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Mad Girl

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Mad Girl

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
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Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

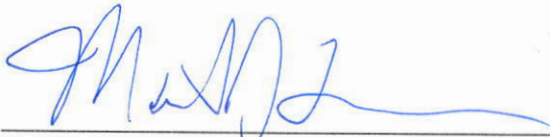
Brittany Barron
March 2019

Mad Girl

by

Brittany Barron

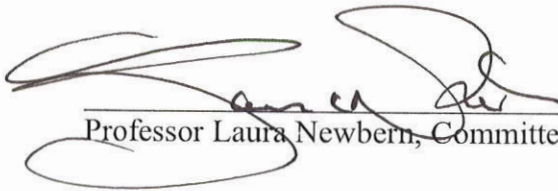
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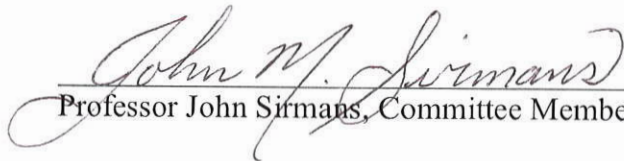
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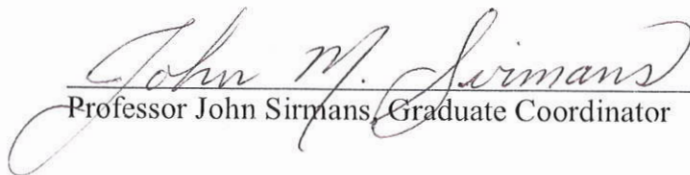
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MAD GIRL

MAD GIRL AT HOME

Mad Girl Imagines Mama and Daddy's Wedding

When Mad Girl imagines Mama and Daddy's wedding,
she sees a smoke-in-the-lungs July night at St. Paul's.
Mama walks down the aisle, bathed in crimson.

Eighteen, a Baptist's daughter, with a heart of hymns,
she's not yet ready for wifely duties. Before they exchange rings
Mama tells Daddy, *I will never love you like you love me.*

Mama's premonition: her dress ablaze in a cauldron.
In photos, her father's eyes locked to the floor, as if in a funeral
procession. Mama walks down the aisle, bathed in crimson.

In forty years, she will look at her husband like a man no better
than a sheep gashed and skinned at the altar. She'd recited vows
she scraped between her teeth, red-mouthed, wishing she'd never bled

for Daddy, who grieves tomorrow and tomorrow.
Mama, a child of May, doesn't belong in his storm.
Mama walked down the aisle, bathed in crimson.
Her premonition: her dress ablaze in a cauldron.

Mad Girl Imagines Daddy Holding Baby Girl

Cocooned in a hospital room,
safe from the white winter outdoors,
Daddy holds Baby Girl.

Before she discovers Keats, Shelley, Yeats,
before she crosses out Daddy's birthday
and Father's Day,
before she stops telling him,
Good night, Daddy,
before she becomes Mad Girl,
Baby Girl's green eyes seek his eyes,
her baby fingers skim his cheeks, his hair, his nose.

At four, Baby Girl feeds ducks bread crumbs.
She's in love with helpless creatures.

At fifteen, locked in her room,
Mad Girl reads Plath,
where she extracts small consolations,
writes notes in smaller handwriting.

At twenty, Mad Girl dreams
she tells Daddy, *You're dead to me.*
If he'd drowned in Cabo,
among palm trees and broken glass
in the muddied Pacific,
Mad Girl would've drowned with him.

On Baby Girl's first day,
Daddy must've known he cradled
a ticking bomb.
He must've thought,
Here is your daughter.
Either light the fuse
or snuff out the flame.

Baby Girl's Origins

In the beginning, Mama was a girl who caught lightning—
she jumped out of barns, rode go-carts she couldn't drive—
until Mama met a boy at a grocery store
and her days began between sheets she pinned
to clothes lines and dishes soaked in the kitchen sink.
The girl had no more time to chase lightning.

There was Mama's first daughter, Sissy,
her little sickling butterfly, who entered the world
with a fractured collarbone, who collected
a helpless thyroid, narrowing spine, crushed bones
like other girls collected baby dolls.
Sissy didn't want a baby doll, she wanted a baby sister.

