

In my project, *Voicing The Natural*, for the Nature In Words Fellowship at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute, I developed a project that sought to speak through the plants and animals that I encountered over my summer at the institute. I planned to create the project using persona poems, inspired by Conrad Hilberry's collection of poems, *The Fingernail of Luck*. As I wrote, the project shaped itself into sections, and finally into a collection of poems that I named, *But That Was In A Different Life*. The poems are threaded together by a persona I created named, Wild Woman. Wild Woman is the voice of nature within a female human. I walked the trails, read books of poems, took notes, worked with my mentor Diane Seuss, and took the time to witness what was happening in the natural world. By witnessing the way in which the web of our world works together, I was able to complete this project.

# But That Was In A Different Life

By Kate Martha Belew

Many Thanks to Pierce Cedar Creek Institute and to the Nature in Words Fellowship for funding the creation of these poems.

Aubrey Thompke for her artistic skills and for creating art to exist with my writing

-And-

Thank you to my mentor Diane Seuss who placed me back in my geographic location.

For all of the headless, roaring deer.

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*“I want/to live my life all over again, to begin again,/to be utterly/wild.”*

*-A Meeting, Mary Oliver, American Primitive*



*[I Want To Forget That You're Human]*

## When I Am Wild Woman

I clamber out of the creek caked in mud,  
water bugs in my hair.  
Drape Massasauga on my tits,  
breast fed venom. Caked in clay and crying.  
Run uphill. Scale sassafras like a ladder.  
Rub spice bush on my body.  
Bathe like a baby in the muck of the banks.

I am deep in the swamp, up to my knees, waiting  
for the dark sounds, clawing my way  
into the cattail like an invasive  
species, marking the trails in lightning bug blood.  
I let the thorns take my body  
piece by piece, let it peel away  
to the hollow of the edge of all that I am.



Massasauga Rattle Snake

*Chippewa for River Mouth*

Chippewa. River mouth. Yawning horizon. I am stretching reticulated jaws.  
Not python, but smiling, rattling like shards of glass in a can.  
Not swallowing, but swimming through.  
Tall swamp grass like water. They are reaching too.  
Belly flat. I am going nowhere, silently, going nowhere  
but river mouth. The river into sea, many miles from snake island,  
from bog. I follow it only in body shape. I am calling in snake tongue.  
I will carry you soft in my mouth,  
bear you to the delta.

Human, girl

*While studying the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnakes, scientists must place them in a tube in order to paint their rattles for tracking purposes, and put them in a tub in order to measure their size.*

When I touch the snake in my hand. I am feeling the writhe. The nail polish the same on my fingers as her rattles. She is used to being followed and afraid. If we were sisters I would love her. If we were sisters we would share a bed at night under the constellations. We would have spent summers together in our childhood. Naked and sunburned. The venom thick like honey in her captive tube. She is eyeing me, flickering her tongue like a fire just gone out. She knows that we both know that at the bottom of the slick tub where they measure our worth there is no way to climb out. It is so bittersweet to be a wild thing.

## When I Am Wild Woman

I want to tell you a story.

I killed it with a rock.

Stoned the snake on the head with the rock from between my ribs.

I pulled it out of the hole of my bellybutton.

I felt like I didn't have a choice.

The snake flicked its tongue like it could taste me.

I took its limp body like a scaled tree branch and I buried it.

Cut my finger over the loose dirt.

Let it mark the grave site, and my guilt.

## Blackberry

Juicy, full, life blood berry magnified.  
Grown in danger field with fingered thorns.  
You find me sweet, but you taste  
the holed leaf sadness. You feel me  
weighed down with the first rain  
this July. You run your tongue along  
the serrated edge of me like we're cooking  
something that needs to be cut.  
I will ask you to hold me in your mouth  
for a moment. To forgive me for my seeds.  
I will ask you to forget the way I snagged  
your skin. I will watch you go with the next wind,  
and leave me with my bitter tipped tongue.



## If We Are Thinking Like A Mountain

*“Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf.”*  
-Aldo Leopold

What is a mountain without wolves?

A mountain.

Minus the hollow.

I mean, howl.

There will be silent trees.

Ask Leopold. He shot them dead.

The mother and her three children.

Ask him how the mountain mourns.

How he regrets.

As her eyes empty, limp paws like hands.

Think of how the wolves breathed before humans here.

At what price can we sell ourselves.

Them.

Remember that when we die we decay.

I hope to God the wild will be left behind.

## Snake Politics

*The Cleaver plant is said to cure snake bites.*

I live in snake politics  
covered in fen haze.

The polarities in my body  
embark on a love affair.

If I were a mask I would wrap  
my ribbons around you  
like a vortex.

The absence of light.

In the forest, I am two  
snakes hidden  
from each other in the grass.  
We play a game we can't win.

