms, is ashamed
to find he likes her restrained -- pins her wings like so.

Later, his family looks so pretty, in their own tableau;
he keeps them in his office framed.
He collects butterflies, you know --
pins their wings, like so.

Hunger

An infant's mouth opens and closes
searching for its mother's breast,
tongue stretched out in quick pink darts.
Eyes bulging in desperation --
a lack of words.

The screech of adolescent lips
spittle misting the air.
Search for open ears,
doors slammed,
the wrong words.

Adult conversations --
fast tongues to palates,
confident lips
words often misused
yet arguments easily won.

We shape language
an attempt to gain our desires
unable at times to communicate.
We are hungry for what
language can provide.

These words are not enough.

Deer Season

Draped over the edge of the
Blue truck's tailgate
You stare blankly.
Eyes wide and dark,
Reflecting streetlights.
Falling snowflakes gently
Land on your thick lashes.
Your matted tawny fur
Smearred with mud.
Your head bounces with each
Each bump in the road.
Antlers clanging against the truck's bed
Streaks of blood run
From your parted mouth
Down the tailgate,
Slowly dripping to the road.

A product of this culture,
few bat an eye --
but I see you
growing colder,
breastbone incision gaping
they'll take everything from you
and burn your bones.
Ashes left of a life,
a flame extinguished
by two wet fingers pressed.

Zipper

A hundred
tiny teeth
Interlocked.
Little metal
chevrons
entwined.
Prone to
pinching,
swift
metallic
clicks.
Steel
digits,
a ladder.
One quick
motion,
an un-
spiraling
tick tick
tick.
Beneath
the silver
zipper,
opened --
warmblood
and flesh
a tiny silver
passage to
you.

Chocolate & Cigarettes

When I was in first grade, my father was my hero; I even wrote an essay about him entitled: Superman. He always took my side when I was at odds with my mother; and every day after school he took me to Kewpie Kone for chocolate soft serve, always chocolate, always on a cone, always all over my face.

When he left I was angry at my mom, that she didn't know we had to have Kewpie Kone after school; like it was her fault. Days, I imagined he had another family, better than ours. Nights, I dreamed he still came to visit me, take me for ice cream. I kept hoping he'd come back for me. I dreamed I'd moved in with his new family.

These scenarios were far better than the fact that he was never coming back. I could handle him having another family; but he left because of those cigarettes he smoked, that tarred his insides dripping like melted chocolate, until everything turned black.

Splintered Glass

She studies herself in the fractured mirror,
her knuckles sting and bleed.
Hoping for a new perspective, only
finding again the lines on her face,
marking her life
like pencil ruled lines
a growing child on a door frame.

The freckled cheek
examined closely --
dry skin cracks
and stories drawn.

Her small face is broken,
multiplied by hundreds of fissures,
each splintered line in the glass
begins her image reworked.
Wanting to see her youth
her beauty as power.
Searching for past
experiences to frame those
she never had.
She leans in closer,
blinking
her one blue eye
winks at her from
a kaleidoscope of shards.

The blood vessels in the whites of her eyes
have expanded -- inky red veins
seeping into retina
tracing iris.

She cannot stop
scrutinizing every crease.
Looking for some other answer,
anything beyond years wasted
some opening to fall into.

Music Man -- Anything You Can Synthesize

Eyes closed, she lets the melody vibrate through her
pulse, reacting to treble and bass
synthesized piano chords reverberate in her.

She lie, ear to wooden floor
palms pressed into the ground
allowing herself to feel the speakers pound.

There are no words in this song --
she has no words after twenty years
she shudders and misses her father.

Classical music from downstairs,
a disharmony between orchestra and
each throbbing beat.

She focuses in on the blending of sounds
shuts out her own techno and
concentrates on every shift in the music below.

A polyphony of resonance and memory of the band leader
each ever lovely note, a reminder
of her father's slender musician's fingers.

Beneath her the music swelled
a booming in which she could almost hear
his voice instructing through the cacophony.

Could hear his disapproval of the synthetic
dislike of how far she'd gone without,
reminding of the beauty in the organic.

