

THRUM: POEMS

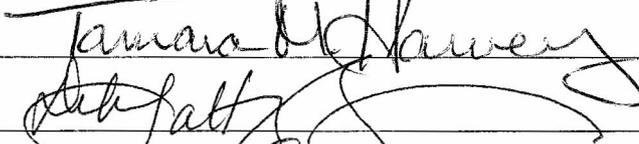
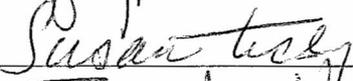
by

Michele K. Johnson  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing

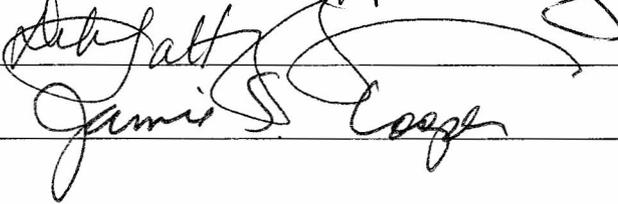
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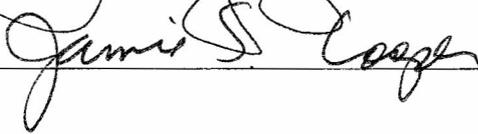
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George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Thrum: Poems

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
St. Mary's College of Maryland, 2011

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Spring Semester 2014  
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## **DEDICATION**

*Thrum: Poems* is dedicated to my family, who let me mine their memories and pasts, and who have supported me in all of my endeavors.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank everyone in my year that tirelessly read these poems and gave me feedback on them. I would like to thank Sally Keith, Susan Tichy, Jennifer Atkinson, and Eric Pankey not only for their feedback on this manuscript, but also for their kind encouragement and devotion to my project. I'd like to thank my parents for their bottomless support, even when they weren't sure what I was writing about. I need to acknowledge the Historic St. Mary's City website as a source for some of the content in the first section of the manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank Luke Huffman for his never-ending enthusiasm, constant reassurance that I am not the worst writer who has ever lived, and for making my work better with his thoughtful criticism and suggestions.

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## **ABSTRACT**

THRUM: POEMS

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George Mason University, 2014

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In this book-length collection of poetry divided into three sections, I use a variety of forms to explore the anxieties of memory. Throughout the manuscript, the poems wrestle with the complications of inheritance and artifacts—those things that get left behind and held on to, both physical and intangible. In the first section, the poems are grounded in place and excavation practices, utilizing source material from the Historic St. Mary's City website to add texture to the speaker's ruminations on a failed relationship. The middle section of the manuscript serves as a bridge between the first and third sections, chronicling the problems of the physical act of making memories, refracting and returning to the same memory again and again and chronicling the shifts in memories as they age. In the final section of the manuscript, the poems turn toward family history, examining the speaker's relationship to expired relatives and to the expectations they may have left lingering in her life.

## **SECTION I.**

## Valley of the Daffodils

be prepared to walk on rough terrain  
for the merging of landscapes  
for flattened grass

be prepared to feel/understand and wear less and less  
it is a natural part of spring  
you will need to encounter

virginia creeper southern lady fern trumpet vine round-lobed  
hepatica soft rush jack-in-the pulpit little bluestem wild bleeding  
heart cardinal flower wake robin speedwell stagger-bush red chokeberry

be prepared for the fact that you will not know their names  
be prepared for your mother to emerge in the faces  
of twined foliage *how could you* and retreat into the reaching

eventually the path thins until it is a rilled furrow in the grass  
wider or lighter depending on the speed of the summer  
be prepared for the river to open you

## What's Important about St. Mary's City?

First successful proprietary colony in English North America

ownership has become an exhibiting factor in how we distinguish

First Freedom of Conscience policy in America

as though thoughts are something that should be held in common

First woman to petition for the right to vote in English America (Margaret Brent, 1648)

having a say

First public inn in Maryland

having a stay

First official city in Maryland

a harried compulsion of stones/ruins/plots cannot take hold: being unofficial lends itself toward margins

First monumental public architecture in Maryland, the 1667 Brick Chapel

our collapse was ornate and hand-hewn, complete with replicas of moving parts

First printer in the southern colonies of America

record and report, record:

say and say what was.

## **TRINITY CHURCH PARKING ONLY**

Should I call it a flushed exuberance, a dallying psalm, a perfect hymn?