We are calling out to the other.  
We are choking on our own tails,  
unable to speak.

Everything in  
between us is cleavers, lightning  
bugs.





## Coyote Woman

If there is a coyote here I have not seen it because it is myself. If there is a river here I have not heard it because it is my blood. It is late and you do not sleep. Regret hangs like a carcass outside your window. I can smell it. You won't untie the body and bury it. When you close your eyes you see me as woman. You see the way the moonlight catches the scar on my hip, the ants pooled in the cup of my collarbone. You stir to my howl, and I do not mean to wake you. You are unsure of my animality, my instinct. I am pawing the dirt, I am slim, shaggy, evasive, waiting. A woman made of coyote. Made up of sly, nature's nuances. I slink through the forests outside your window. I am waiting for you to remember that you have made a promise to love me, and I intend for you to keep it.

## When I Am Wild Woman

I stumble out of the woods on the wrong side.  
There is a house here, and a shed.  
I crawl back to the shadows.  
I become the wild witness.  
Know the season is wrong to be bleeding.  
I see the man with his back to me.  
Eyeing the cage.  
Backing coyote up with his rifle.  
Cursing under his breath at Her.  
She is snarling.  
When he lets the gun kick  
I close my eyes so tight  
I can see Her soul leave.

## Monarch Butterfly

1.

There is nothing so sweet as a toxin.

2.

When I was nine I had a house of butterfly chrysalises.

When I was nine and I looked into the mirror and I saw a butterfly body.

I ate the poison like them.

I made my fingers into wings.

3.

Maybe the real Monarch is me nursing  
bitter liquid. Maybe it is me as Monarch.

*Call me Queenie* I shriek.

Maybe I am stomping circles around  
everyone else enjoying  
the unfeeling in my fingertips.

4.

Call it toxin, but it makes me dance.

Call it toxin as I ceramic soothe myself to sleep.

Bathroom floor beautiful butterfly.

5.

And if he follows me home at night I must be asking for something .

My wings are poison-veined and begging.

If I follow him home I must be butterfly beauty,  
because those are the ones that are never alone.

We are milkweed to milkweed, with a predetermined dance.

I mess up the steps because I did not make them.

I am stumbling uphill. I am twitching  
antennae, uncomfortable smile.

When I wake up in the morning with shredded wings

I realize I do not understand poison as well as I thought I did.

7.

There was a time when I believed I had to hold onto the grass in order to spin along with  
the world. There was a time when I believed I could make it stop. There was a time when  
I believed that if I spread my great black and orange wings I could leave the orbit, escape  
unscathed with the toxin on my tongue.

## The Fox

*An Inuit story tells of how Fox, portrayed as a beautiful woman, tricks a hunter into marrying her*

Look.            You see.            Me.

Quietly invasive. Fox woman. Holding up the flag of deceit.

You would not love me if I were solely            The Animal.

You would not love me if I were red.

Do you forget that-

Your insides are red.

Bleeding is red.

Alone is                            red.

Does it make a difference if there is fur to grab onto? Would you sell me for profit?

These are the things I wonder.

Look. I was here before you, and you never knew it. I will go on  
after

You.

I am holding out my hand paws. I am lacing the hunter's hair.

I will love him until I don't love anymore.

Until I go home.

Until I am fox without woman.

Cunning            under the            tree            cover.

## Lady Slipper

Don't say I've trapped you into loving me.  
This is an honest and good love, insect.  
Pull you into my breast, pouch, heart.  
If they call me orchid I must be difficult.  
*Special.*

If they call me *special*, I dare them to transplant me.  
They will regret the uprooting. Choke on that edged  
word, *special*. Let me spiral in my own home,  
and let you be the trapped one. If the shoe fits.

If this is love then one of us will be the trapped one.

You abuse my body without knowing it.  
You abuse my beauty just by staring.  
I am aware of my stems, my color.  
I am aware, as your fingers beg to pluck strings.  
Flower petal chords.

When I open my mouth you call it blooming.  
When I wilt you call it death. Have you not considered  
the freedom from body. Have you not wanted  
to be something other  
than flower?

## Red Tailed Hawk

Follow me.

To the tree with the neuron branches in the field.

It looks dead. It looks silver.

However the connotation of magic strikes you,  
you will find it here. If we are silent with each other.

I can feel it under my wings.

Follow me.

Perch on the axon branches with me. Dendrites.

Think about how you must have learned this in biology.

Think about how that doesn't matter anymore.

Burn the textbooks. Set your fingers on fire.

Call it flying. Call it freedom.

Jump.

Follow me.

Don't try to run away. I can see you from miles  
behind. I am hawking you. I am eyeing your bleeding ears.

You complain about their ringing at night.

I am going to save you from yourself.

I can hear your heart beating in time  
with gravity. I want to hold you, feed you  
like the fledgling.

