

ARTICULATE THE SKELETON

by

Alyssa Dandrea
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

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities and Social
Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Articulate the Skeleton

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

by

Alyssa Dandrea
Bachelor of Arts
University of Mary Washington, 2011

Director: Jennifer Atkinson, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



This work is licensed under a [creative commons attribution-noncommercial 3.0 unported license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

DEDICATION

For Claudia, forever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very warm thank you to my class of fellow candidates for reading and responding to my poems and for the pleasure of growing and writing beside you the past three years; the poetry faculty at George Mason, especially Jen and Eric, for your infinite wisdom, guidance and whimsy; all the friends and family members who share in the memories I've invoked in these poems; Michael, for your love, patience and unwavering support along the way; and, always, Claudia, Matt and Christine: you live in these poems as much as I do.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vii
I.....	2
Elegy	3
Tall Tale	4
Blue Earth, Minnesota.....	5
The Serpent	7
Magdalene.....	8
Barabbas on the East Coast.....	9
Homage	12
Traveler	13
On Galapagos.....	14
Bird.....	15
What We Found in the Woods.....	16
Virginia	18
II.....	19
From Out of the Dark Door of the Secret Earth.....	20
After Burn	21
What Washed Ashore.....	22
In the Town	23
Morning in August.....	24
June	25
Daughter.....	26
Mother as Mermaid.....	27
Olly Olly Oxen Free.....	28
Barabbas in Swamp Country.....	29
Horseshoe Crab	32

Roadside Attraction.....	33
Hell.....	34
III.....	36
Harvest.....	37
Elsewhere.....	38
The New House.....	39
Inverted Cedars.....	40
Disappearing Disease.....	41
Werewolf.....	42
Barabbas in the Dakotas.....	43
Bananas.....	45
The Yeti Finds Itself in a Corn Field.....	46
Holiday.....	47
On the Farm.....	48
Late.....	50
IV.....	51
Articulate the Skeleton.....	52
Advent.....	53
Minnesota.....	54
Eurydice.....	55
Shape of Winter.....	56
Elegy.....	58
1993.....	59
Burial.....	60
February.....	61
Barabbas Recalls the Ozarks.....	62
Doppelganger.....	64
Notes.....	65

ABSTRACT

ARTICULATE THE SKELETON

Alyssa Dandrea, MFA

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Jennifer Atkinson

This thesis confronts belief in both the seen and unseen, the forces that exist outside the self, and the transformative power of memory, story telling and loss. Each poem examines and names a human sadness explored most often by the same speaker—a daughter—who is searching for an understanding of her own traumas, loneliness and simultaneous reproach of and desire for the divine. At times the speaker turns to nature to soften the violence she experiences and witnesses in the domestic sphere, but in that natural landscape, she only encounters new monsters of mythical origin, i.e.: Big Foot, werewolves and mermaids. Yet within these fantastical encounters, the speaker is able to more fully reveal her hope for humankind and the truth about her own sins and flaws as well as those of her family members. The poems here are strange and magical; they are uncanny and lyrical. They are obsessed with the heart and with finding a way to survive.

*All human nature vigorously resists grace, because grace
changes us and the change is painful.*

—Flannery O'Connor

I.

Elegy

a little girl comes up from the creek
she is missing
a shoe stands dripping

on the porch
don't let her in

I tell my mother
she says *who?*

I decide my mother's heart
is simple

it would be better
if mine were too

if what I love did not return
like her memory

of horses

when she rode them bare-back
when she smelled like them

let me in

a little voice says
my mother
hears

a fever of cicadas
a kind of nothing

my reckless heart
is at the door
already

I am going to open it

Tall Tale

My father fell from the sky one day, fully made,
at the end of summer. I am told he landed
in a swamp town in Florida where the oranges grow

so beautiful stunned tourists slip into their groves
and steal them for breakfast. His dark hair,
his big, comical teeth the clouds stirring

above him to cover the hole he made as he fell.
He walked toward my childhood, to my mother
seated in a lawn chair at dusk where she dangles

one foot in the grass watching me assign the fates
of fireflies. I am learning that cruelty has nothing
to do with anger. Mercy nothing to do with love.