And then there she was, Baby Girl,
as if she'd sprung from her mother's womb
at her sister's bidding.
Baby Girl hid behind Mama's skirts,
or she clung to Sissy's neck.

Baby Girl arranged herself for them:
her blond hair fell straight down her back,
her burnt-red cheeks sparkled in their presence,
her smile appeared at the necessary moments.

Baby Girl learned to breathe,
Please be happy, Mama.
Please be happy, Sissy.

When Baby Girl slept,
she dreamt of the white houses
they once lived in. She dreamt
of hands around her neck.

Mad Girl's Origins

Alone in her bedroom,
Mad Girl begins
when Baby Girl pulls out her hair
and becomes a red balloon.

She floats
up, up, up—
almost to heaven.

Mad Girl wants to float
into a sky that's a sieve
where no falling stars
sift through.

In the Torn Photo, Little Mad Girl

feeds ducks, stretches her Little
Mad Girl arms toward the blue water.
She smiles, and small waves sparkle.

Her arms stretch toward the blue water.
She will never be as happy as she is now
when she smiles, and small waves sparkle.
Mad Girl lingers beside a dark water.

She will never be as happy as she is now.
The ducks will leave; the lake will freeze.
Mad Girl lingers beside a dark water.
The sun's dissolving, the ice crystallizing.

The ducks will leave; the lake will freeze.
There's a white winter in Mad Girl's head.
The sun's dissolving, the ice crystallizing.
In that photograph, it's fall, but

there's a white winter in Mad Girl's head.
Mad Girl sees oranges and reds in a photo
of Little Mad Girl, where it's fall,
not in the colors that drop dead.

Mad Girl's Emergency Room Memory

In the emergency room,
Sissy's illness, a monster,
devours her organs.
When the doctors admit her,
Sissy asks for Mama.

Daddy and Mad Girl sit
in the waiting room,
she draws on a magazine-
subscription card:
childish scratches
that she shows Daddy.
Mad Girl still wants him
to see her drawings.

For safekeeping,
Mad Girl hands Daddy the drawing.
He holds it like a tissue
in his lap. Back home,
Mad Girl wants to show
Mama and Sissy her creation.
Mad Girl seeks Daddy.
He concedes, *I left it
in the waiting room.*

It seems important now.
Perhaps Mad Girl drew a house
where they were a family.

Mad Girl Imagines Her Brain

a slaughterhouse, where cows, with numbers stapled to their ears,
die. In Mad Girl's frontal lobe, there's that old heifer,
with bells tied around her neck, who wins prizes at the county fair,
her pink and swollen stomach pumped with antibiotics.

Until her final day in the spotlight, courted to the kill site.
Hooks line the ceiling, rusted and red, still slippery, still dripping.
All eyes are on her, as she tilts her neck, ready for her new silver medal.

No matter her trophies and titles, the heifer is hit in the head
with a hammer or slit in the throat.
She's drawn and quartered,
hooked and hung upside down. She will be discarded later,
a severed stump, where flies careen in her dark eyes,
mistaking them for blackberries.

Mad Girl Ponders Death

Mad Girl watches as the cows comb
their skin against the tall grass.

The yellowed grass is so thick
it'd prick her thumb.

The cows crawl, as if they carry stones
in their bellies.

Their heads slump as if they've foreseen
the hammer's thump.

In their black eyes,
she sees dark moons
that pull her into their orbit.

Mad Girl at the Grocery Store

On the day she becomes a vegetarian,
Mad Girl accompanies Mama
to the grocery store.

Mad Girl walks up
and down the aisles,
picks up apples
and smells their pink skin.

She stands in front of the chilled
produce longer than any warm body.
Mad Girl reserves those Wednesdays
to show herself.

To upset a pile of pears.
To pick up a box of cereal
and put it back on the shelf,
until Mama checks off ground beef from her list.

Mad Girl stops the buggy,
considers the package's red pool.
Asks Mama what it is.
Mama tells her, *Blood*.

Mad Girl disappears that day,
scared from the foreboding.
Her desperation is as bright
as that animal's red blood,
wrapped and choked in that clear plastic.

Mad Girl Becomes a Daughter

Daddy carries a shovel
and his dead dog
into the woods.
From this distance,
the dog could be
a newborn,
a nub,
pink and tender.