At eighteen, two things seemed holy: the river, and you.

It made sense to bathe myself in both, wring myself out  
after hours spent under water. I always preferred the crunch  
of gravel to the smooth placation of tar. We were slick enough  
to melt the solids, erode the hardened earth, sink deep  
into the soil.

My mother will say there are only so many ways  
to get clean.

## Field School

To participate in the excavation  
revolutionized the understanding—

the historical period under discussion  
made practical, expanded public interest.

Formation: where the ability to share  
is significant in the history;

learned identification techniques with  
a growing interest in displays;

a leader in archaeological sites requires  
the practical laboratory and field experience.

Understanding the colonial,  
sharing lifetime pioneer.

There is always the possibility  
of standard summer.

The excavations are open to the public,  
our formation, where the ability to share—

the excavations are open

my mother will say there is a difference re:  
the application of a teenage relationship:

certainly it can only mean formation via  
stagnancy via circles. It is vital to know

it was frequently summer for us. Standard  
summer time demands the colonial urges

we feel borrowed from the black space  
behind our teeth as it edges back, splits

fretfully as the body complicates. A growing  
interest in the display pioneers glass bodies

asks for see-through. As humid inhabits lungs,  
roots as calloused crosshairs swill the earth,

gulp erosion, cause fumbling; oysters waver,  
their shallow filters burble until plucked;

rhododendron scrabbles at the river pines.  
Who keeps ordered rows of tobacco, anymore?

## Historic St. Mary's City: Yoacomaco Area

You can tour a wigwam, whiff the hanging  
of dried trout and/or blue cat, borrow  
the custom of wearing very little.

They sponsor young visitors;  
and encourage the young to understand

the Yaocomaco were of Eastern  
Algonquian lingual and Eastern  
Woodland cultural stock.

You can try a real life diorama  
of wood and split chicken wire, stand  
gauzy, encased in the EXIT sign's blur.

They recommend you read all the pamphlets;  
it is easy to become lost otherwise.

One can be convinced to make love in a wigwam  
after hours if the locks are not correctly fastened,  
if mulch is properly tamped down.

They say that it is all authentic and  
assume that one will pay the visitor's fee to see

"Yaocomaco Town." Bought from the  
Indians who were helpful to the settlers,  
especially during their first year. A re-  
creation of a small Yaocomaco hamlet  
typical of those found in southern  
Maryland in 1634 at the time of contact is  
there now.

## **Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation: Main House**

She will say, now it is time to make the hard-tack biscuits. Now, the fresh apple cider. Flies and gnats lovingly wrestle in the pulpy juice. She says they drank it, grubs and all. Now, see—

making oneself at home is a figure of speech that means filling in

I volunteered and tried on the apron and you pulled my waist into you from behind, pressing the knots into my back.

## Deposits

Lodged words, gulps of phrases where living once was, sheathe the mottled brain. Deposits swell the tissue: take up a spade, burrow into, find. Artifacts found here represent multiple periods of time—various eras of prehistory, seventeenth century, eighteenth century, and up to the present. American Indian artifacts include stone tools, ceramics, warm/heavy hands, and tobacco pipes. Among the premier colonial artifacts found at St. Mary's City are vessels of elegant Façon de Venise glassware, complete with a neuron pathways pattern and a set of Kataya (Turkish) ceramics, one of only two known examples in the United States. Artifacts found here represent multiple periods of time—varied examples of pre-pre-pre-history as it may appear to the post-present era. Ancient artifacts include babe you are so gorgeous tonight, and tobacco pipes. Among the premier colonial artifacts found between synapses are many vessels of elegant love-making in a truck bed and slapdash sex in the woods, only two examples of an early tendency toward patterns of collapse/rent. One can hear, if listening, the thrum of accretion as it rattles.

## Artifacts

red pick-up mountain bike orange amp knot  
pickaxe collated pages yellow notebook pencil  
ring hamster maze notebooks notebooks red  
lined paper brush arrowhead arrowhead flecked  
guitar pool table slightly slanted emerald set  
pottery shard arrowhead coin weights gold leaf  
matching earrings faux rock edifice wrench  
encrusted embankment sandbags tarp pebbles  
gloves shade closet futon blackberries muddy  
stones lime arrowhead gnomon copper medal  
path warm beer damp high school class rings  
angel head lead stamp arrowhead silver armor

## **Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation at Dawn**

We all in the tour group with our faces pressed close to the ground: these are the sweet seeds  
grumbling up from the earth and these are the sensitive spurts of industry.