She waits for my father like an unlocked house.
I am seven. I believe the sun is a man, the moon,
a woman. I believe I am guarded by angels that bend

over me like willows. I have only prayed when required to.
But I recognize him when he walks through the trees
it's my mother, unsure, arms at her sides, staring

hard at this smiling, wind-blown man. A few dogs
that have followed him here. His face and arms are pink
as a newborn's, his jacket covered in burrs, and on his lapel

a blue nametag that reads *father. Cruelty, mercy*, the fireflies
blink and do not hurry. They still don't know what I am.
What I'll do. He comes close enough to show his hands

to my mother. I catch three more, now a dozen in the jar.
What I want is what I've always mistaken for the heart
the way it erases itself, that forgery of light. How easy to believe

that something glows defiant against the body's chamber
And that fathers, like anything else, could fall from the sky.
Suddenly a firefly lands on my dress and gives me a name too.

Blue Earth, Minnesota

I dream my brother
has died and our parents
are afraid to touch me after
because whatever he was

I'm made of it too. They look
at me as two people might look

at a haunted house: from the yard,
in broad daylight. We go out
into the woods to give them time
away from his ghost;

the spring bees
are weaving together wild

onion and bloom. The dream
makes them curious
but they do not pursue us.
My pockets are hot

with the stones
of certain fruits. I can't recall

eating them, but this is how
the dream works like air
pushed away from a wing
I grow afraid

without knowing why
though the wood

is bright and not too quiet.
Help me, brother.
I know this isn't you
even as your ghost

crouches inside me
a blank light bulb, a curb

of snow in the dark.
The dream is stuck in me.
Warn me to go home,
that you are not dead,

that I am
well-loved.

The Serpent

In the blue hour before dawn I have come
here to see the monster for myself. A man with a boat

prepares to take me out to the middle of the lake.
From the shore I imagine the ripple, a sudden wave, flash

of stippled fin near the prow, or, if he knows I've come,
he might rise, black from black, with all the swiftness

and shyness of an angel. We launch from a small jetty.
We are watched by children watched by strays.

The afternoon: oars slapping the water, disappearing
briefly beneath lake skin, a repetition of lavish and dark measure.

A silver mist has begun to fall. The boatman can't bear
to look at me; later he will tell me it's because I remind him

of his daughter's friend. The way wind still lifted her
wet hair even after they pulled her body from the lake. His silence

is a bright ache the shape of what I want to say. Egrets
cry out incessantly; their belief in the sky unshakable.

By five o'clock the clouds have gone leaving behind
a ghost of moon, its buried sleep uncovered suddenly.

My boatman has caught a fish, and I watch him clean it.
Trout, he says, thumb guiding blade against belly

in one careful motion the entrails and head
one mechanism tossed overboard. Do not mistake this care

for love, I think, as he whispers: *the other fish love it,*
believe me. I am lost. How long have I been weightless?

How long beneath the lunatic moon, its pear belly,
its shining crystal roots? The trout's eye glints back at me,

flaunting its golden halo. It drops beyond my sight,
going to him, my god. But I know how it looks it looks it looks.

Magdalene

It is nearly twilight, and the bees are still drifting.
From the kitchen window, I watch their dizzy
suspense the eyes of children the way they settle

heavily on a body or cleave to some point far
beyond it. The way we grope in the dim light
for certainties, sense the outline of a thing before

giving it the full weight of our hand. In the morning
I'll wake and forget your absence for a moment,
but for now I'll watch them finish what they must do.

The careful work of naming each flower as a god,
of subtracting in order to add this the only terrible
desire as they lift in and out. Suddenly, I will notice

that hydrangeas have taken the little yard. I will think
it is no longer night that darkens this space, but them.