I want to forget that you're human.

*[Electric Deer Decapitation]*

## Beheaded Deer, The Power Lines Near Brewster Lake

It was too late by the time the last sparks flew.  
I had already been tangled in the webs  
of fire wires and crashing electricity.  
It was as if the hand of god  
had bent down and squeezed  
my soul out like it was soft sea  
foam. The black char left  
on earth's stomach.

I let my body keep running.  
As if I didn't need eyes.  
As if I could breathe through  
my wounds. As if I was opened up  
through maggot mouths  
to the god forest and set free.

When the girl comes to look for my head  
set apart from the charred skin  
I will speak from my thinning legs.  
My tough skin. She will think she imagined  
my headless gaping stare.  
My legs pumping. Empty shoulders.

*I am lighter fluid.  
I left my skull behind me  
burning as I made my break for it.*





## Maggots On the Beheaded Deer

*Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!*

*Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!*

*-From Footnote to Howl by Allen Ginsberg*

It is the only reason I would ask this question.

Moral validation.

Can't help how sweet the rotting tastes.

The hardening of life into artifact.

I am crawling with false guilt.

Can't help but writhe with endings.

Can't help but think this is the way  
things have to be, in their own time.

I say my prayers before I sleep  
at night, but that only makes me holy  
in the way that you think of holy.

Yet, I am

*Holy.*

## When I Am Wild Woman

I hunger for color.  
Peel blue down to its intestines.  
Suck on the earthworms of it.  
Grind out yellow. Suckled on sour.  
Feast on the white bones of the headless  
deer. Scrape open red with my hands.  
It is under my fingernails.  
Green is on my teeth like earth moss.  
It is growing there. When I breathe  
it is as if I am breathing poison ivy.  
Let it snake around my tongue,  
trail behind me.

If I am bleeding trees  
then I am bleeding in  
to his Brewster Lake.  
If there is no blood  
like oil on the surface  
then it is fake blood.  
Sunk like rocks.  
When I take the paddle  
and pull it is a weak  
pull. I never understood  
how tides work. How  
is all the water  
moving to the other  
side of earth?  
If I am bleeding trees  
I am losing consciousness.  
I am fading fast.  
I am deer in the woods,  
open carcass, missing  
head. He came and stole  
It. He stole everything.  
Head. Hooves. Eyelids.  
Flattened my intestines  
between pads of fingers.  
If you squint he looks  
like a wolf. If you close  
your eyes. He is nothing.

Wolf Paradelle

When I smile it is supposed to break your bones.  
When I smile it is supposed to break your bones.  
A shivering bone wrenching grin.  
A shivering bone wrenching grin.  
A shivering smile supposed to wrench your bones  
When I break it is bone grin.

It could have been love like fingernails torn off.  
It could have been love like fingernails torn off.  
I would have held you like raw meat.  
I would have held you like raw meat.  
I could have held you love.  
It would have been raw meat like fingernails torn off.

I will lie about ever catching your watery eye.  
I will lie about ever catching your watery eye.  
Quiet deer. I want to break you. Snapped neck, sexual infatuation.  
Quiet deer. I want to break you. Snapped neck, sexual infatuation.  
Eyes will lie to you about infatuation. Sexual neck you're quiet deer.  
I want to snap. Catch a watery break.

When I lie, I smile. Love is supposed to tear off your fingernails.  
It could have been sexual infatuation. Shivering like bones.  
A snapped neck is raw meat. I could have broken you.  
I want to hold you. Break your wrenching grin.  
It would have been about bone. It will ever be about bone.  
I caught your watery eye, quiet deer.

When I Am Wild Woman

This is what I want you to see:

A poem in which you are the star,  
the villanelle villain. Look what you have done.  
You've thrown a hammer and a chair.  
Bent all my fingers back, pulled  
out my teeth for your collection.  
I want you to see silence.  
I want you to take your words one by one.  
Weigh them. Feel the press  
on your hollow throat tube.  
My ears bleed when you offer forced apologies.  
You have not witnessed the blood  
on my hands from damming.

This is panic. You make me  
the doe in the woods, wide eyed, electric deer  
decapitation. But I am roaring at you.  
I am calling you out, wolf.  
Headless as I am.

*[Throw Them To The Wind So They Can Live Again]*

I feign the death bloat. I eat those that get too close.

Fake redness, fake sly-handed pass, fake death.  
Is it fake foxhood or womanhood?  
I stay still until the last second and then I am  
the colors your eyes make when they're closed.

If I were to tell you that I love you would you believe me?  
If I were to tell you that I will keep the cavern  
of my mouth body to myself would you leave  
me alone?

It is a snap reaction.  
You bend your head and then—

Teeth.

If I were to hide would you let me,  
even if you knew where I was hiding?