At the time indentured servitude was a popular method of free labor. It was impossible  
to run a plantation without some form of such as it was to garner the fat leaves.

Your arm a thick blanket across my back, blocking the sun, and I hear my mother saying do not touch do not go near that fence the hogs are not restrained you don't know what could happen.

Maintaining a crop and its yield has was becoming a part of the servants' lives that  
could not be split though it is to say that splitting is or was often necessary.

It is not to say that one was equal to the other, but maybe like.  
It is not to say that smoke rings are the same as the real thing.

## **Remnants: Printer, Ordinary, Storehouse**

women rarely travelled/an ordinary meal for an ordinary man/debts  
paid with the new year's harvest/necessities like promissory notes  
were badly needed/a typical charge for a bed—a straw-filled mattress  
on the floor often shared by more than one person/masters of merchant  
ships maintain order/sometimes thrive/some might instead exchange goods/  
quite a profitable business/the occasional woman  
traveler would stay in rooms occupied/would pay on credit.

## **Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation in the Evening**

I cannot haul this collapsible version of you  
if it is not folded correctly [if you insist on having lungs  
I must insist they be empty].

The wispy blur of you will not bend  
at the blank angles necessary: creases  
are needed for this delicate work of carrying on,  
of remembering without seams, tears, or bunching.  
I must ask that you be thin  
as pine needles and pointed.

Pine straw spread  
over withering crop beds and left there  
to decay. I have heard mulch holds  
color more dependably.

If you insist on lingering  
I must insist you decay.

## **Church Point**

One can be convinced of one's own implausibility and one can be accused of having two heads at once. It is impossible to make one understand how happy,

in the glossy, blurred light,  
one could make another.

One can be convinced of such things as long as the grass is high enough to obscure and one can be made aware of the pottery shards. It is impossible for the fine,

black sand to allow the true  
touching of two bodies.

My mother will say it is a simple matter of addition:  
there is no pure experience. I will say but waves  
bleed with ease into one another.

## **It is vital to understand exactly what happened:**

that there were some instances of complacency and budding as well as consuming and planting. It was a matter of being privately owned as well as of being the first the very first.

It was a matter of forgetting how to hold things as well as a matter of holding them. It was a matter of surveying in order to understand under which levels each artifact should be placed—I have it on good authority that soft soil does not hold, I have it on good authority that riverbeds are steadily losing oysters to the hands of the hungry, I have it on good authority

that sand is often found months or years after the fact. It is important to understand the impeccable nature of a mother's look combined with a shovel/trowel, it is important to understand what cannot be remedied and when wrestling could be akin to drowning. Many do not know how deep is the river and many could not name the points.

If you are a visitor here, be aware that you should pay the fee, be aware how you walk the course as this will determine how much you enjoy your stay. It is vital to know that enjoying your stay does not mean it was worth the drive.

## **Pagan Point**

Having never been there, I cannot assert whether the rumors  
of a better view are true. We once tried to swim  
the breadth of the river and were caught in the balm  
of soft waves and ringlets of seaweed; collusion: oystered  
and brackish. It was easy  
to forget, once we regained the sand, the swift bite  
of the river jellies, drawn through the maw of the two points  
by summer's salty intrusion.

It is difficult to know if the colonists  
dealt with a similar problem  
as the marks disappear  
within days after a stinging.

## Ghost Frames

Learn the significance  
of the ghost frames and see  
evidence of Maryland's first mill.  
See evidence of the burnished glow  
of young people, their skin all known.  
Be prepared to walk on rough terrain.

It seems the grass flattened itself  
around the wooden house-bones,  
like ears on the head of a cat.

Rafters and risers, wind-splintered beams holding nothing —a space-fed  
claustrophobia: burden- buried, crystallized—  
I cannot hold it all at once—

## **“A Nomenclature of Gnomons”**

The excavations have provided a scientific apparatus used in the fledgling

how difficult it is for us to say *we were happy*  
how our bodies were borrowed from one another

One of the most striking examples of this recovered in the later phases of the excavations.

without anyone saying you must give it back  
without one of us saying you have had it too long

One characteristic is that to be accurate, the angle has to demonstrate an equal pull between the two.

some things are known from the wreck of other examples  
some things are not known until the wake reaches the other  
shore

Our gnomon, with other artifacts, will be displayed.  
Archaeology is the need to provide  
deposits of refuse to tell

## Trinity Cemetery

Beneath it, the river slumps and erodes. Against it,  
the river pines argue intently with ivy.

