

Syllabic Heirlooms
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*we are heirs
to the alphabet we are born to*

- Ted Pearson

To Geri and Matt, my parents, who chose to give me everything.

And to our future hand-me-downs.

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*Series in progress.

Preface

A Word about Inheritance

Heirlooms stay in the family. Domestic objects, they collect dust in grandmother's closet or beam from a treasured cabinet. Some families worship these items; they invest them with bloodline identity and kinship myths. Others forget them, regarding inherited objects as trivial or as burdens to maintain. However, there are heirlooms we cannot see, passed down through groups unrecognized as families.

We receive language, and arguably, our resultant perception of the world, from our cultural community. We absorb a pattern of love from the indelible figures of our lives: our parents, our first relationships, and our greatest heartbreaks. As women, we understand what it is to be an individual from the legacy built by our mothers, grandmothers, and those who came before. Passing on love and trauma is a ritual of the human tribe, tracing back to our very birth as a species.

These types of ancient inheritances – the cultural, the emotional, and the spiritual – impact us more deeply than a physical object ever could. They shape our truest selves, our vulnerable domestic hearts. They are the heirlooms which none of us asked for, which none of us can discard, and which have preoccupied my mind and work over the past year.

The syllables in this, my first collection, are my way of expressing what many have explored before and what many will explore again: origins, womanhood, love, loss, shared humanity, and the miracle of self-deliverance.

I pass them on to you.

My Mother's Tongue

What was there to say that the roots of her tongue could manage?

- Toni Morrison

Background Noise

back where i'm from
women got tape dispenser tongues
clip their talk, dust whipping their faces
shut down sound with a lipstick snap
powerful enough
to pin drunk brother to the ceiling
or maybe
refasten a broken reputation

back where i'm from
the smartest girls yank out velvet muscle
unroll wet ribbon until
they secure a dream of wrapping paper
crisp creases, coiled bow
and present it to their lovers saying
this is
my gift
to you

i'm from
that place of homestyle heat
where Missy learns rhetoric from a sticker-burr
where all the ladies' cotton compliments are slick with oil money
and where Nana's stash of lye unfilths errant mouths

back where
Mother's loving strategies are hot chocolate and tequila
and cicadas thrum while Sissa skinny-dips between Cyprus roots

where
a rawhide scent beguiles and
a little girl can't tell
daddy's hunting belt
from
daddy's dancing shoes

Small Town Pastime

adolescents high on
chain-link fence
howl at the asylum

prodding

listening
for them
insides of
them inside

entreating

Sun Shower

Helios & Koko quake
a Texan Tarantella

hot wind kicks crust
blackjack peat

water rancored by its splat
(bashful under solar smirk)

still wars proud ochre blur
remember the

conviction
felled before on the

convection desert's
wetted floor

an ancestral ear swivels dirtside

Big Bad's beatin' his wife today

Warning Belle

gritty braids pom-pom the cross of
the volatile monocle
pink in the stalks

the family ironsight
discharges ironsound
 reddened rhotic rhapsody
snaps bodies
 in thorn tree trochee

proverbial cuffs clunk,
jimmied by a shrug –

if the man comes around
he'll bid glossy scales and plates but

none eclipse

this here

fine set of mine

them that i won

Maiden Name

I spoke your name and it was before any meaning.

- Mark McMorris

Brazos

creeper vine, you came to me
my belly against that mythed mesquite
smells of sweat and cearasee, you prowled sargasso green

twining yourself between my heels
yes, i'll grant you that...
thin grip winding up my thighs
yes, i'll grant you that,
rough tendrils sliding toward my hips
yes, I'll grant you that
thick branches prey upon my lips
STOP -

*either you can or you can't but
i'd sooner let this body wither
and figure scant
and sell my hallowed tunnels with the tired tones of
a dry disciple's bill than let you
pry apart
my vocal chords
allow you in
that heavenly door
cede the tongue with which i
implore, impure, unsure
these my
favorite found and forgotten words:*

stop -

save

save that for

save that for me, me, me.