Barabbas on the East Coast

Today I came
to another sea

the blue-black
of a sore eye

stretched beneath
dawn I followed

the wrack line
meandering

where tide
abandons wreaths

of sea grass
and things that look

like other things
when I closed

my eyes there
the world seemed

made of birds
all calling crying

revolutions
in the air

blind this way
I felt made

of salt
a composition

of beads
strung together

carelessly
I watched pelicans

sail back and forth
above the foaming

waves their ancient
bodies taut

like arrows
their beauty

an improbable
certainty how could

I matter
when such creatures

don't see me
at least I am

not lost
the smell of fish

wet earth
licked back

and rising is a sign
I can pretend

I am dead
a grimy nameless

stone in the shape
of a giant bird

older than anything
but touchable

a relic too
I want to belong

to the coast
where sea and land

share their secrets
but I keep moving

I no longer
remember

when I quit
believing

there was an end
for me

the egret
and gull

I hold longest
in my eyes

salt and cloud
as though

I might
fashion wings

through rote
or know how

to use them
if somehow I did

Homage

—for C.E.

You were drawn to ruins — a collapsing fence,
dull, roofless barns, a house gouged, then left

pocked by a rush of fire. It should be fitting
then that your body in the end would unbraid

slowly — singing itself, your brain, that god,
away to the next world. And it should be fitting

that the season is pale and loosened by rags of leaves
prophecy, after all, is patient you might have said once

circling through my drafts in red. But nothing fits.
Not the stun of this severing, not the mad rummage

through memory. No matter what I've heard,
resurrection is always messy, full of rise and fall;

there will be significant decay. And I don't now know
the given name of the bird that calls, alarmingly,

outside my window, but I hope that you would
love this derelict composition — its fleeing shadow,

its rumor of wings

Traveler

“...you will remember me if you want to...”
-John Titor, November 6, 2000

I remember the way the air changed
around you as you pressed a knife into one
peach, then another. It became thicker, hung
itself like a hospital curtain, gathered
and final, as if I could not reach out, pull it
back, and find you there at the window
surrounded by the smell of another flesh.
Yes. We remember what we want to
in mouthfuls; I was nine years old filling a basket
with blueberries, eating as I went. I was scared
of bees, but watched, fascinated, as mosquitoes
pricked my bare arms leaving behind tiny jewels
of blood the color of my stained mouth. That night
no one got sick but you. I felt my way downstairs,
to sneak my hand into the basket, rolled them
between my fingers cold, cloudy, each one like a stone
taken from the bottom of a deep well. John Titor loved
his mother, believed he slipped between the folds
to find another her couldn't I? I could find you
like an unexplained bruise after it has already darkened.
Find you as he found her, rocking on a porch
shelling sunflower seeds in your mouth, a blue cotton dress
unable to conceal the other me, your swelling stomach.
And leave you there spitting back the remnants in time.

On Galapagos

Black shores, beloved of
the sun a smattering

of cold volcanoes thrown
like divining stones on the map.

And what would the rocks say
if asked, or the mangroves with

their incessant legs? All is
salt. The spirit has no

bones. Before you, there were
seasons. Spring was a door

the smell of thunder crouching
just inside the frame. If asked,

the rocks on the shore would
warn the iguanas away

from the coming net of rain.
But all they do is glister

and steam. Besides, the iguanas
want to look like them,

want the rain to give everything
the same name. They say: if

you want to be mistaken here
crawl upon your belly.

Bird

on the power line a comma accidental
stroke of the brush whatever startles

us at midday waiting at a crosswalk or
in the lean of life a posture of mourning

reveals itself in folded wings crows appear
before sunrise to ravage the neighbor's garbage

out by the curb I have never witnessed this
but I know it's them they betray themselves

the way my body betrays me when in want
leaving traces belly to cheek how we learn

to love vanished things first I meet his black
eye a tender mechanism set in his face

and know no crueler intimacy passing far beneath
his reach the dark syllables he holds in his throat

for me half-starved and somewhere somehow
another me uncoils hotly into your absence

What We Found in the Woods

when the tornado
came
it mangled

the church
playground
so for weeks

we'd hear
things like
found another piece

Mike this time
up near
the Hormel plant

or
the Anderson's dog
the lost one

came home
dragging
a swing seat

this was
our game
we needed

those jagged
shards of blue
and yellow

like bits of sky
inventing
the woods

as though we'd
never seen
them before

yesterday
June swore
she *found*

*the jungle gym
rungs
laid out*

*beneath
the maples like
a spine*

she told this
to the Harris boy
on his bike

as she hung
her linens from
the chestnut tree

that speared
her kitchen
window

today I saw
her red
shutters

floating
in the quarry
it seemed

wrong
her baby's
blanket tangled

in the reeds
like the spirit
itself

but I haven't told
I never found
a thing

Virginia

The year after the blizzard the trees sagged
with peaches. They gave and gave

fat little bellies, a little pink along the spines;
wherever birds landed a hard volley of rain.

