

AUDREY GRADZEWICZ

Not Me. Us.

for Lauren B.

I.

Curling again into the womb of sleep,
my mother grows thinner and more hairless.
When she dreams, a ghost wearing her skin

chases her through a hallway of mirrors,
stalks her into the desert where she will drown
in a flash flood of her own phlegm.

Awake, she'll be frantic: *I don't want to die*,
she'll say. *I'm needed here*. Yet when she cries out
in Tongues, it is not a life without pain that she imagines

she is praying for. What she wants is for me to fuck
any man, for me to fill the canyon between us
with wild, somersaulting grandchildren

who will learn to arc their backs into a bridge.
What she wants is a new language in which *lesbian*
is eclipsed by *mother*, in which the love between mothers

and daughters is easy, in which I am as sexless
as stone. For her, I've maintained the sterility
of *clinic* and *donor*, weeded away hotel-room hours

spent watching strange men jack off into Soft Cups,
of turning and holding that emptiness inside myself
until I was so full of it I thought I might burst.

II.

It is suicidal, this longing
to be *lesbian* and *mother*

and *father* and *god*,
so sometimes I pray

to be reborn into my body
at ten, watching

a house burn. I understood
the rough shape

of a drug deal gone bad,
but felt so intoxicated

by that hellish warmth
that a woman I did not know

slapped me. Later, I thumbed
the worn Billy Graham

FINAL COUNTDOWN tract
in my pocket, which explained

that God's Judgment was bigger
than Y2K. The millenium

ebbed away. It was still hot.
By then, I had lived forever.

III.

Life of Crushed Windpipe, this morning you open
to early spring, to the straight, relentless
tracks of coyotes in the snow. At this time of year,

coyotes are hungry and in search of sex,
which is to say, they are human. Here,
the weather of my family grows colder

as I whisper-sing *Sexual Healing* as I chip
the ice away from our well pump; they are afraid
of what leaks from me. For years, my family

said they wanted me dead, meaning, *contained*.
They tried to pound me shut. Now,
I'd be as solemn as a cemetery angel

if any of them would touch me. In my small,
small town life in Pennsylvania, I try to fix
the broken furniture of my body

with well-vodka screwdrivers, know
that when "Bad Company" by Bad Company plays
on the bar jukebox, I'm probably in bad company.

Last week, as I drank with my friend, laughter
kept breaking from me, and I almost felt
unbreakable. Though when smoke poured

from the building across the street, I worried
about how worried my friend looked,
about how to make her unworried. I wanted

to still be talking politics with the one-toothed man
who tried to sell us cut-rate pot, with the man
who liked pickle juice martinis, with the pig-eyed

twins my friend nicknamed *The Brock Turners*.
Pressed, my friend said she'd vote for Bernie Sanders
because she found his wrinkles sexy. I was so drunk

I could almost see it: my having jerky and spastic sex
with that one, particular man, letting him go down on me
as I held the wild, white tufts of his hair. How in earnest

everything would have to be. Though it was easier
to imagine what would come after: how, flushing
with orgasm, he'd walk stiffly through all the hanging

veils of morning until this one, where unalone,
I am still alone, cattle lowing in the distance,
the blind rooster calling out hours too late,

and then the pinpoint of his body on the horizon,
his rounded shoulders slumping
toward the earth until he is earth, until the cattle

and the rooster and the sex-starved coyotes
are earth, until the imagined children
of my imagined children are earth, until well water,

until all the fiery gods of abandoned buildings
are earth, until God, until my friend,
until her worry, until queer laughter

and the blood on my dry hands are earth,
until I and cold and the universe stop,
until not even earth is earth again.

Legacy

When night slaps the earth so hard it leaves a bruise,
I worry about the way my children will startle

like deer, sweet-smelling spittle flying
from their open mouths. Scattering of other sweetnesses

they will know: grassy aftertaste of smoking
in fields, of making conversation as clumsily

as new lovers after sex. Not sentimental,
my children. Not tender-hearted,

though my tender-headed daughters will wince
and turn away from me as I french-braid

their wild hair. They will turn so far away
that I will know them only by the damp sliver

of neck between hairline and collar,
the particular heaviness of their gaits.

My children will spend their lives growing
resentfully into names like *Lichen* and *Conifer*,

tag headstones with haloed penises, snap
bubblegum and press it into the worn jackets

of strangers on the bus. They will shoplift condoms
and potato chips from black-eyed bodegas, then skip school

because they already know that no amount
subtracted from loneliness will be less lonely.