Dirty Picket Fence

she can recall who you are,
just barely.

you languish in the cinnamon sweet nothings
that cling to the roof of her mouth
whenever she swallows
whenever she wakes, avoiding your name.

she remembers the bonfire smell of sweat and cedar
the cicadas rattling faster than her heart
the licking of petals by the stone wall when you...

and then she's driving,
driving to you
with a tetanus lock grip on the steering wheel
a cigarette between her lips bobbing
up-down, up-down

she feels it now, right now.
and it's going to snap her bones
like a load of
raw iron ore
and she's still learning how to swim
but she is going to do it,
do it for you and she's going to
wrap her arms around your neck and
croon an undulating frequency
loop an
empty polished melody
when you see her and...

she can't remember how she, how she,
she is standing by your picket fence and
she can't remember how she, how she,
she is standing on your white washed porch and
she can't remember how she, how she
forgot her middle name.

but she remembers yours.

Takes Two

lost in the shower
musk and jasmine drunk
one hand frothing above,
the other...
imagining your eyes amidst the steam

would they fixate on the water coasting
the satin skin
the granite core
would they see droplets riding magnetized, rolling toward the waist
hips
dark gurgling

drain that consumes you all of you and maybe me
sometimes
if witnessed in the light

my gaze straining through the mirror's fog
i sip on, oh, what i could make you think you think
what i
could make you
unearth
with flattened tongue
how i
could make you
unbind
in spite of yourself and
ah, lap at my memento mori

but i alone i
deciphering my blurred outline i
reaching out to
touch oh –

cold

wet

Snuff

maybe sometimes yes
i sense he forgets my sacred name
but his face recalls
that night

when we laid slow
on dark warm soil
when he discovered unto me
the secrets of
desert heather
as he swaddled me in lamb's ear
as the world spun so fast that
his cough syrup gospel
slid down my throat
no effort to swallow
good medicine

my baby's got them superpowers
hangs late love in purple-black sky
so that if i dwell too sinnerly on
 why again
 he does not deliver
 why again
 he is not wrong
i must witness pure souls
reenacting authentic past for present play-pretend
 oh, how we showered in sparks
 remember

so long have we waded in the gully now
so long have i supped upon our foggy bathwater

i weep without knowing why

when i rewind the tape to eye
our old embrace -
was it
simplicity ?

i have been faithful and yet am faithless still
the stars that blaze across the sky,
once anything that
might could
be,
are random hunks of rock.

X

*Shall I not take care of all that I think,
Yea ev'n of wretched meat and drink, If I be dear,
If I be dear to some one else.*

- A.L. Tennyson

First Date

and have you been lost before
and were you really and what was she like
and did you wander and were you barefoot and in fields of clover
and together
and did you hope and cradle a question and left unsaid and is it still
and did leaves murmur back
and soft

and while you and young and aching beneath the willow tree
and your roots and spreading
and tender
and your body's rhythm and does it jump and just at the glimpse of a clock
and does it change back
and will you too and

do you embrace yourself in the smothering dark
afraid of bursting into butterflies
or merging into the purple melody

of lavender oil gulped at
night
beating back sound or
stillness or
questions my mother told me
never to ask a man

Catch

late one night
entangled with you like the honeysuckle and the garden gate
hard-earned fortress too definite when your lips met
mine
my head tipped back
chest bloomed open in a
sigh

smoothing my hair
you sank your fingers below my ribs' embrace
enclosed your hand around my heart

When I Knew

fell asleep on your lap
on the way back
from the airport

dreamt that
i was you and
you were me

i didn't
shudder
in my sleep
swaddled in the scent of leather

only when we slowed to silence
only when you unbuckled me, tender,

did it
quicken
in my blood

The Chthonic Disease

Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh

*The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots*

- T.S. Eliot

*as the harp-note tells of steel,
strung to bear immortal peril
(pleasure such as the gods may feel)
bid men feel
as we feel.*

- H.D.