So many we couldn't jar them fast enough.
Inside, an endless march of sweets:

pies, crisps, tarts, cobblers cooling on racks.
So many we thought they'd overrun us,

gorgeous, with icebergs of cool whip
floating on top. Outside, the trees kept nothing

to themselves. The fragrance lifted
each evening until it was a swarm

battering dully against our shut windows.
But it was already in the house. I was a child

convinced the trees were magic unafraid
of what might show up without warning.

Even then I knew something always does.
And the trees cutting into the cloth

of memory the trees, their endless golden
eyelids were calling it by name

when we slept. When we slept,
it was with our mouths closed.

II.

From Out of the Dark Door of the Secret Earth

god came crawling
and paused somewhere
disguised as
a peeling blue house
a hundred crushed bees on the porch
a scarecrow
in the yard with no mouth
but found out too late
no one leaves country life

pretty soon god became
a luna moth diving
its sad green truth
into a fire pit at night
a child the only witness
a narrow country girl
made violet beneath a bug zapper
a shade of the house
so a shade of god

there are more shades of blue
in the country than hidden dirt roads
god has that at least
and gold little corncakes
in the morning
when all the winged creatures
devastate the sky

and every night
the jimson weed opens
leaving itself like a note
on the doorstep
of the house of god
that says

*everything in this life crawled
out of that trap door in the earth
out of the silence that isn't heaven
but what a dog can hear
what a snake can taste
the place I feel around for
when my memory is just too good*

After Burn

We spent the day at a brown lake.
Smelling of wet rocks and split banana
skins discarded in warm tufts of grass,
we kept to ourselves, floating like dead men
aimlessly towards the dark middle.

Catfish strayed from the bottom's shadow
sifting the light through lonesome eyes, but no
one felt like fishing. A family of three packed
their things, up-ended an orange cooler leaving
ice chips winking, softening in the sun.

People milled by the water's edge and hovered,
sprawled out on the high rocks – it was a place
to stop, to come and go from as easily as slipping
into water – a cool dress. None of us saw the man
follow the girl behind a stand of trees, but we all

heard about it the following day, felt it as we watched
the news, careful not to touch our pink thighs.

What Washed Ashore

was not serrated fin; was not
a tooth spat out, bloodied,
dragging gum from

the membrane sock. It was an eye,

opened, now gathering me into
its fist: I imagine the body it must
have come from. Staring into the

pupil the marbled blue I see

the layering of scales, the thrust
of limbs propelling a dark shape
over fissures in the deepening

pith; the monstrous eye, roving

and deaf, now warning me in
its stillness of what cannot be
helped what fills

with sand and knows nothing else.

Somewhere, scavengers
go slowly, dragging out
the months. Somewhere, they

continue the final work of undoing.

But I will carry this
weight, without knowing
what will be born; as if an egg,

as if the womb of the thing.

In the Town

Something has come into the air since Sunday last. I felt it like baldness, the sudden absence of a bandage. I saw it on the face of our young cook like a door closing by itself. She set out for the woods at dawn creeping past that wet hour—her hair loose and wild down her back. God gave me no daughter. Our skin peels; our milk sours in the glass. The dogs that roam the lane have turned vicious. We hear them tear at each other at night. God gave me no daughter. The girls are going now like birds, like flies. What will we do when none are left? God gave me no daughter. Now the day is perpetual, the light is our fever—maddening, maddening. Where has our darkness gone? I have no daughter. But in the cellar something beats bloody its fists, is tearing out its black halo of hair.