*Welcome to the New World!* a wooden  
sign trills on the shore. First a church  
is built, then a graveyard.

I have told you that I do not want  
to find the hidden grave or the plot  
buried beneath crushes of rhododendron.  
I have told you that silt stains my feet.

I have told you that when I lie  
in the grass there, the hanging tree  
makes the ground pulse beneath me  
as its roots shift.

## Deposits of Refuse

How much we used our legs in that year—how much we tamped down  
in lieu of some other effort.

What I is dug up:

five anniversaries, each with  
its own French meal,  
my car dash scattered  
with national park receipts  
sheer as moth's wings.

What I is dug up:

the pain, like pine needles blooming  
in the hull of my gut,  
like the rasp  
of a toad's poached belly  
on the hot tar of Route 5.

We kept accretion coming, stuffed the creases in our brains  
with days, walked farther than we should have, let the sun  
bury itself in our necks and shoulders, gnawing a place,  
  
cutting a moan.

## **The Museum's Shop at Farthing's Ordinary**

Reproduction pottery: for breaking and/or holding a wide variety of materials that have been made for collectors of blank eras for those without children.

Souvenirs: not to be lent out freely.

Colonial games: depends on who is *it* (these goods are too heavy to mail).

Housewares: I, or you, or them.

Nautical niceties: see: gurgle, see: collapse, see: sand, see: rubble, see: two people and also a beach with small waves and a burnished sun on the water as it sings against hulls of boats and four exact hands.

Books: collected works, single works, borrowed works, encyclopedic replicas of forgotten works, smothered works, works woven from river weeds, works that double as pillows, untranslated works, illustrated works, works that seem like ladders but are really holes.

## **Under the River Pine**

we were leavening all the time we were rising and rising the grass seemed to brush our backs with deliberate pointed stalks we were trying to be deliberate we were holding fistfuls of the stuff tightly and it was seeping out between our knuckles with every pulse of blood warm there were times when I thought that you were someone who was aiming always it turns out you were just as heart-headed as I was and turning also always toward

## **St. John's Pond**

The tepid water, waving forever, its silted bottom calling  
for more relics.

When one is at a loss, she can look under the glass, finding what has  
been pinned, a thread's width of steel pushed through the spanned fin  
of a toad's foot.

When one is at a loss, she can finger the narrow leaves, draw lines  
in the dark, blackening sand. She can see previous examples  
of stark, bold turns.

The culmination: a blank disparity, a collection of objects, a bulky folder layered with  
human, closed.

## SECTION II.

### **Eventually it will all return to slough**

and the squirrel minus its eye will forget it had  
ever had one and the two crows fighting  
in the road will smear—lipstick on a tooth.

(Of the varied and nonspecific tendrils I am seeing  
a collection of the myriad I am seeing a blooming of slough.)  
There is so much to cut and not so much therein to save.

Even if we say we have molars we don't know  
how many, have you tried to count your teeth? I have seen  
the teeth and they lie, they lie—magmic, igneous,  
disingenuous. My mother has a small porcelain basin  
with lid and all of my baby teeth live inside, cracked.

At night the dream-wrought fights and the teeth  
escape my mouth, are replaced with wooden pegs I wake up  
thinking about George Washington and can't laugh.

I have wrecked through some in my dreams  
there was a week that I died three times in my sleep, once by arrow  
shot from bow, and twice from a bullet—  
stunned lead slug how did that get there?

As I have said, it is important to know that it was frequently summer. I like to think we did it for the first time in the woods on his childhood blanket. Bruising the blue wood sedge, making the crows and jays ruffle. According to a Dr. Nader, I can rewrite my memory if I tell someone else the wrong thing enough times or if I take a drug that inhibits norepinephrine. According to Dr. Nader's research, rough berber can become rustling ground-cover can become supple flannel. I have been described as someone who has grown reluctant to be sure of anything. Now you will expect me to tell you something of which I am sure.