I do not die on the side of the road.  
I do not die at all.  
I walk with Deceit next to me.  
I laugh and so does she.  
It is a barking mad laugh.

We are somewhere in the thick woods.  
Somewhere where if you speak  
your words slide down hill  
one after one, until you question  
if they're real or red.

## Common Weed

I grew up wild.  
A seed that dropped  
out of the sky. Grew  
like the weed  
of circumstance.

I developed calluses  
on my roots.

What is it that I need?  
Is it a sort of recovery  
from myself?  
In order to stop the takeover  
of everything around me.  
To stop the desperate  
growth of everything  
I am.

I am trying to breathe,  
but it is hot this summer.  
I bathe in your herbicide.  
You have made it difficult  
for me, so I will be a burden  
to you.



## Snake Myth

How was I to know not to smile up at the sky?  
Two teeth grin like scissors, sky so blue that when it fell

it bled out of shock. I waited forty days and forty nights to breathe  
again. Held my ground for what it was worth at the crossroads.

Untangled the souls from my venom, my snaked shoe laces.  
Oh Styx, your crossing is too expensive. I would rather live.

When I was your hair I was coiled,  
when I was your eyes I was stone,

when I was your teeth I smiled,  
for that was what I was supposed to do.

I always knew that I was subtle for the Bible told me so.  
I fell into your stories for your convenience. As we walk

together in the tall grass you will come to tell the tale too,  
and I will talk to you as someone who knows something.

I'll touch you where you need. I'll get us both kicked out of the garden.  
We'll throw our names into the river. We won't ever look back.

## Monarch Travel

I am being beckoned south.  
Between the poles.  
This will be my last adventure.  
It will be trans-Atlantic if I wish.  
Cross continental.  
If I wanted to keep flying I could.  
Call it diapause. Call it living.  
My body unfurled like two hands.  
Palms down.  
Call it whatever you want,  
but it is mine.

## Mute Swan

*Swan terror and swan stigma. Three of them slaughtered  
at the edge of the pond*

*-Laura Kasischke, "Swan Logic" from Space, in Chains*

Call you with my swan song, just before the stained glass sky breaks with the howl of this. Bend my neck down to Leda before I go. She will blame herself, and I will let her. Did I mean to be dramatic?

Take the last bow with my wings out. Spanned as big as a wolf. Enveloping the lake with expected silence. The hissing of me. Reeds around the edge. The lake is hollow. Don't belong here anymore

than I do as a statue. Aggressively introduced. Mated for life is such a joke. When I fly off the zero edge of the forest line I will be gone forever. Lay my voice thick on the surface. And let it sink.



## Rattlesnake Skin

I have and always will be the rebirth.  
Death is not always dying. It is the fertility  
of snake skin returned to the ground that I

relish in. When they come for me  
with their torches, cursing that which gave  
them knowledge, I will churn with their body

heat. I know I have grown outside my skin,  
and I am feeling. I am beyond a warning  
or a coiled muscle waiting to strike. I am

growing out of myself and I reach without  
hands. When you go, you will go out  
of my mouth like a reaching god. When I go

it will be a release from the heavens.  
A flood from legends, making the swamp  
gasp with the freeing of boots. You walk

through the grass next to the cinquefoil.  
I hide underneath your feet. I am quiet. It is  
raining. I will be your petty symbol for fear.

*The herb of Achilles, carried into battle to heal the bleeding of his soldiers.*

I will lick your bleeding  
only to end it. Staunched  
blood flow in the fawn  
that the coyotes  
found first. I will be your  
herbal abortion. Let nature  
take its course. Slick womb  
with clasping leaves, rotted  
roots. It is time to let go.  
The tannins, and the yellow.  
The Navajo throw me  
to the wind at night.  
Chew me for toothaches.  
I will grow as your wild thing,  
calling the devil on the hill.  
The burial mound. I rise  
toward the moon. Hitching a ride  
on Achilles' heel. Call me witch.  
I'll always come back to you.

Snake Mother's Womb

Snake womb still warm, it is cold-blooded parenting.  
They say us pregnant ones are the mean ones sliding,  
shaped like S curve. Smooth. Birth canal, the creek.

Empty nest syndrome. Call it snake post-partum once they leave.  
Snake baby seems a contradiction of danger and decency.  
Do they have little hands that will hold mine? I forget we are handless

creatures. Let me caress you with my darting tongue. What will I do alone?  
Snake mother denial, daughter denial. Forget this ever happened. Painted rattle.  
They are tracking me. They are following my every contraction

until I am gone. I will paint the swamp purple with fingernail polish.  
Let me cup you in my mouth snake daughter. Teach you loneliness.  
When you're young your rattle is singular. It makes no noise in the hot wet earth.