Rain wets Daddy's face and the glass
as Mad Girl waits at the kitchen window.
She cannot look away.

Without a word
Daddy returns, hours later.
He would have a better chance
of seeing her if she were
the flowers turned to weeds
on the table, a spiderweb,
or shadow.

Mad Girl begins
her own pilgrimage
to the disturbed place
where he dug.
She guesses
and tries to stand
where Daddy stood.

She pretends to lie
in the grave:
dead leaves cover
her body
and Daddy
loves her enough
to bury her.

Mad Girl Dreams

of a tree stripped of its skin—
a lone skeleton, separated
from her sisters,

and then, Mad Girl, in the middle
of somewhere, appears as if in a fun house
mirror: Mad Girl as Baby Girl,
Mad Girl at sixteen,
Mad Girl at seventeen,
Mad Girl today,
and Mad Girl tomorrow,
all legs, all arms, when she opens
her secret box,
where the razor blades wait
for her to open lines upon lines of red
after years not touching, not looking
at her body
as if it were a peony.

Mad Girl's skeleton stripped
like a butterfly bare
of its wings.

If bones could bleed,
they'd bleed
like a skein of ribbon,
endless in its unwinding.

Mad Girl's Trees

Mad Girl dreams of the first house,
the shuttered Cape Cod.
She steps outside, alone.
She sees the grove
of white trees and fog.
Look at the trees, she says to no one.

Trees as white as a ghost's back.
Trees stripped to their original skin
before mire marked them.

An ache pulls her indoors
where windows lock, doors shut,
lights blind, but she's moored
to the cement. Her family waits inside,
but they're strangers to the white trees.

Inside the house, a *tableaux vivant*:
Sissy sits at her vanity, stares until she sees
a thinner version of her reflection;
Daddy calls for Mama incessantly;
Mama cries in her bed that sleeps one;
Mad Girl's empty, midnight-blue room
shelters creatures she'd rather not name.

Mad Girl marches into the grove of trees.

In her dream,
she hears the hound's cry.

Mad Girl's Tunnels

If Mad Girl's heart opened,
the dark-eyed strangers, those
I-need-you-to-save-me boys,
would see tunnels.

Tunnels after tunnels
like underneath the Seine.
No exit, no light, no hope
to call back the boys
she's asked to leave.

She'd rather them see
the Luxembourg Gardens,
its courtyards and statues.
Elm leaves awake in amber,
and the evening sky losing
its blue to violet overtures.

One day, she will meet a blue-eyed boy
who will ask her,
Are you this pretty when it rains?
She will lie.
Yes, she will say.

He will call her *darling*.
He won't know that others call her a little mad.

Mad Girl's Aubade: Pendergrass, Georgia

Five forty-five:
Mad Girl awakens,
and she can still live
in the skull of morning
where cows scatter
in the pasture,
knock against the trough.
With every nudge,
they beg,
More.

Mad Girl asked the same, *more*,
when she sat across from the boy she could have loved,
the days she knelt at the altar for alms,
the moments she stared at the creature in the mirror.

In Pendergrass, the bone of sky
says, *enough*,
yet when Mad Girl dreams at night,
she dreams of that boy, those alms, that mirror.

MAD GIRL ON VACATION

Mad Girl Finds Sissy's Photo of Orlando

In a photograph, three members of a quartet appear—Daddy, Mama, and Baby Girl. The Daddy is unrecognizable, half-smirking, muscular from years grinding his silver machine. He's a Winn-Dixie butcher, chopping fat, flesh, tissue. Back then, Baby Girl loved Daddy when she woke him with a kiss on Sundays, and she screamed with happiness when he came home from work, lifting her in his arms. The Mama is unrecognizable, tilting behind Daddy's shoulder—she's younger, laughing.

Baby Girl is a pink bubble in Mama's lap. Mama's mouth is open, as if to say, *My baby will be the daughter who disappears before I can say, Stay.* To the right: A sea gull? A false shadow? No—Baby Girl's in silent conversation with that bitch Mad Girl, smiling with her perfect teeth.

Mad Girl's Gloucester

Mad Girl waits for the whales
off the Massachusetts coast
with the gray sky, grayer water.
Mad Girl wants sunshine,
something to remind her
of Georgia, of a reason
to smile and forget why Mama
doesn't join the family vacation,
forget how she separates
her parents with punctuation.
Mama. Daddy.