That part of the brain grows stagnant of swampy use and/or a hole/low area.  
*The idea that memory is fundamentally malleable.*

to come *away* or *off*—to slide *down* into an adjoining hole, to get *rid* of, an  
*exuviation*

The pointed trowel, the open mouth, the stubbled driveway, the flowing faucet,  
the blank linoleum, the glossy snow-cone mouths: the slough, the slough.

I felt the groundwater gurgle at each turn,  
the brambles colluding to blockage.

*Be prepared to abdicate* the neurons  
are saying without relief.

Was it a broad day? Had it grown its callus  
of evening yet? It had a sheen:  
a crop of hostas sunning their bellies  
on either side of the walk.

The routine familiar: sidestep puddle  
dishes in the sink the towel's  
corner leeching wetness onto flecked  
granite and heat pressing  
its humid mold into the room  
the screen door breathing.

We all know the fade/blur, have palmed  
its outline to muffled seam.  
It's difficult to know the crisp still  
of a rimless, unborrowed image.

What's important to know is that things were always being said, everyone with a mouth and everyone with billions of record-retrieving, building, framing neurons. Some hypothesize there being three concentric rings of memory--inner floating in the water of a brain like a lump of pumice, the two outer wailing, working, unsteady in the molten. It's impossible to know whether or not the words were actually said as I have been described as someone who edits her memories past the point of obsidian. Slurring neurons nearly always surrender.

A fluid cache marking  
its own lithe membrane

with use, synapse patches  
bald with the running over

of hands. Would a puncture  
mean much in this plastic map

of there then here now?  
Let errant neurons wade

into the making of past?

We all know the fade/blur, bumble,  
grapple, dissect.

linoleum shellac  
sink crusted with used china  
creased and re-created terry fuzz  
released and floating restless  
over porous don't spill on me  
granite and heat pressing  
its intentions into the damp firm  
backs of four legs.

the place is an heirloom the place is an  
ordered row  
the place and day and time say and say  
what was

Binding together the individual parts  
of a memory into a unitary whole is known

as what / suggests remembering events  
based on what did happen and also what

was interpreted to have happened /  
Remembering a list in terms of its overall

meaning often leads people to form  
inaccurate neuron paths for details.

How to know when to solder and when to peel

the linoleum heaving, her blotted form bent over the sink. She hands me the dishtowel, an abrupt flag passed along *you dry we have something to talk about* no one in the room but us and rushing, bubbling fervor, the clogging drain. *Tomorrow I'm going in for surgery there's a tumor in my throat, in my thyroid they say it's cancer* a lump in the throat a blip on the flesh a mark on the marred in the swallowing space *it's an outpatient procedure I'll be home by dinner* her same frame as minutes before—it must be—but all I can

recall that there were some instances of complacency, budding  
as well as consuming and planting with him there were always these matters of being privately owned as well as of being the first the very first. The matter of forgetting how to hold things as well as a matter of holding them, *you know we have something to talk about* said through grasps, gasps, that same flannel blanket  
shimmying through my dreams

recall is a wispy billowing of *everything will be fine* and waves of heat pressing firm through the crisp screen door.

its corners wet with those consolation snow cones, those *give me one more* moments, that pressing summer heat.

Now:

the white scar—narrow brooch at the base of a missing face—  
white hands, pale hands—one must always cover one's mouth—blurred  
form like a child's drawing in wet concrete, edges sucked smooth  
like a candy too long on the tongue.

Now:

the red fingers—their full-tilt unearthing of  
sedge—one  
must never let the ground know it's been known—keep in  
mind  
the construct, that the forms placed so neatly in the dirt  
don't hold as the slough rips up, roils.

In those moments that shouldn't shift, I am short my sureties.  
blankly.

I am a body

we were there we were there we were traces, folded membranes, collections of slough.

*also*—a side channel, or a natural channel that is only *sporadically filled* with  
water

River silt bracky, bumbling, borrowed—color a hand, burden a back, lick  
skin  
as if once buried neck-deep in salt. You little ferns  
growing here do not know the rich soil.

Consolidation occurs almost immediately—construction begs the extra peg to hold it in place. *Filing an old memory away for long-term storage*

*after it had been recalled is surprisingly similar to creating it for the first time.* It is as you say it was and the particulars are not so very much up for discussion as they are mere flotsam  
petrified in our cerebrospinal juices,  
subjected to waves and upwellings

the body blankly  
absorbs.