## Barred Owl

*During the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was custom of nailing an Owl to a barn door to ward off evil and lightning. During this time an Owl's call meant imminent death*

Nailed down to provide you with your luck. Blood like black on the barn door. Head spun around from there. All the way around like death. Just keep spinning. If I could cry it would mean I am coming for you. It is a haunted call in the long hallway of after-dark. Watch from the branch with inner eye after the barn gets plowed down along the dirt road. The boards fall into the lake with the thorns and roses. I steal a rose come dark, and it all crumbles to ash, and feathers. In the missing rafters, red. There are so many questions you wanted to ask of me.

I become your nocturnal ghost. Death sits beside me, and we talk in forced whispers.

Tick

It seems odd to be a measure of time.

Drink life. I am thief, and this is truth.  
I am carrier, whistling myself  
to sleep at night. I'm unsure why  
the dragonflies spin while they fuck.  
I am dizzy from watching them.  
They are working muscles. Wings.

I am unsure of the catbird's call.  
Sounds like an old porch door  
with someone behind it. Unsure.

Here is what I know:  
they will come if I wait long enough.  
A pulse. A wrist that wakes up  
every morning.

Until it doesn't.

Sandhill Crane



The chilling sound of the rattle behind the trap door. Flick the coiled door stopper with your pointer finger and thumb. Let the prehistoric reach your blood and spinal

fluid. Answer the call honestly. I am fossil now. Stained ochre. Pulsing wings. Send the dust motes flying. Call in unison. Haunting. I throw my head back and laugh

like a lush in the swamp. It's singing and passion. The suffering. The litany of leaping. Twenty-five million years to the day, I crane my neck, a spindle.

I, the last, the singing, the leaping, long like those before me over the swamps. They search for the bones next to the cattail skeletons, sinking.

## Dragon Fly Parabelle

*The Southern United States term "snake doctor" refers to a folk belief that dragonflies follow snakes around and stitch them back together if they are injured. Some English vernacular names, such as "devil's darning needle" and "ear cutter," link them with evil or injury.*

If I am to speak it is in the quick tell hum of wings.  
If I am to speak it is in the quick tell hum of wings.  
I will not bite if you let me free.  
I will not bite if you let me free.  
If I am to bite it is quick, I, the hum.  
Let me free of wings. I will not tell if you speak.

In water, late summer, I am your darning needle.  
In water, late summer, I am your darning needle.  
You devil. My eye poker. We have seen better weather.  
You devil. My eye poker. We have seen better weather.  
We have seen late weather. I am better summer. Devil water.  
Pure. I am you, your darning eye poker in water of needles.

With care and dry fingers you bind my body.  
With care and dry fingers you bind my body.  
Follow the snakes to save them when they are injured.  
Follow the snakes to save them when they are injured.  
When dry finger snakes save my body with care.  
Bind to them. Follow with you. They are the injured.

Follow my body. The snakes speak in quick hum  
of water. I am free my needle eye. I bite,  
speak and bind. You devil darning in late  
summer. Poker with dry fingers. We have seen  
in wings. I will save you. If you let me tell when better  
weather is, to care and bind them. They are not injured.

## When I Am Wild Woman

I speak in mulberry tongue, rich with hallucination.  
I cut my own deer paths. Control, block, randomize.  
I crush seeds in my teeth.  
Grin goldenrod. Throw the rock  
so when the glass explodes like dandelion seeds  
I am already gone.  
I am already running.  
I pick dead birds off the paths,  
throw them to the wind so they can live again.

*[She Hasn't Stopped Burning]*

## When I Am Wild Woman

I want tell you a story.

Once in the summer I wandered home like a drunk through the forest. Tripped into a cut down tree as big as my body. Put my palms on it. It asked me if I was saying sorry. Sorry thick on my tongue like wood chips. Sorry like a branch breaking through my throat. Like I took the blackberries and smashed them on my white dress. Smears them on my mouth. Gave me something to be sorry for. I pretended to be crazy, or your definition of crazy. *I really just bit my lip.* I explained as I caressed the dead tree body. *I really just wanted something to love. Shut up. Listen.* When I crawled out I was a coyote. When I turned around I was a dragonfly. When I lay on the path I was carving a space for myself as a glacier. I was covering my tracks as I slunk off into the woods wiping the blood with my hands. Singing. Dropping a match.

Red-Backed Salamander

*Salamandra, Eastern Origin absorbed by Latin and Old French referring to a mythical creature which could walk through fire.*

Up like a spark under the leaves. Tiny match. When you take my limbs I will find more. Drop my tail when life gets too heavy.

Redbacked, reborn. Dragon's cousin, estranged.  
Related only in secrecy and fire. Smooth gills of breathing

under umbrella leaves. I know that when the rain comes I won't drown. When the rains end I will walk through the fire

of your shadow in the valley of glowing  
candles. Walk through every fire you ever light.