Said Delphi to Her Lover

if only when
our mouths meet mosaic
or your eyelashes brush my cheek in a dance
or your head brims in a rolling boil

i could hear
the tile shatter
press thumbprint tints on my stationery
sweat beneath the warm perfume of sandalwood

i think that if
when you kiss me in the unlocked night
we dissolve into cleaved locust streams
or coalesce in a craven moon

then, i suppose,
i could know for sure

Cassandra's Question

six months after my parents met
my father with the dark and swirling hair
had a vision

a sunset swept patio
grandbabies run circles around
rocking chairs made years before,
when his hands were steady still

and he and mamma
sit in a porch swing
spitting sunflower seeds and chuckling over
the familiar shrieks of the kingdom when

he turns,
looks into her face,
an honest map,
and she, not needing to ask,
uncurls a weathered smile

and now their child wonders
what many have before:

do you share my vision?
tell me whose wrinkled hand you'll clasp -
will a glance be enough for you then?

Daphne in the Dark

will you tread softly
if you go?

will you leave me awake
with anxious ears
clinging to
your jacket's rustle
a prophecy in a tongue
i never learned

will you deprive me of conclusion as
the door glides into the frame's embrace
with nothing but a sigh

will you leave me
open and
paralyzed
while your cologne vanishes
in stagnant air
while
i, bewildered,
replay again
how

steadily
you drew me in
made me feel the warmth

Eurydice's Hymn

i discovered i could spell
anything
as long
as
i
started with
the letters of your name

so i follow you
with my head down and
sneakers on and
now only one
song remains:

don't ask
if he is
true,
if he is
certain,
if he is
here,
don't ask

Pygmalion

but when
your naked skin
meets air at last
you stand
a statue
still

watching me
with wild eyes

Shivering Medea

had all i wanted
or so i thought
but no you were
you were and i was

cloaked in your fleece

wrong
but no not quite
wrong time isn't that what they say
in the stars you deceivers

guess the gods are greek after all

a man
the man
future father of your children
himself still a child
walking inside a grown body
wailing over existence
instead of you

still here, baby, still here

you can lead a horse to water
make him
 offer up his immortal soul
 for your amusement
 profess eternal fealty
 to your ankles
 spew abashed visions of himself
 dying in your grasp

but not raise his stony anchor

saw you in a time before all time
merged our worlds
till you claimed me, not kept me
i still know what your bedroom looks like

Retreating Figures

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil

- G.M. Hopkins

Morning

you cloistered me
in shangri-la
wrapped me
in silk-net whispers

i saw
the peach dawn
felt
blonde children
leap into our arms

i showered
in honeysuckle heat
slept
soft moss for our bed
your breath upon my neck

then you were gone
or someone else
but i have these pictures still

Helium

i lost my love as we sat beneath the mangrove trees
as leaves cast latticework shadows on our lips:

it started with your pinky toes
each glowing bright as lightening bugs before
disappearing

your bones burned beneath your skin
apricot light pouring from
the basket of your ribs
the handles of your pelvis

i, rooted, helpless
as the space between your eyes expanded
as light wormed into the gaps of your teeth
as you grinned into the foreign air

my skin cobbled, frozen by the question I had to ask:

“were you ever here?”

and there i was with my arms reaching out, trying to anchor the sun.

Seized

her wails
burst apart
the night

i rush out
her voice
deep
within the cornfield

bare feet striking
flat against the earth
i kick down
a quivering stalk

witness
a mangled descent
into rising dust
a splay of coiled hair
thin skin ripping

and i hear it then
the silence

Remember Me?

you devoured me, an apricot
did you find the stone amidst
that red-black blood
bubbling from the pits your incisors bore

i consumed you, a wafer
firmly placed, dissolving on my tongue
you vanished into dark caverns

i can hear you
still pulsing in the velvet sound -

oh yes, remember me?