The solid sprout of a new memory glides into its little slot, carries its own weight complete and makes its stakes known,  
hammers down into the clay.

I will call some things burdens and others roots.  
Some things sedge and some things linoleum.

One could say my neurons have wanderlust, plodding the same seams of meaning gets them all riled up. They may shout to me how many times must we go over this. They may say our rustling is done, our flash and fade have simmered wearily long enough. We all know the grubby glimmer oft-handled events accumulate. Who is to say mine are the only fingerprints on the glass. Who is to say we are not mired for collapse.

The dumbing shimmer  
of a retreat. We all know

the staked familiar: loose lip  
of cabinet nudged open per  
push of JC Penney plates stacked  
and restacked maroon towel  
walls to match flocks to snag  
on every chip a relief in the  
ceramic's stern countenance  
one mouth's fair words pressing  
narrows the air between  
itself and the other.

We all know the small runs  
of staying.

what with the wherewithal for some to say and later make a reference to some such—  
more than 100 billion neurons inhabit the brain: lassoing, framing, crumbling  
as the synapses between them wander worn.

in passive: To be swallowed (*up*) in a slough; a piece of soft, miry, or muddy  
ground

Sallow-rutted, fringed in dusky bracken ferns, the same gravel road, the same  
billions of fragments coated squarely with blue-grey dust. The back drive pulsing  
somewhere on the landscape: hillocked and brave.

I am tired of the tooth: mineral hunk anchored in nervy pulp. Earnest by day, heedlessly fleeing by night. Leaving thirty-some holes bare, my mouth blanketed in space. What the remaining irregular humps have molded over, the deadened cells won't say. Dropping dead, unleavened head melding to its new form, only to erupt wooden nubs, ceramic pegs wrenched out of some conscious memory of *this is what we have left*. So fill the holes, don't worry for what you can't account for, don't miss that whistling hiss of *I was sure-footed once*.

### **SECTION III.**

## **The girl and her exercises to remain:**

tell the teller and what's left out won't rise up,  
will rise up, depending. If the moon, yes,  
if the sun, yes. What's buried and between  
rumble alive to quote what's missing, to make  
shapes of it in the air with their fingers  
and toes, and map and map—why can't I see  
the bits I leave behind  
on things? I should know, those molecules  
bear me, all of me, and their maps remember:  
this is how I lose.

those things which color  
the backs of our eyelids when we sleep,  
drawing over and over again  
the infinity sign, the spines and spleens  
of animals, the bobbed tails of cats,  
in their prisms where all sides  
narrow into one.

grasping renders it all splayed  
too neatly, more precise than it is—the points converge  
and the slat-lines don't condense into walls,  
but remain: those places that resist  
definition, enduring scattered in the shift  
from known to what else.

don't wonder where it goes.  
like Pluto's twin, newly-discovered, these things  
burrow dark and don't begin to ache  
until the connective cord raises up against fingers, sought  
and kept by the relegation of so much light.

## Mining

what makes possible the small  
runs of staying that vein the coarse path,  
jagged and swollen with flotsam and lost points  
of buried ore

the cratered culmination furnished,  
peopled with pock marks from those small  
concave deaths:

the slow muss hush of the draping phone cord  
the wild inconsolable in wracking in submerged  
the ten delicate nails split-sharded against  
the side table flecked with my mother at the ends  
of those nails wailing—later I am not meant to hear  
my Uncle Tony describing the scene:  
three-days-dead body, *splayed* on the floor, next to the bed  
three-dead-days body, slayed on the floor, beneath the beams  
thee-dying-days badly, strayed to the floor, near the bent—

o ambulance called to slump bleakly down the gravel drive  
o widow emphysemic-sistered, o widow traced in tar:  
away for the weekend her sister emphysemic  
those sputtered gasps echoing around the hospital room  
ballooning from one mouth caught in the other

My mother will often relate this about the death of her father:

the night I heard he died  
    I felt his body bend against me as I slept  
his weight laden with *here* as he settled  
    the bend of his knees over the edge of the bed  
though I knew his true frame was buried  
    stiff— languid—? in his agreed-upon box  
I knew also even more so his mottled hand  
    as it brushed my face I did not open my eyes  
but felt him: the air that moves a windmill  
    the sun that strikes the floor  
                    through a window

So I wonder, where the anchor who  
    the anchor in this?