## When I Am Wild Woman

I bend low with my poison ivy  
crown. Stoop to Virginia Creeper  
undergrowth. Take the fawn  
like a child. Dappled spots  
and blood. Teeth embed smiles  
in flesh. Crescent body caught  
over log. Sliver moon. Wonder  
what abandoned her. Ribs of fish  
dangle from my ears. Close  
her fly-caked eyes. Lay the body  
to rest in a salamander fire.  
Run howling into the night  
as if she was mine.

Salamander, Bleeding

*“The Salamander, which renews its scaly skin in the fire, for virtue” –Da Vinci*

I don't feel virtuous when I am bleeding.  
It's red, and hot, and bruising.

The way that the liquid sizzles  
on my skin. I only like the rain now. Frying

pan for fear. Alone in the wood at dusk.  
I can't stomach anything but burning.

Try to find my way back to the source, slick  
in your hands. Arsonist. Fire-breather.

My myth hides in the corners of your oven.  
You call me your dragon.

Steal my blood.  
Save yourself.

Marshland Spider Killer



They are pouring maple syrup all over this marsh.  
It is a ritual black hole pulling in air.

The sweetness of it. The spiders march in.  
Spinning webs like cotton candy.

And the birds call. Too loud  
like sugar spun nightingales.

You are the one unsure of how to step.  
They cover the sun with their wings. A picnic blanket.

You think it won't be dark  
here. Heavy. Try to shut me up.

Your dirty nails tickle my throat. Reach further.  
Life's a beach at the edge of this swamp.

I'll burn her.  
Don't test me.

I invite you to sit on the blankets.  
Watch the bloodied sunset.

Don't touch me.  
Watch the spiders try to leech my blood voice.

Violent arachnids.  
I throw their webs in the fire.

Feel my phobia burning.  
I'm the spider killer in this relationship.

Queen Anne's Lace

*The red flower at the center of this plant is referred to as a drop of blood from Queen Anne who pricked her finger while making lace.*

*What about me?*

This is me quiet. Reserved  
in a white dress.  
There is a prick of blood.  
Am I spindle blood?  
Virgin blood?  
This must look like such a ruin to you.

If I were to bow  
my head in regal contemplation  
I would only think of a certain night.  
Forget the chastity in womanhood,  
there is nothing pure.  
Untouched. Yet it is glowing like holy  
relics. The light  
catches my crown of lace

A confession.

He snared me,  
ripped up my roots  
a few years too early.

*What about me?*

*Well, what about you—*

Tossed into his bonfire.  
Smoke into red north star.  
I would be bitter  
if it hadn't made me who I am.

Prairie

This is my call. Follow it.  
The sky will pull like the lake wind.  
Drown the boat of your eyes.  
The branches of your thumbs hold  
foxtails in your fists.  
Bees are humming in my earth  
like small earthquakes.  
The yarrow bleeds here. The feet  
before you furl the path open. Spread  
legs of summer. You can run  
here without looking down.  
Hair burning like grasslands on fire.  
The grasses licking your bones like flames  
as you pass through. The echoes  
of branches breaking behind you.  
Just up and go.

Stinging Nettle

*This plant will bear either male or female flowers in their life, which is why part of their name dioica, means 'two houses.' Nettles would be put under doors preventing evil to enter. However, don't take the plant with roots, because if the plant loses relation with the land, it loses part of their powers as well.*

*-Dallia, 10 Interesting Facts About Stinging Nettles*

I have learned my house well.  
Learned my body. Learned my rules.  
I did what they said.  
Learned how to bend in wind.  
Learned to slight those that touch  
what they aren't supposed to.  
Hooked leaf hands.  
But to know it's still my fault  
for growing. Learned the acid  
in my leaves, in all the parts  
of myself, woman, or nettle.

I let them rip me up and lay me  
at their doors. Let them use  
what I had for their protection,  
their betterment. I pleaded  
with them. Told them to keep  
me in the earth. As soon as I've  
left it I'm no good to them.  
No good to myself. The evil  
has already seeped in. They already  
know it with their eager hands.

Grounded, or Burning.  
Those are the only ways I'll live.

When I Am Wild Woman

*The invasive species Autumn Olive does not originally grow with thorns. However, if it is cut down and grows back it will produce thorns on its branches.*

I crack the earth as I ripen.  
When they cut me back,  
I return with thorns, like the Autumn  
Olive. When I drop my leaves  
it is the dance of a shaken woman.  
It must be something to be celebrated.  
Being able to feel the cold.  
If you crush me under your feet  
I will be your herbal cure.  
If I was the dogwood, I would bloom  
like a tree set on fire.