Morning in August

-for my brother

The light came, corn-silk thin,
siphoned from a mother's breast.
We woke early, upset the dew as we ran
with mist pearling at our throats,
clustering in the stray hairs at each

temple: not long before the scent of wild
onions gave us pause. The sweating rot
of stalks pushed up through softened
earth beckoned a frenzy of our hands
cleaving, tearing at knots of white-sunk

flesh. We gouged the soil clean, then
aimed each severed ghost high and far
into the fog, listening, separated, for
the sound of a thing receding

June

You didn't tell me about the baby because you couldn't.
Because so often we are without words. As when evening
clouds touch the pines across the lake, for that kind
of silence split open by a loon's call the long caress
of grief whose color is apricot and whose weather is deep
morning sunlight over snow. This is how I try to understand
things, how I always have. It was June when I stood
at a fence with the first boy I loved watching horses
in the damp field beyond us. And only days later we found
the foal sprawled in a shallow ditch nearby, his neck curved low
as if against wind. His ribs gleamed, and we did not
touch. His eyes, cavernous, gathered us, and we did not
touch. We made a home, necessary, in that cruel space
between us. We never talked about it, wrapped it asleep
in the myth of that other life where the sky, a blue hurt
delivers us. Where the only language is flight. A place I've begun
to believe in again. Silence, after all, is invention,
you'll tell me. Not everything is a poem. I know that now.

Daughter

You will die in September. You will have gone
to the garden to dig for potatoes when your heart gives in
unexpectedly. And perhaps you live

alone because your husband has died
or left you years earlier when your despondence became
like a bird in the house. Or,

perhaps there will be no husband after all. You will live
in the country
where the nearest neighbors

work a sprawling farm the main house
like the white of an eye set far back on a hill. They keep
peacocks, but you will never see them.

The truth will be that you love
them, the fact of their existence
like a crater in the heart. Because

you will come to realize that there is no other
blue and no word for the shade of
their long, shining necks. And

this will be what keeps you alone.
Why even the dog will slip its collar one evening
and make for the tree line. That you finally love

nothing else so well as an edge, a cold
that burns, the little fish-
mouths of certain flowers

a plain old grief. Don't worry. You will lie
in the garden for weeks, diminished
by tiny gods, possessed
by bees that will

make a door to your chest and
fill it with such gold. Haunted

by a house that looks and looks
and does not know what is wrong.

Mother as Mermaid

My understanding of you comes from below
from the cold arrow-shafts that point homeward

there you are suspending me in a pool singing
kick kick kick love instruct me now far from home

in forgetful ascension what shape should I take
what song could surpass the lure of home however strange

this memory like a shipwreck is a false home
meant for the things that gather and blink their light

in the empty rooms of sea it has changed everything
still I conjure you in rainstorms and aquariums

the timbre of your voice full of song if I say it was
lashing me in place your hair nothing like mine

somehow not wet braided with tentacle clung-to
with the tender feet of sea snails you never wanted me

breakable so easily persuaded but I was always yours to drown

Olly Olly Oxen Free

Off the coast of Hatteras, a thrashing in the shallows:
gull and shark, the black tips of wing and fin striking

through daylight, while men along the shore cast out
into the waves. For a moment, the scene exists only

because of the bluefish. The hour blushes for them,
for the sharks whose hunger is so strong they beach

themselves continuously. A mother and son watch
from a distance, their expressions different, both difficult

to read. Further down shore, someone has thrown a kite
into the wind; the sudden shock of pink is confusing

and could make this all a dream. But I know this place.
I swam here as a girl. I know my brother is waiting

behind me barefoot, hidden by razors of dune grass.
I wish he would come out and sit with me on the sand.

Barabbas in Swamp Country

When I came
upon them

they already had
the heart out

were kicking it
a deflated ball

three boys
and nearby

the freshly dead
body opened

by a jagged cut
down the middle

a rope still tied
connecting neck

to tree *dumb gator*
the smallest boy

laughs the clearing
is flooded

with light
swamp violets

crouch in groups
beards

of moss are broken
by rosy sun

one boy places
his palm delicately

on another's face
leaving a bright

red print
I have arrived

too late the heart
barely the size

of a sugar sack
will shred

the beast will be
emptied its bones

left to gather up
the sky long

after the boys
have turned

to ghosts
if I could speak

I would say *please*
don't and possibly

I have because all
at once the children

snap their heads
and look

right at me
bloody each one

I swear they
recognize me

or perhaps only
the desire for death

they know too well
and would it be

so awful
to be torn from

my torso
as I pass through

their group
I imagine their

miniature hands
inside me like wasps

a language
of boyhood riddles

the longed-for
voice of god

that disturbing
and soft

Horseshoe Crab

Uncovered by the early tide: a body breathed
with ocean, caked in other life, dragging shades
of the same color. Monstrous. Calloused beyond