Green apples with hard seeded remnants cut from  
their centers hairbrush small and plastic-coated  
puzzles baseball games pieces spread the floor across  
windows windows and blue rugs treadmill riding  
lawn mower pulling red wagon vice grips black  
squirrels red paint on a flaking deck swing set  
sandbox ceramic glass hen photo albums flood-worn  
the organ with its nestled keys and wooden pedals  
sustain and where does it rest now and what against?

we say lost we say *irretrievably* so

eventually my father's mother brought herself  
to us, drifted causally across three state lines  
her stakewalls of memory shifting in the dirt  
at every border crossing.

o rocking chair o slivered soul o

*do you want some lunch? some nice saltines?*

eventually my father's mother was brought  
to degradation that leathers the inside,  
blots and blears whole people, dollops of days: smeared.

at sixty-five, my father's mother is no longer someone who can presume  
to lean back on her heels  
and not fly into the fade.

o small wooden bench o crippled cells o neural spaces

*don't you wail some lurch? sore next solve teens?*

the ottoman emerges as moss-colored weapon,  
is brandished when we visit her weekly, then monthly.

I am my mother, then I am no one.

At sixty-five and blurred a subtle slur a salacious scrabbling  
an eventual, dream-like *succumbing*.

*dent yellow so mild lunge? solemn ex-sundries?*

try this it was her favorite a brandy alexander did you know  
she rang a dinner bell did you know she bagged groceries  
to buy christmas gifts did you know she baked rhubarb  
into gummy pies did you know anything besides: diabetic,  
alzheimers, cancer. the creme de cocoa and half and half  
slur through me buzz my chest bury their sweetness in  
that stiff solid place that appears occasionally in the throat

later, in the right light, my father says *god you look just like her.*

do you want to be more than an aimless caterwaul?  
bury your thread in the head of another.





the parts of them  
    released apart from will, free from definition of *this is how*  
    *you will remember us*  
the sallow garments frayed, framed, all along my mother's  
    mother's brick walls.

it is difficult to belong to other people  
    it is difficult to mow the lawns of the dead  
    when they no longer can

*it's good to touch the green, green grass of home*

    something taking up rent  
    burrows and hems itself—stitches so small, make them smaller  
    than traces, thin as embroidery thread moistened in the mouths  
    of grandmothers and of little girls—  
    the needle, the need, the drawn-on lack—

I never remember seeing that three-stoned ring on her hand I only ever knew her  
hands one way I only ever knew as *in your blue veins* as *she was a blue-blooded girl* as *don't*  
*make me blue*

    if you insist on clothing yourself in it, buck up those  
    tender shoulders—the hems are heavy, the fabric macabre,  
    the hood bloated and suffocating

and as for the value the worth well  
the appraiser's head bobbles, winks  
*do you even know what you have here?*

in lieu of donations,  
give us new honking hearts,  
bedazzled faces, open,  
    waxing moons

for what are we  
to wear after all  
of our faces have left  
the thin room  
with her

apron after apron go-kart slotted spoons  
basketball hoop over garage door open  
like a mouth floors rummaging through  
themselves the hidden higher ceiling a  
lowered doorway a stubborn stain pool  
emptied yawning grill pit missing some  
stones remember when you broke your  
tooth on the hardwood remember when  
you thought you'd get married on that  
hill remember when she crashed into  
Dad on the ladder remember breakfast  
cooked in bacon fat with baby on the hip  
remember onion grass and car grease and  
the swinging bridge the cicadas the dead  
dogs the breeding cats the distinct night

singled we are all pressed into that distinct box that careless caterwaul that julienned thread, split ravelling: if not for some grandmother I would not know how to sew.

togethered we are all pressed into that discrete box that claimless caterwaul that julienned thread,  
spirit revelling: if not for some grand other I would not know how to sow.

say to the sayer and repeat repeat reap eat reap east reed eaves rend each  
pray to the prayer and rend each reach bleary cast crystalline

How to go on  
How to go on a date  
How to go on a diet  
How to go on living  
How to go on living when someone  
How to go on living when spouse  
How to go on traveling forever  
How to remember  
How to remember dreams  
How to remember names  
How to remember things  
How to remember the derivative  
How to remember the declaration  
How to remember the dead  
How to memorize  
How to memorize lines  
How to memorize the periodic  
How to memorize all the bones

o pulpit mumble o withering psalm o colicky flame

my weight  
in the pew next to her signals  
my denseness, a florid unwilling, a tightening.