Flat palms strike the polished wood
feeling like Beethoven deaf, without him,
the music is painfully beautiful.

Drywall

She presses her ear to the
wall feeling the
vibrations of
screams pulsing
from next door.

“Fuck!”

A male voice
hollers.

A female weeps and sniffles
a voice speaking softly.

She cannot hear her
words but
knows they are important,
she places her
hands flat
upon the wall,
stretches
her fingers and
pushes her
ear harder
against the wall.

“I love you!”

The female
Whispers,
her voice makes the
wall shiver
beneath her palms.

He yells again,
this time rattling the
wall, quaking against her ear.

The wall seems to swell
against her skull.

Anger welling
into the drywall.

The wall seems like
paper,
a frail
reminder there is
little between
them.

Self-Portrait as Venus and Adonis

1

In all the world there was none more beautiful
than young Adonis (who had no interest in love).
He was built for beauty
His only joy in riding and hunting sweet deer.

2

Venus, goddess of love was infatuated...
Left the heavens to make Adonis love her.
(She knew she could have him in all her glory
How could he say no? No mortal would stand a chance).

3

She forced him to tie his horse,
Recline by her side
while she spoke passionately about love.

4

She numbered all the pleasures she could offer him.
(Let x represent what we are, and y what we can be)
He turned to run (why doesn't no mean no? Is there some
secret x I must say for it to mean x?)

5

Deserted by his horse he looked at her with disgust.

6

She fainted.

7

Fearing he had killed her (will you forgive me? I swear
I will try to love you).
She asked for a final kiss.

8

His kiss gave her a vision of his death,
(A boar will be his x, her y).
(Don't leave me, I can protect you from fate).

9

(If she had done x , would she have achieved a better y ?)

Atomic

Imagining that your freckles
are atoms bound in your skin,
I press the veins along the
back of your hand,
Wanting my fingertips to fuse to yours.

I often find your hair on my tongue
your scent on my hands and
in my hair -- I wonder
with what do I mark you?

A pair held by force
an attraction between opposites.
Two isolates merging
but repelled by the contention
behaving as tops spinning upon an axis
we spin in different directions,
pushing us closer together
more stable
together than apart.

Permanence

Thick black lines
outline of something bigger
ends curling out
a filigree design.
Crimson and persimmon hues
swirling inside the edges
the ink pools on skin
smeared around in tiny circles
blending with pinpricks of blood
beneath six tiny needles.
We choose artifice to adorn ourselves
lovely natural scenes
sacred texts.
We mar ourselves
as reminders
perhaps of who we are or who
we wish to forget.
We brand ourselves with false images --
pleasant images to cover pain,
or ugly things never to forget.
Either way we are attempting to hide
cover up a past mistake or
create a new one,
a persistent reminder of who we are,
hope to become, or once were.
Sometimes it's just something beautiful
or stupid, or vague.
Sometimes we are simply marking a life
that seems utterly unimportant,
a permanent crease of ink on a page.

End of Things

Eventually one has to walk away,
once there is nothing left to give --
there is nothing left to say.

When the relationship is clearly cliché
when you can't think of moments you want to relive,
eventually one has to walk away.

No longer wanting him to be part of each day
the list of transgressions too long to conceive --
There is nothing left to say.

Why is it, that he often strays
leaving so much to forgive,
eventually she had to walk away.

We thought this feeling would stay,
not sift through our hands like a sieve,
silence between -- there is nothing left to say.

We have advanced into decay
stopped caring, talking, trying to misgive.
Eventually we both walked away
there is nothing left to say.

III. Perceptions

A lot of information reaches the eye, but much is lost by the time it reaches the brain.

Richard Gregory on Top-Down Processing 1970

Double Exposure: Girl Feeding Deer
With Hunter Father

That's me at the old house, the one on the forest line.
I called her Rosie, in the picture you see,
My daughter used to feed the deer, beneath the ancient pine
that doe in my childhood yard. In my youthful sympathy
I loved that damn deer. That deer's artifice:
I saw myself in that doe, I read too much into this,
a blurred negative, gun cocked, aimed. I reminisce --
picture the way our human hearts mislead us --
when I almost shot my daughter, way back when
(father just in view, gun high, just a deer, right?)
I locked up my rifle, vowing to let that deer in my yard again.
Exquisite fawn beauty treading the night.