Catgut Stitch

will your dissolve
hold him fast forever
will he feel you still

or

sever
split and
seep again

marred by
darker
scars

Moving On

when it is time to enter into night
i turn my face to open air
to curling drapes
and dampened dreams
weather debris and
frigidity
unite with
the maelstrom
in my room
the thunder
upon my bed

i sleep
with my windows open

i wake
with hope that
a lock of my hair is gone

Exhale

filling our lungs with each other
we shared in
raucous whispers
gasping vows
sacred pealing laughter

but now breath
once our union
is air flowing
in between

That Hum

*You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water*

- Seamus Heaney

All Around

fingertips brush
on cherrywood tables
smearing
skim milk foam

*

a figure cranes
over parchment stacks
extracting, anxious pace
fresh meaning from old ink

*

a shrunken hand
twists the faucet
an exhausted daughter learns
that running water soothes baby's cries

*

in blushing light, a clap of skin
old bodies feel love again
like before he lost his hair
before her eyes grew half moons

*

rhythm pumps:
in news reports and baseball games
lovers on one knee and
middleschool heartbreaks
children in grandpa's lap and
hurricanes in family homes and
all around it ever-thrums

but my yellow dog,
still,
in hard ground
will never know

Viewpoint

dull apartments
encased in slotted brick
frantic to locate
his hallowed room

peering into windows
i saw shoebox worlds stack
atop themselves

someone was
 fixing a meal for three
 burning a letter
 sipping beer alone

someone was
 wailing over a limp dog
 combing a child's hair
 allowing another to woo

someone was
 glancing down at me

Invisible

grey hair twisted
smooth into a knot
eyes pass over
and forget

she treads slowly
with effort
shoulders back
chin high

maintains composure
when a cashier asks
a question with
a smile too big
speech too loud

she dresses her evening table
with a pressed cloth napkin
and a bright china plate

she reclines
in the middle of the bed
remembering

how young she was
how beautiful and naked
in that real and wild field

Dark Market

i let you

save me

from what i refuse to remember

embrace me

while i am not yet wrinkled

love me

what is nothing truly like

believe me

will i see mother on the other side

(because your

unmoving lips

let me

speak like

how i used to

speak with god)

Solitaire

*I touched the Universe—
And back it slid—and I alone—
A Speck upon a Ball—
Went out upon Circumference—
Beyond the Dip of Bell—*

- Emily Dickinson

I

that day
striding through
a blue corn sea

it will
be me
alone

II

hot water and
steam and
my own
bare feet
still
against
dark marble

scrubbing
with brown sugar
and salted violets

sloughing
real and red and
raw again

until
quietly

i shine

III

acetone musk
slithers through
my garden window
prowling - hush -
for a crack in me

but i
bathe in royal jelly
feast on sweetened comb

and watch attempted punctures
while i lick my

sticky

glistening

fingers

IV

ears so hot they
sizzle thick
like bacon

all this heat
would scorch
a softened soul

lucky i'm
cast iron

V

saw myself
spread upon
the fresh-made
sky

as i tread past
flickering eyes
in dusty corners,
past climbing vines
and hands of men
i've known
before
and never

but my gaze fixed on
that spider-gauze
soul
i've seen it now
for the first
and ever

i'll wrap myself
in myself

need no
lurching words
to tell me
i am

VI

i whisper ruddy worlds
into existence
and tuck them
in my cheek

bright
the newest face before me flatly beams

but i take myself places
they'll never go

VII

if ever
she parts
her lips,

no one
knows why

so they invent –
a heroic pair
of shoulders
a calloused
thumb

imagine –
a rosebud
unfolding

and as they search
for what they cannot find

she withdraws
behind a screen

unseals herself

in a rush of
honey and
flecks of
private gold

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