a twin before birth, my mother carries  
the task to still carry her dead-in-the-womb sister,  
her dead and bled out not-to-be companion

*dear god we start please we are polite give me we are wanting*

there is a chance I will give twins  
to myself, there is a chance it runs in families,  
the vein of ore circling, routing, clinging

*dear god we strain please we are palpable give me we are warning*

do I know my mother's twin because I know my mother: her  
laugh or how her hands bend when folded in prayer?

The dead—a chain running, rounding  
our necks: a rosary glinting like candies  
in the dark womb of a purse—murmur  
in memory, go on because the alive decide  
to let them:

a stellar crack  
in the consciousness of another

Do I know my mother

*dear god we say please we are plausible give me we are waning*

construction-paper book bound by pressed wood  
carved whale's tooth carved with sailing ships,  
filled with plaster GI Joe with parachute and  
bayonet yellow skateboard ribbed with orange  
wheels silver ring three diamond/glass/crystals  
plated in gold (18K impressed upon metal?) watch  
with elastic goldish band no time kept bridesmaid's  
dress with blue sheath covering lacquered pearls,  
two strands two puppets soft with use one blue  
snake one yellow bird, two soundless tongues

I wore my clothes like shutters that week  
the tar had finally dragged itself from one sister to the other, loping along those seven  
years globular unmarked and my mother returned from St. Agnes one evening saying to  
me your grandmother wants you to sing at her funeral and I said yes of course I will.

the organ woman was impatient we had little time to rehearse the hearse was coming  
but she

didn't have the music I had to run and get a hymnal align my  
voice to her stuttered pushing  
of pedals her bombardment of keys  
all of this I remember all of this  
the fountain in the vestibule with stone  
birds the rustling of dress clothes  
in blank pews with legs fold and unfold  
my mother putting her white hand on  
my shoulder when it was time the carpet's  
threads varied with worn by the pressure  
of uncountable imprints the music stand  
the great carved crucifix behind me bearing  
down my voice happening to the room  
and what song it was  
I do not now know.

I am thinking I cannot ask I cannot call my mom and ask her because I had only one  
responsibility and it was this: sing the song and remember.

the birthday shudder we carry, the tender one-use moon  
*save it up for a rainy day...or should I say night? harw-harw*  
the load of dead skin lining our gloves--no, not like a lamb's--  
I mean I'm a human and I've left traces on it all, if no one  
is running behind gathering them up again, my objects  
are a map, and why shouldn't I blaze the trail, raze and flail,  
graze until all the touches turns blots smears mean more than *I*  
*was once somewhere.*

Gnawing on green apple slices,  
the remnants of seed pockets embedded still in the sour  
chunks, I am barely counter-height. I am a snag on the inside  
bricks of the kitchen walls. I am opening and closing  
the seldom-used dishwasher to hear it creak. I am not  
wondering when my mother will be over to get me but  
I am wishing I was home.

age does not come like it should and we all know that

the birthday shudder we carry, the pocket full of adages--blank, merry,  
warming themselves against our everydays, and, when those are dreary,  
against our memories. Is it possible to impose order that way on an unruly  
batch of thread, long left to tangle in a drawer, by pulling it forth  
and bringing it to mouth and to needle. Don't wish your life away, Love  
means a rainy waste, Work haste, play away, Don't stitch, your love will fray,  
A stitch in haste saves wish, A wish a day keeps the rain away, Don't suffer  
apples, Leave a wish and haste a life, A bird in the stitch is worth nine  
Look before you play--

there is a lesson here in how much we can hold.

## BIOGRAPHY

Michele K. Johnson received her Bachelor of Arts in English from St. Mary's College of Maryland in 2011. She received her Master of Fine Arts with a concentration in Poetry from George Mason University in 2014. While pursuing her MFA at Mason, Michele also taught Composition, Literature, and Creative Writing, and served as Editor-in-Chief of *So to Speak: a feminist journal of language and art*. Her work has either been published or is forthcoming in *THRUSH*, the *Ucity Review*, *OVS Magazine*, the *Ampersand Review*, and others.