Double Exposure: Ghost of a Girl
With Woman Disguised as Self

Between self-love and self-rage

A soft focus Polaroid that

is a place she seldom goes, an image:

shows a girl of thirteen, looking at

herself successful (in self-hate this is disguised)

her pale face in a hand-mirror, as if she'd seen a ghost --

(she cannot see herself) Oh how she's glamorized --

eyes wide, more unsure than most

Often, relishing in her imagined beauty,

perhaps she was just thinking too hard:

she wonders *who can see right through me?*

the wilderness outside her own backyard.

Double Exposure: Girl-Child in Furs
With Hungry Gentle-Man

The first time I knew I'd marry her?

Overexposed. I lay naked,

Easy, when she lay undressed, wrapped in fur
embarrassed, cold, I couldn't fake it --

awkward, limbs delicate soft and silent
his dark eyed desire made uneasy

her childlike beauty made love feel violent
skin to skin, I felt less sleazy

like something hungry, uncontrollable --
flushed friction, and flesh we burned.

I wanted more than to make her comfortable.
After, I wondered what I had earned.

Double Exposure: Daughter Sees Mother
Mother Sees Happy Failure

The photo of my mother is radiant, soft belly rounded
I've always loved this picture
her right hand caressing her abdomen, she looks so grounded
That was the realest love I've ever known, even if I lost my figure
Like nothing had ever happened, like her life was perfect
I was so healthy then, our little family growing
she always says she loved being pregnant, when I was born she wept--
your father said I was glowing
when she drives me insane, I remember how much she loved me then:
of course, that wasn't you in there. I didn't tell him, never did.
Even when she has failed me time and again.
It was the one we couldn't have -- the one I hid.

Double Exposure: The Girl on the Milk Carton
Sees Herself

The milk carton marked *Missing*, shows a girl with her best friend
She found the 2% behind a carton of half 'n' half.

Just sixteen, blowing out her candles, a memory without end--
almost dropping the milk, she recognized herself in that photograph

One day talking back, the next she was gone, family couldn't understand,
pulled into her past, her transparencies, her shame --

when had their daughter changed, when had she gotten out of hand?
She had tried so hard to forget her old identities, her name;

They posted flyers everywhere, plastered her face
her secrets that had made her unfit

to every surface. Wanting nothing more than one more embrace
though she knew no one would see how she didn't fit inside of it.

Part II: Girl Examines Carton
Family Still Searches

There wasn't a place that they hadn't looked

She hadn't left so much as a hint

Searched her room, picked through notes, flipped through every book

Knowing her friends and family would be fine, she couldn't look back, and didn't

Asked all her friends again and again, "Are you sure?"

The night she snuck from her cage

Tried to think of someone else to ask, another place to find her

So unattached, she left to make the world her stage

Convinced she had to have been taken

She thought, nobody is ever really missing, and dropped the carton in the snow

Unable to know why she might leave, she had spared them feeling forsaken

They were all still looking. Five years later, how was she to know.

IV. Invariant

When we move our head and eyes or walk around our environment, things move in and out of our viewing fields. Textures expand as you approach an object and contract as you move away.

James Gibson on Bottom-Up Processing 1966

At a Party

Smoke swirls around dancing girls, half dressed and ripe for bad decisions.

The incense is bitter, like peppery patchouli, but does not cover the smell of pot and cigarettes.

Things left unsaid allow this party to continue. If we all opened our cotton mouths and screamed brittle truths, the walls would quake.

The truths are mixing in the air with the sweat evaporating from slick bodies pulsing to techno, this house pulses with the vibrations of sonic sound and unsaid words.

Things left unsaid are better left alone.