The whales appear side by side.
First a tail, and then spray.
The whales arch in tandem,
a water dance,
and Mad Girl sees her breath
when she exhales.
Whale bodies rupture the air
as if they can open the sky
and demand the sun's warmth,
call the restless water to settle,
guide daughters back to fathers,
fathers to daughters.

Mad Girl wonders if she touched their skin,
would it feel like the heart's muscle?
If Mad Girl were as brave
as the whales, she would hold
Daddy's hand.
It would be a gift,
and what a gift it would be
to please him.

Mad Girl and Sissy's Big Sur

Big Sur stretches across Sissy's scrapbook cover: cloudless day, azure water. In the crag, Sissy recognizes her sickness, her rotted thyroid, the one that radiation expelled when she was eighteen.

The day Mad Girl and Sissy travel to Big Sur, they drive across Bixby Creek Bridge. The marine layer coats the water. Mad Girl wants to tell Sissy, *I'm sorry it's not like your scrapbook cover.*

Mad Girl wants to trade places with the white bird circling the staggering rocks. The white bird who knows when to feed, to drink, to cry out, to skirt the cliff's edges. Mad Girl knows nothing in her thirteen-year-old body. Not how to make Sissy happy.

Nor how to tell Sissy her secret, hot like a white stone in her chest. Mad Girl clasps Sissy's hand and wants to whisper, *I will follow you, I will follow you to Big Sur, I will follow you into the water, I will follow you down to the ocean floor.*

Mad Girl's Moab

At Arches National Park, Sissy and Mad Girl stand
on one of the canyon's edges;
below, nothing but cracks
in red earth.

When Mad Girl looks down,
the canyon's mouth agape,
she hasn't yet begun to understand
the canyon opening within her.

For the first time, the ground below Mad Girl shifts.
She understands that she can jump,
and Sissy can't save her.

Mad Girl asks Sissy, *What if someone trips?*
Don't say that, Sissy hisses. *Someone will hear you.*
She should know Mad Girl doesn't scare so easily.

Daddy Takes Mad Girl and Sissy's Picture in Moab

Mad Girl and Sissy sit atop
one of the red rocks
as the evening sun accepts
its descent.

Later, when they have the film developed,
Daddy's shadow crawls
toward their feet,
grabs their ankles,
and never lets go.

Mad Girl Begins to Understand Distance

Standing beside Lake Powell,
Mad Girl retreats farther away
from Sissy—whose soft voice
belongs between two sisters curled
together like an elk and her calf,
not meant to travel
unfamiliar distances
between land and water—
whose soft voice says,
You're going too far.
No one will recognize
it's you in the picture.

The lake spans
two hundred fifty-four miles,
borders two states.
The girls stand
twenty feet apart
and Mad Girl thinks:
It's the farthest apart
we'll ever be.

Sissy, Mad Girl's second mama,
used to rub Baby's Girl's back when she fell
asleep in her arms, watched Baby Girl's face
become Sissy's mirror—blonde hair
everywhere, slim fingers,
blue eyes (now green), nimble limbs.

Mad Girl stares at the photo.
In that distance,
Utah and Arizona,
lake and land,
sister and sister.
Mad Girl remembers
so much pressure,
so much release.

Mad Girl's Albuquerque

Before their hot air balloon ride, the family holds the balloon's ropes, watches as it swells and fills, until it's ready to float. When she thinks of Sissy's hugs, Mad Girl's own hot air balloon bursts in her chest, auricle to ventricle. When Daddy wraps his arms around her, Mad Girl's heart weighs less than it should, her ribs crack, her spine's crushed, she cannot breathe.

Later, flipping through Sissy's scrapbook, on a tan and sandy page to match New Mexico's terrain, among other pictures of pueblos and cacti, Mad Girl finds their balloon-ride snapshot, smaller than the other photos. Sissy and Mad Girl wrap their arms around each other's waists. There is a crisp, straight line, a perfect scissor cut, where Daddy was.