In the Prairie Fire.  
I am what is left  
of the controlled  
burn. If you kicked  
the ashes and asked  
for them to surrender  
what they've kept  
they would hand me over.  
They would hurl me out.  
*Take her. She caught  
on fire this spring,  
and she hasn't stopped  
burning.*

*[But That Was In A Different Life]*

Drought





I walk down to the bridge over the swamp  
and call in reedy whispers.  
Forked laughs. I call in rumors and they  
come, the Massasauga. I fling the bodies  
of the field mice, spare the smallest.  
The runt sleeps next to me at night in my fist.  
The rattlers hum in the mud, rise  
out of the cinquefoil like heads of the hydra,  
bobbing to a tune that twists in swamp language.

If We Are Telling Lies I Am Winning

Blindly I die on the side of the road alone.  
A gasping carcass of earth things.  
Moving with the earthworm's ache.  
You leave my thawed silent snake head.  
For the hawks to lick their lips to.  
Closed doe lips, fox body.  
Something erotic in the way my legs are bent.  
Scent of death and lavender crushed in your bone.  
It comes down to everything you've ever known.  
You're passive in the thinning woods.  
Eyes on sticks that want to snap your pulsing, searching body.  
You're scared to love a wild thing.  
Capable of death, living.  
Go away. Leave me.  
Wide eyed. Willing.

Woodpecker

It is a dangerous game to play with wood.  
Hollow. Trees. I am whittling a stick  
of that pain. I will wield it as a weapon  
if I have to. I am smoking the foxtails  
in the wood pipe that I fashioned  
from my feathers. I am trying to rid  
myself of the feeling in my rib cage.  
Confuse it with the weight of lead.  
I needle the tree bark.  
I am knocking on the back door of God.  
When he answers I know I won't be able  
to explain myself.

God Tree

I am the god tree at the center of the medicine wheel crossroad.

Us trees, teeth stained blackberry.

Ripened smile.

Dead brothers reach like lightning from the ground.

There is a trail map of constellations here.

It is my tree body and I'll do what I want with it.

Splice the night by branches, like split road kill flesh.

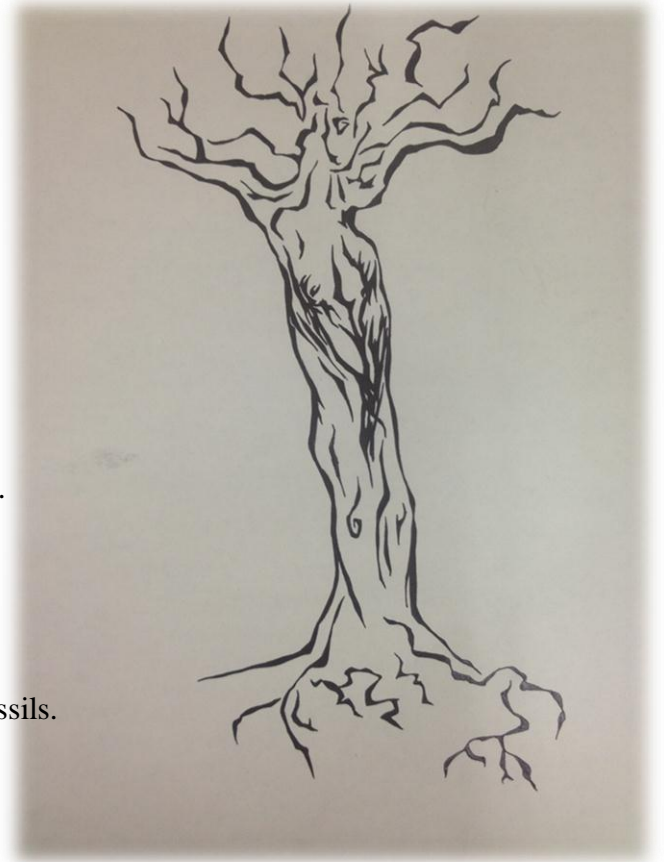
When I get bored within myself it is a rain shower.

The bones beneath the bark are twisted shell bone fossils.

I quake, hallucination in the tree line.

When you stop to look back, salt pillar, you will find that everything has changed.

If you dug me up, I would be roots for miles.



Brewster Lake

Is this what it means to live?  
Sounds a bit tired, overused ripples.  
This must not mean to be forever,  
but in that moment before waking,  
it lasts. The dark water is thick  
around the lily pads.  
Could be any year here.  
Could be anywhere.

They cut through my body.  
Slice it open stroke by stroke.  
They are paddling in lives that hang  
around them like humidity.  
They are unsure if they are breathing  
air or water.

I hear their mouths swallow around tomorrow  
as they paddle.  
This all must be metaphor.  
The wildness, the wet of me.  
The dam on the edge.  
The beaver slapping what comes too close.  
This is for all the lives we are not living.

When I Am Wild Woman

I want to explain something.

I was raised out back by bears, the threat  
of them. I only knew lonely  
because of the coyote mourn, until I met you.  
You made me follow you home with your human  
voice. Brushed out my blue hair.  
Pulled my skin out from between my teeth.  
Made me warm. I don't want you to think  
that I don't love you when I leave.  
It will only be because I can't stand  
in the shadow of your house anymore.