We show our unsaid rage by inhaling and bumping and grinding. No one makes it to the Keg without being groped. No one enters this house without being sucked into the mass.

The music cranked to full capacity, some try to have conversations but fail. Many things are left unsaid in this room.

Our bodies are the things left unsaid.

Unsaid. Left things. We leave our minds outside, afraid the words will seep in.

Left things, things we left inside. Sweaty bodies seem a wonderful excuse to rub and slide up against.

We have all become unisex, shirts and skirts have made it to the floor and we are trampling those restrictions, we are shoving them into corners.

In this house we are swingers grasping in the dark, nothing inhibits. As far as we can tell there are no consequences, things we will leave unsaid.

There will be more left unsaid tomorrow, when we wake.

Bodies draped over chairs, couches, the coffee table -- bodies entangled in each other's hair, sweat -- and is that glitter? Bodies on top of beds and duvet covers on the floor. Bodies on top of bodies. Flaccid penises stuck to legs and arms and faces. Bruised thighs and breasts propped on pillows and greasy faces. Perhaps (these descriptions are) better left unsaid.

As we wake and peel others' bodies from our sides, we will search for our clothes and our minds.

Pull on various garments in hopes of covering our perceived nakedness. With that nakedness comes knowledge we never wanted. We make this night a thing left unsaid.

There are many things we left unsaid that we have swallowed and hidden in our bellies as we leave, are left.

We are choking on these things left unsaid.

Unconscious

Thick oil paints smear the canvas
reds and blues, blending violet
behind the fingerprints and brush strokes
an inky nude lies lined
beneath the rich tones and linseed oil lacquer
seemingly faint upon her chaise lounge
nipples erect as though aroused
dimpled by the pen's point
nothing exists to mark her sex beyond
her heavy breasts
not even a hair or triangle to make her female
she lacks any feet
as if they were never drawn
her hands lie clasped behind her head
eyes blackened and scratched out.

If you were once deeply loved

and without her, you are now excluded
and now she loves others far more than you,
if you were once her greatest lover but she stopped
letting you in, what does it feel like outside

of her limits? Does her love emit
into other people, does it make you angry?
Do you still reach out for her in the dark?
Do you wonder if they perform for her

as well as you did? No longer even friends she's
giving others what you were denied, what stories

might you tell of her love's terrible walls,
her rages and secrets -- her memory now spoils.

Suppositions of a OB-GYN Waiting Room

All sorts wait here
from the pre-teen girls
snapping bubble gum to
little old ladies with walkers and
few men, many alone.

It's hard not to assume
why they're there
from the obvious round bellies
full of babies to
those in for annual exams.

Too-young girls
in oversized sweaters
some with anxious boys
or older men.

Proud couples beam,
seasoned women watch their offspring play
reminding them to be nice
from their chairs with
swollen ankles.

Then there are those
older nervous or sad seeming women
eyes closed in hope or disbelief.
Awaiting any news --
Women that cleave tightly to their
boyfriends, fathers, husbands, or handbags
slowly exiting or
rushing out the door.

Some hold brown bags with samples
others diaper bags, carpet bags,
some designer purses spilling binkies and babas --
Each bag could reveal a secret
each hiding information.

Most women find themselves here
some version of this space;
perhaps never noticing those around them
who all have their own story to tell.
These waiting rooms leave us
to our own devices,
trying to be incognito
most uncomfortable
all waiting to get it over with.

Antiquated

Every summer she dons a new floral dress
without fail, she slips on flats and
drives to the only antique store in town.
An old metal shop still smells of
melted steel; the floor's stained cement.
Shelves lined with rusting parts,
walls a montage of old mirrors, empty frames,
bed parts, and shed tools.

She walks slower than usual
pausing at each bauble
humming to her own tune.
It takes hours to see and gently
run her fingertips over each artifact
every heirloom reminds her of
some past person, event,
some story once told.