Mad Girl's Denali

On Father's Day, Sissy, Daddy, and Mad Girl fly to Denali Mountain; they land atop a glacier. White snow, white mountain top, the sun flashes half-white. Sissy and Mad Girl ask Daddy to take their picture. They stand in the palms of the mountain that almost grip the sisters until they slip under the white stain of snow, never again to see the man they still call "Daddy."

Later, in their hotel room, Sissy leaves Daddy and Mad Girl alone. Daddy asks Mad Girl, *Do you know what day it is?* Mad Girl wants him to regard her like the mountain range, worthy of a picture, a spot in a scrapbook, but then move on to the next attraction. She wants him to love her no more and no less than the trees, the deer, the water. Mad Girl wants to tell Daddy, *I know what day it is.*

Mad Girl's St. Peter's Basilica

Mad Girl thinks of Christ as she lingers
at the stained-glass windows
and Michelangelo's Pietà.
She prays every morning:
have mercy on Daddy.

Daddy stands off
to the side—
shuffles from one foot
to the other.

She considers Daddy
and the crucified man
the Virgin holds in her hands,
afraid that these men are more similar
than she'd like to admit.

All this time,
Mad Girl's held
pictures of them
in her mind.

The picture of Daddy
at the beach as a boy
grimacing—
or grinning—
at the camera.
He could be Christ
before the crucifixion.
He could be Lucifer
before his fall.

In the pictures of Christ
she's seen
at Granny's home,
the savior bears no scars.
He looks down from Heaven
and watches His children.

Mad Girl's Amalfi

Along the Amalfi coast, lemon trees overwhelm
the rolling hills, no spaces in between.

This morning, Mad Girl wants to sleep a little longer
and find the Italian blue sky behind her eyes.
She sees black upon blackening skies:
another morning to wear her mad-girl smile,
another morning to repeat a prayer that today
she'll mean it and tell Sissy, *I'm happy. I promise.*

Sissy and Mad Girl stop
to smell the fruit,
to consider its yellow
skin. The lemon juice,
both sweet and sour,
stings Mad Girl's tongue,
a punishment
she believes she deserves.

Mad Girl thinks, *I want to sit
under the lemon trees.
I want to sleep
and never wake:
the choke of lemon juice
rotting in my throat.*

Mad Girl's Amsterdam

In the Netherlands,
the tulips are teeming,
self-contained reds and yellows.
Mad Girl keeps collapsing,
keeps promising
to stop counting
the yogurt containers
in the refrigerator,
keeps meaning
to take her medicine.

In the Netherlands,
Mad Girl thinks about home,
what awaits her.
The office where she sits
with Mama
and psychiatrist,
where she discovered
Waterhouse, his gilded-framed
Soul of the Rose. Mad Girl envies
the woman's face immersed
in the petals. Woman-
soul and rose-soul cheek-
to-cheek, while she sits
on a sofa, her own soul missing
from the conversation,
suspended somewhere
between diagnosis
and treatment.

In the Netherlands,
the tulips portend,
The worst
is yet to come.

Mad Girl Left Her Heart in Bruges

Mad Girl asks Sissy,
*During our three a.m. telekinesis, do you ever wake
with thoughts of the red door in Bruges,
the aftertaste of a dream on your lips?*

Mad Girl dreams of their gondola ride
along a Belgian canal
and the house with the red door.

What if Mad Girl and Sissy had gone inside
and Mad Girl had stayed behind?

After, Sissy would sit alone
in the gondola, a new woman.

Without Mad Girl's stag antlers
hooked into her sister's center,
Sissy could pose for a picture
like a Monet lily,
perfect in her isolation.

Mad Girl's Kauai

Sissy tells Mad Girl, *I see your scars.*
They stand at opposite sinks
under pineapple-shaped light fixtures,
among golden-plated towel holders.
They cast dark shapes across the marbled floors.

Why must Mad Girl wrap her secrets
in white towels, the stink of bleach?

Mad Girl wants to plunge into the Pacific
until she floats to a different coast,
emerges in a different world,
where all the Mad Girls go.
She carries that fate like a noise
in the back of her skull.
It ticks, a scalpel
against bone,
a warning,
*Do you really think
you can get away from it?*

Mad Girl lies to herself, recites
a memorized passage
as if from a biblical psalm
between sisters:
*I'm still your Baby Girl,
your pink-cheeked bubblegum girl.
Spill all your sorrows into my cup.
No season, no madness, no secrets
between us.*

When Mad Girl lies,
they are two dolphins,
swimming in tandem
to the world's end.

MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG

Confessions of a Mad Girl

Mad Girl appeared among the lilacs where I wept,
after another day of mean girls at recess and Sissy in her sickbed.
With yesterday's flowers, too sweet, tucked behind her ear,
Mad Girl told me: *pull out your hair*.

Sissy, remember me laughing in a field of lilacs shimmering—
forget my screams red with panic—
Sissy, remember my blue dress bedecked with lilies—
forget that girl, whose perfume made me sick.

Forget my screams red with panic
when I pulled out my hair.
Forget that girl whose perfume made me sick,
who promised to stop spinning my thoughts.

When I pulled out my hair
I wondered what was wrong with me.
Mad Girl promised to stop spinning my thoughts—
monster girl, fuck-up girl, I'm-sorry girl.

I wondered what was wrong with me
when I slow danced with myself, drunk on reverie.
I used to be Sissy's lilac girl, flowers-of-the-field girl.
Thoughts cut me with their hooks, their claws, their teeth,

when I slow danced with myself, drunk on reverie.
Mad Girl promised to soothe my mind's bloody menagerie—
their hooks, their claws, their teeth,
when I remembered the girl I used to be.

I'm trying to forgive myself for that bloody menagerie.
Sissy, remember my blue dress bedecked with lilies.
I forgive you for not being well enough to help me.
Sissy, remember me laughing, in a field of lilacs shimmering.

My Donations

One month before we graduate,
my friends and I donate blood.

I'm twenty-four, but friendship
still startles me like my first day of Kindergarten,
startling enough, like the search for a hand
to hold when crossing the street.

After the nurses separate us,
shut us in small rooms,
they shuffle paperwork,
ask question after question—
Are you pregnant?
In the past six weeks,
have you been pregnant?
Are you currently taking any medication?

Approved, we wait and worry
we'll be late for Sociology of Gender.

I'm last.
Isn't this how I'd already written
the scene in my mind?
Friends. This is how they'll leave me.
Stuck in a chair,
a needle taped to my arm,
while my blood assembles in clear bags,
like a hunted deer bleeding out
awake enough to watch
as my carefully created world
pauses, then shrinks
to the width of a bullet.

I pray for amnesia

in the slender space
of a locked bathroom.
I pull out my hair
sure that I can stop
as sure as I know
that my friends
will leave.

In the end
when my thoughts
sink into stasis
when my hair is gone
and I'm stupefied

a reaping of hair
surrounds my feet—
offerings
met with darkness
in the slender space.

My Body Psalm

My body is a grasshopper,
long and lithe,
belly to the mire.

My body is a dove,
ivory skin and skeleton,
wings open to the stones below.

My body is a rabbit,
spritely and outstretched,
torso brushing the bluebells.

My body is a deer
light and nimble,
white tail evading wolf's maw.

My body is a story
for a man to tell
his brothers, how his hands
roamed my smooth skin
like dove feathers,
how my neck softened
like the snapped neck of a rabbit,
how my lips reddened
like the gutted flesh of a deer.
But he will not tell the story
of my birth. The screams
of my mother,
the multiple sorrows she buried
in my body.

My body is Eve—
more than rib,
more than Man,
more than a man's word.

Daddy's Walks

Daddy takes solitary walks along our dirt road.
The day our dog dies, the spring never seems to end—
cypress leaves fall from the sky, the color of pearls—
I love Daddy when he's walking away, cypress leaves falling.

The day our dog dies, the spring never seems to end—
our tulips don't know whether to wilt or stay—
I love Daddy when he's walking away, cypress leaves falling,
wearing his button-up shirt, like a schoolboy.

The spring the tulips don't know whether to wilt or stay,
I don't tell Daddy that I fold him into my prayers.
I imagine him wearing his button-up shirt, a schoolboy.
I imagine I am the baby girl he once held in his arms.

I don't tell Daddy that I fold him into my prayers.
We exchange small words on the days we talk.
I'm not the baby girl he held in his arms.
I wonder if he thinks of her on his solitary walks.

