

**HOW HER
SPIRIT
GOT OUT**

POEMS

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WOMEN WHO GO MISSING

I.

I've watched women leave with nothing
but love in their full-roomed eyes.

Walk right off their porches
dragging their nightdresses into a night
that knew how to mimic the dead
they loved more than themselves.

I've seen them abandon their gardens
not because they failed
to coax the hearts of plants
from the ground like magic, or because
they didn't know what they neglected
would overgrow and strangle, but because
they knew if they didn't leave, they'd kill
what they couldn't afford to nurture.

II.

Nothing plants you deep enough.
The soil you've grown in is too much

Mama's smothering face. You gasp
in the mulch of her strewn guts.

Some days it's easier to stare into the violent
swinging dark and take it.

You want to stop writing to what disappears,
open windows that look like the outlines
of black women who go missing. You understand
Hurston's shaky shelf of fragile things,
and also what falls from it. You wish
for Lorde's throwing knife
to hide in your hair. This world is full
of weapons. It's hard to take care of
what comes to flower, scatters
after a mad wind. Even your mean
great grandmother who lived to be difficult
never knew the trees she made
from the seeds of her body were better
than any strangled sonnet, clenched harder
than any hand working against her.
You come from a braided clan of women
who held their tongues with their teeth.
You tasted their blood in your sleep,
women who planted their visions
on the tongues of their daughters.

III.

On Askew Street, didn't she have a garden
in the middle of concrete teeth and sirens? Didn't
her husband sigh when she put on her boots and short-shorts
and with her ass out toward the street give
the marigolds a drink from the hose, fix the slouch
of tulips? Even Mrs. Eddy tried to outgrow
the hips of her roses, but didn't know how
to make her soil the right kind of dress.
Didn't the neighbors say, *How country*, and *Who*
this heifa think she be? Didn't she just go about her business,
smile at their husbands, call them ladies by their first names?
Weren't they always a temperament of color
she could curl her heart around, softening what made living hard?
Wasn't it the one thing she didn't need us for? Weren't we jealous?
We kicked their heads apart, dyed them in motor oil, blamed stray cats.
Even then, didn't she say *Girls, I want color at my funeral*?
Didn't we keep our promise? Didn't your purple dress
stun the mourning out the day? You were always her Iris
standing against a dull brick house. Sister, I couldn't tell you then.
Aren't we here, remembering how even the bees were drunk?
They wandered into the house like our displaced uncles. Hell, the flowers
didn't even stay put in that small plot. Snuck out at night
into the neighbor's kitchen windows.

IV.

Women in my family do not trust their dead
to plots and cherry wood coffins. They play them
on the inside of their eyelids when they pray.
Projectors run their memories in blind, white light.
Spirits fall out their mouths in scriptures.
It's hard to tell who's speaking. They keep them in

glass jewelry boxes, locked on coffee tables.
Frame photos of their open caskets and call them
Mother and *Father*. Wear their second sight to bed.
Converse at 3am. Call this counsel.

What the women in my family
do with the dead is their business.
My aunt married a corpse who built coffins in my heart.
Told me I didn't want his dead man sadness.
Sometimes, caught him with white marble eyes
he let me borrow from time to time.

The women in my family give the dead
to their daughters. My mama gave me
her dead mother's name. I've drowned in her
dresses, tried on her smile. My mama is looking
for some stronger dead woman in my eyes.

I don't tell her that Grandmother comes to me in dreams.
Grants me time in the garden of my childhood.
Collects fears that slip from my eyes.
They're withered peach pits when they fall
into her waiting apron.

She shows me a place to bury them,
near a dogwood where I buried my baby teeth.
She promises they'll come back
as something I can eat, a fruit so plump
it will feed me a lifetime.
We stare at the disturbed earth and wait,
but I wake before the harvest,
the squirm of trees rising in my stomach.

ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN

I don't know how to count
the times my father showed me how
men hide their love, how mercy can be contained
in quiet gestures. How many times did he
pile too much food onto my plate, or
pick an eyelash from my cheek
asking me to make a wish?

Only once did he have to
put his finger down my throat
to make all my mistakes come back up
on a bathroom floor. Taught me
palms can be both cruel and forgiving
when he pushed them into my chest,
listened for my breath
the same impatient way
he listened for my lungs
when they lifted me
meconium-wet from my mother.

When the nurse asks me to place my pain
on a scale of one to ten,
I'm seventeen in a room
of adolescent suicide artists.
The bulimic girl that braids
my hair like we're at a sleepover
tells me how she did it

with a box-cutter in her garage
while her family was at Pizza Hut.
The goth chick says she
learned to tie rope knots
from Girl Scout magazines.

I grew up hiding
matches from my mother
so she wouldn't burn the house down.
My father said I was just like her.
I could let a glass slip out my hand, stare
too hard at him or at a spider before killing it,
could slip into her dresses and zip
their spines up over my body without any struggle.
I lined up barbiturates on the counter
and counted backwards until I couldn't
because on a scale of one to ten, how many times
did I watch her strike a match to life
to let its yellow head burn
down to the tips of her fingers
until the living room smelled like skin and sulfur,
and the tabletop was scarred with spent
bodies of matchsticks?

On a scale of one to ten, who cares how you measure it.
The cheerleader says it was just an accident.
The girl that never sleeps writes

her six-month-old daughter's name
over and over on the chalkboard
in the rec room like some kind
of punishment. At some point,
we all get sick of counting.