She finds the same trinkets her great grandparents
had in their home on Buena Vista Avenue.
The store smells of the rubber toys
her grandparents kept around for
their grandchildren, sticky toys
smelling faintly of syrup.
Porcelain dolls with cracked cheeks
faded aprons with unknown spills.
Combs, shells, costume jewelry from
another time, another place.
Some she can see in her own home
when she was a child
others she tries to imagine
what homes they came from,
where they might fit now.

All the while she thinks of her life
the places she has been
the pieces of her life she
has left behind

now or soon antiquated.
Cabbage Patch dolls she loved
tea sets and Barbies long gone
much like some she sees here.
She imagines who might want
these dolls now or later,
what child would love something so used?
A child who has lost someone
or something dear --
who holds fast
to what has already passed.

Endo Metra

Her doctor
spoke words that meant
her body: cervix, uterus.

All she hears: inflexible, useless.

As she dresses she pauses,
presses her fingertips into her abdomen
tries to feel and picture each organ,
the web of her uterus and ovaries suspended.
She imagines her ovaries like a nest of spider's eggs
ivory cotton down, with thin blue veins.
Fallopian tubes as threaded bridges
to her uterus' perforated silk.

*Who would live in that deep darkness?
What could grow in that hollow
scarred tissue?*

Thinks about her own spinnerets
their catatonic state -
She wonders if her eggs are marred,
eggs fragile as webs
torn easily from doorways.
Feels herself yanked from her frame
lacking a dragline.

Have all these delicate parts hardened in me?

Hard. Immovable.

*What could possibly form in
something so desolate?*

Tassomancy

The tea bag rips open:
the wrapper torn too quickly
startles her morning haze,
glazed eyes widen.

Tea leaves litter the counter,
hibiscus bits and kernels,
hand hovers above the mess,
pauses -- *Should I be reading into this?*

Staring at the debris she seeks
cloud-like outlines, for puppies,
hearts, or fetuses.
*A lock may mean obstacles;
a door, an event.
An hourglass: the need to decide --
She places palm to belly.*

Wolves

Your blades cut the ice crossing over and over in circles around the rink. You hear the scrape of metal and ice blur together, the sound misting the air, but you barely feel your feet touch the solid surface, powder lifts from your skates and softly lands in your wake. Your teammates call you off the ice, not understanding this tradition after each game, where you race no one but yourself; the cold sound of the ice cracking, your blades shaving layers. They always mock you when you do this, still in half your gear, you skate until the zamboni kicks you off, sometimes longer in nothing but your spandex tank top, bottoms, shin guards and socks -- no helmet.

In the glorified closet they call a locker room you pull off layers, and watch the others pour sweat from their skates, wipe it from their eyes. Everyone reeks, helmet matted hair sticking up in various directions, you try not to breathe in as you attempt modesty as one of only two girls on the team changing with boys who're like brothers, except Zack, you two hooked up once, and it's never been the same. Miranda, the team's goalie, tears off layers with no shame, freckled flesh soft and goose pimpled. This is your team, a pack of wolves that fights for each other on and off the ice. You've seen just about everyone on this team half naked, or exposed mid-dress, you say nothing when you see too much, say nothing when the joints or pills are passed around, say nothing when you go home with Miranda (you practically live with her now), say nothing when she offers you a shot to match hers when she runs her hands down your arms or when her hands slip between your legs. Your team is your family, as close to one as you've ever had, you say nothing to keep the peace, you say nothing to keep what you can -- you say nothing.

46 + 2 Chromosomes

There are three different kinds of
humans on earth,
each perceiving one reality
in three different ways
interpreted differently.

The first have 42 + 2 chromosomes,
their consciousness does not see
anything outside of themselves
only one energy within them,
a singular consciousness.
A life of selfishness
ignorant of any other
thriving without the
burden of other
consciousness.

The second, more common
have 44+2 chromosomes
a place where we can see
various realities all around us.
Whether we choose to accept
each reality or not,
we know that they are there.
Recognizing that others
are a part of our stories,
whether we take them
into our lives or not
we are affected.

The third, 46 + 2 chromosomes
changes everything.
Traits often repressed
surface -- an anima
that influences
all chemical reactions.
A shadow looms
in this consciousness
46+2 people

cannot deal with an environment
that reminds them of
repressed aspects of themselves.
If they reject sex,
overly sexual persons
may cause irrational fear
or outbursts of anger.