I can hear the woods growling.  
They want me back.

*Reverend Parris: Speak man, we cannot relent. What say you, Corey?*

*Giles Corey: More... Weight.*

*Reverend Parris: Lay on. You are commanded by the court. Lay On!*

*-The Crucible, Arthur Miller*

If I were to tell you the truth  
I would have to do it in pictures.  
See the lat line, long line.  
Latitudinal and longitudinal  
direction. See the way they slice  
the body. Limbs strung up  
with geographic locations, positions.  
The lines run through  
like pulsing rivers. This is how  
the lakes were formed.  
Pressure.

The more weight you put on my chest  
the more the indentation. I will remember  
this when I press down. Myself.  
If you could only see my glacier body.  
Watch me carve a shelf of earth.  
Hang up your portrait.  
Would you feel like you  
were losing yourself? To time?

I will show you this picture. Wave  
it in your face like the tree fingers  
in the tunnel. They are waiting  
for you to commit yourself  
to a mistake. Waiting  
for you to jump off the hill and in  
to their hands. Watching the earth  
lines snap inside your body.

Watch me melt into the earth  
to wait.

Fox Liar Vs. If We Are Telling Lies I Am Winning

Blindly I die on the side of the road alone.  
I feign the death bloat  
and eat those that get too close.  
You bend your head and then—  
Teeth.

I am a gasping carcass of earth things moving  
with the earthworm's ache, the colors  
your eyes make when they're closed.  
What is it in me that is dead?

You leave my thawed silent snakehead  
for the hawks to lick their lips to.  
Closed doe lips, fox body.  
Something erotic in the way my legs are bent.

You call me thing wild. Stark raving  
mad. That must be living. I am walking  
with Deceit next to me.  
I laugh and so does she.

It is a barking mad laugh  
with breath the scent of death and lavender.  
The same that's crushed into your bone.

It comes down to everything you've ever known.  
You're passive in the thinning woods.  
Head down on the sticks that want to snap

your pulsing searching body.  
You're scared to love a wild thing  
speaking words that slide downhill one after one,

until you question if they're real or red.  
Until you question if you're capable of death,  
living. Go away uncertainty. Leave me wild. Wide-eyed.

Willing.

In Which I Am Haunted By All The Lives I'm Not Living



In a past life could I have been one of your foxes?  
Could I have had ticks embedded in my veins?  
Grown tiered gills?

This is between me,  
and everything. Me  
and all the lives that pulse  
in through my feet. These sorts  
of things come from below  
the earth. Growing up  
through your soul's soles.  
When you dig up my rock  
grave, what body will you find?  
The blood veined the same.  
The escape of body. The freedom.  
The bear, the minnow, the yarrow.

You have cut  
this down and I am  
on to you.

If I look closely  
it will lose its shape.  
Small fingerprinted  
remnants left behind  
on the tree stump.  
You left the rings bleeding,  
stopped aging in its tracks.  
Decaying seems so drenched  
in method. Seems too tender  
when the worms caress  
the skin bark in the roots  
left behind. You loved  
these branches,  
but you have broken  
them. Left them  
reaching from the ground  
like hands.

Threat

If I am not the black bear

I am the threat of the black bear.  
Circle grove claw marks,  
broken bark from the tree slide.  
You will never be alone.

If I am not the black bear  
I am the clouds over the tree line.  
The storm that accuses all day,  
but never proves anything.  
I am dark and breaking.  
The feeling of spinal fluid boiling  
on the stove.

If I am not the black bear  
I am the waiting in the trees.  
Threat of black hair left  
in paw prints.  
The argument about existence.

Always in front of you,  
but you keep looking back.  
I will wait for you ahead on the trail.  
My nose to air. Inhalation  
of the storm,  
and its passing.

Myself as Mask

*it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself.*  
- "The Poem as Mask," Muriel Rukeyser

When I cast myself out  
I was foolish  
to regret the freedom.

*Good-bye I don't need,  
or want you anymore.  
Don't want to feel  
you inside my hollow self.*

I wanted me to slither out  
of my belly button  
as something solid  
when I know I'm not.

There is thick heat  
this summer. Reminds me  
of another shell. Reminds  
myself of the shell I'm leaving  
behind. Have I left this atmosphere  
yet? This unnatural natural.

Myself crawls back  
to me. Drapes itself over  
my back. Whispers in my ear.  
*You need me.*

If I was strong I would keep  
walking. If I was weak  
I would shrug my heavy  
body off. Instead I take  
my long fingernails,  
carefully carve my  
name into my chest.  
*Know thyself* I quoted.

Follow the smoke in the air.  
Leave the mask burning.

Go.