Easter Picture of Sisters, 1992

Not the fountain with the carved angel, its wings askew;
not the birds in their mid-morning trilling;
not the green forest in its spell-casting
to plague them with long shadows,

but the girls: you, sister, are a preteen,
and I am still new. You smile in a way
you won't when we're old enough
for strangers to mistake us for twins.
You hold me in your dancer arms
as if you want me to stay this small forever.

We wear lace and our best pink dresses
avoiding the sky hanging above us,
dizzy in its grays. We could be two butterflies
dancing in a hurricane. We know nothing
of illnesses, of distances, of time.

Even if the fountain flooded, and the wings
of the angel dragged her underwater, and the sky
dropped, and the trees curled into the ground,
we would still be there, both young, both clean.

Butterflies

When I overhear Mama saying *thyroid storm*
and *thyroid* and *the gland shaped like a butterfly*,
I imagine a butterfly in the eye of a hurricane.
Wings flapping until the flapping ends.

In my first-grade classroom, I dedicate a class project
to Sissy. I write, *she never is around people much,*
except me. She gets sick, but I don't know
what *sick* means. I lie to my classmates. I tell them,
Sissy is engaged to be married. A prince sneaks through her window.
Or, *She is traveling to the rain forest, to the desert, to the sea,*
and she wants to take me. This time next year, we'll leave.

Morning at Haleakala with Sissy

I didn't think the sky was real that November
when we watched the sunrise in Maui.

I was as young as the morning
and you had seen more
than a girl your age should.

The sky was dark
until it accepted the swell
of reds, oranges, and blues.
When the colors moved,
we moved with them.

All we had to worry about
was the sky.

I believed if we held
our breath,
we could taste the sea.

I believed if you stepped
into the clouds, they would
shelter you far better
than I ever could.

If the Haleakala sky isn't real,
neither are you,
neither am I.
Neither is the day
we'll part.

Lake Michigan, 2018

Sissy and I travel north,
and it could be the end of the earth,
where water and sky meet,
where everything is blue.

Lake Michigan isn't just blue—
its waves flash ultramarine,
turquoise, sapphire.

If I look at the lake long enough, I wonder,
What is water? What is sky?

We must've been here before—
before Eve bit into the apple,
before Medusa turned men to stone,
before Icarus flew too close to the sun—
when we were water
when we were blue
and we opened our arms to it
as if it were our apple,
our stone, our sun.

When I Was a Baby, I Crawled into Aunt Becky's Swimming Pool

It must've been cold
when the water
surrounded my body
like a pebble.
How easily
the water accommodated
its shape for me.
What a strange world:
no birdsong,
no swallowing,
no breathing
underneath.

It must've been a bright day
when the sunlight hit
all the right places
on my skin.

I almost remember
a voice promising me,
*I will tell you stories
of the water.
But you're not ready
to hear them.*

It's been twenty-seven years.
I'm ready now.

A Girl Becomes a Woman

Call me Baby Daughter.
Mama shares stories
I collect
to tell my babies.
*Your grandmother
milked a cow
named Betsy.
When she pinched
her udder,
Betsy kicked
the milk pail.
It spilled
across the barn.*

Call me Little Sister.
I worship Sissy
outside her bedroom
door, peek
through the cracks
and watch her sleep
in her sickbed.

Call me Doe.
She blinks
in your head-
lights as if you're
the last drop
of spring water.

Call me Water.
In the pool
above the pulpit
when I was saved
I didn't see God.
I still wonder
if Preacher needed
to hold me under
deeper
and longer.

Call me Little Mad Girl.
I pose
in Mama's wedding dress—
white like the inside
of a coffin—
the collar presses
against my neck.

Don't you call me the spitting image
of my grandmother.
I rummage in
Granny's jewelry box.
Her clip-on pearl
earrings pinch
my skin like her fingers
pinch my belly.
One day,
you'll be beautiful.
One day,
you'll be a lily.

If you call me Granddaughter again,
I'll swallow the name
as I would Granny's blackberries
so tart tears well up in my eyes.
I watch her old hands sew
quilts of wedding rings,
quilts of Danish girls,
quilts of pink and blue.

Call me Flowery Branch—
forever home
to dogwoods—
forever home
to where Mad Girl
was born and buried—
forever home
to the sweetest blues
below Blue Ridge.

Don't call me girl.
When I kiss you,
if I kiss you,
there's no sugar
on my lips.