This 46+2 shadow
is a defective archetype
potentially powerful and
dangerous --
Representing everything
about ourselves that we
fear and despise.
A veil over every
awareness --
a panic that
what we hate in ourselves
mirrors back at us
in every person
we encounter.
Staring at our failures
forced to run away from
or meet them every time we interact.

Can you imagine such a life?

Things Remembered, After the Flames are Gone

The Kitchenaid mixer you
just got for Christmas,
bright red and steel beauty.
The medicine cabinet you just filled
with cotton, q-tips, purple
nail polish.

The birdcage from
the local antique store that
sat in the back of the walk in closet
for five years,
awaiting a canary.

The desk left unsanded,
wasted Tiffany blue paint.
Drawers filled
with poems, Post-Its, pens.

Unfinished knitting,
board games left unopened,
still tightly bound in shrink wrap,
CDs, books, and films
still un-alphabetized.

How dirty the bathtub.
The sheets on the bed
not yet changed
stiff with sweat.

To a Man on His Deathbed:

And did you get what you wanted from this life? Did you see the stars up close, name them after the children you never had? You always talked of running marathons across the country, hiking unknown paths, and forging new trails.

You used to tell me of your wife Grace, the one with the golden brown curls, the red gingham bikini. You said she was most beautiful in the morning, sleep still smeared across her lashes, drool dried on her chin, lips pouting at rest, her hair in curlers -- You said no one was ever as lovely as your tired wife, just beginning to rise.

Did you get what you wanted from this life? The ten kids, five boys, and five girls, with their mother's curls and your dimples? Did they grow up to be doctors and preachers? From this life, you took all the imaginings you could find, built them up in your mind -- the tapestry of a life.

And what did you build?

Touched

Angry, shaking, she sees nothing but red,
she wants to bite, to be bitten: Although,
she'd pull someone gentler to her bed

Wants any kind of touch, when she's low,
imagines calloused hands that scratch, until
shaken to present, the wind outside blows.

Grasping sweaty sheets she wants to kill
to make the desires stop, kick the habit
would do anything to make herself still.

She needs a damn relationship or pill
to stop the voices (her gasping for air)
someone to dance naked with, upon hills:

She laughs out loud, "red beasts are everywhere;"
ha ha! Listen they are near: hear, oh hear!

The Weight Of

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God
from "Daddy," Sylvia Plath

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
these are the burdens she bears --
She tells anyone who'll listen
that having a bag full of God
is like having all of the cards in a deck
but not knowing what to do with them.

Marble-heavy
like knowing you're going to die.
A bag full of God
as if you had severed him from heaven
stolen all of life's answers
carved in
a language you cannot read.

A bag full of God
imagine the weight --

She carries this burlap sack
though she cannot open it.
A power she is unwilling
to wield.

Naked

Naked in front of a full-length mirror,
posed, airbrushed beauties in magazines.
Scrutinizing your large round breasts,
counting dimples on your ass.

Posed as airbrushed beauties in magazines,
wanting to see a golden reflection.
Counting dimples on your ass, you find yourself
imagining your body with smaller proportions.

Wanting a golden reflection,
eye your large round breasts,
Imagine you, smaller.
Naked. Mirrored.

This is Only a Test

The paper bag is warm
with the cup of semen inside.

The heat of the plastic cup
radiant with possibilities,
he thinks of his wife
how much they want this.
This cup, kindling with desire
for their nuclear family.

His genes, blood-warm in his hands
seem radioactive --
incandescent reactor
replete with malformed mutations.
He thinks of his uncle and half brother
mutated, animals
in public meltdowns,
fits of rage they cannot control
minds that will never grow
beyond monsters.

Glowing with possibilities --
he wonders if perhaps this
tepid cup might
be the end of things.

Hundreds of swimming anomalies,
holding the fate of desire,
beautiful babies or
screaming heathens.

Heat rises to his face.