flesh: were you tricked into being when you rose,
salty and cold, from a corridor of sea?
Creep and edge in the sand

the sweep of your tail across the morning so deliberate
I could not bear to touch you, though the ridges
of your eyes begged a curious finger to trace

the Neolithic socket. I wished for another day,
a different morning, an hour more spent
asleep; I never could have dreamed you up.

The sun broke fast as I hurried on to the distant pier.
And slipping back into the sea then, if it did, foreign,
embraced by barnacles, was my very own skull.

Roadside Attraction

We've stopped here to stretch and take what's left
of the sun into our sleep-heavy limbs. Besides

the gift shop girl, we are the only ones here.
Paul Bunyan squares himself in the muggy evening

air, stares over the highway contemplating
the marbled distance while mosquitoes seem released

suddenly as if from a box; they boil upward, sneaking
in where they can – summer's end is eaten

from the inside. Tourists won't be back until spring,
but the axe will not rust; the ox will still beat

her unnatural blue, softer than drum skin, into each
car that whistles by until she is only a pinprick,

a color lowing in the dark.

Hell

—for my grandmother

After he died, she found reasons to stay
indoors. It wasn't hard. One year later,

she watches from the kitchen window
as the tomatoes ripen, heavenly on the vine,

remembers the fullness of her young body
in the peach dress on the second day

of their honeymoon to the Ozarks when they stopped
and found a little creek bed. They didn't see the bear

until it was almost close enough to touch. Or so
she says. She feels him holding her loosely

by the waist again as he did that day, his grip relaxed
in the moment, knowing she would need possession

of her body to turn, to act. And she remembers too
that in their fear they abandoned the map by the creek

that day, were lost for hours after, uncaring, but alive.
If she were to go to the garden now, reach out

her hand for a single fruit, it would separate from the vine
at her touch. But there is no temptation left for her.

She will wait for my father to come, trim back the sprawl,
and gather each perfect globe for her. She prefers

the quiet house, so like a ship the way it creaks
beneath her feet, the way objects feel beneath her hands

at night when she can't sleep—damp, consequential.
The map is gone and without it the way to navigate

the wide rooms the soul makes, the places that threaten
to leave us. She drifts a little, longs for a time when no one

could imagine the world without monsters gilding hand-
drawn waves, those uncharted miles of nightmare blue.

We must want our fear to have a body, a face, she'll tell
me one day, so that when it call to draw us out,

we are disciples, already come to love it seeing the shape
of the thing we want most not to see, nearly.

III.

Harvest

It is beautiful to wake in this bare month,
to share my bed with absence to think of it
as an affair. And in this spirit, I stock my shelves

with fragrant oils and spices: cloves, grapeseed,
turmeric. I buy artichokes and watch videos about

how to cut and prepare them. *Remember, the stem
is a continuation of the heart; you'll want to peel it
and cover it with lemon juice.* I am paralyzed by how

much is sheared away, how little remains after all.
I take the kitchen scissors to the bathroom and cut off

all my hair to be sure this means something. When
I finish, I stare at the dark handfuls, a heap of winter
in the sink. Maybe out loud I say how could you

leave, just like that? and ease my hands down
into the bowl as if it were full of water.

Elsewhere

In the harbor, boats knock faintly, scrubbed
near-white with salt and sun the smell
of fish, still wet, still blue-deep, their brilliant
scales cutting eyes in the sleepy
morning light. Up the hill, a girl rehearses
lines from a play, coils a hand at her navel
as she paces the little courtyard, slapping
stones underfoot with a branch in time
with her speech. The grandfathers play cards in the shade
of lemon trees and beyond, the beautiful
suspicion of Heaven a sky undone in variant green;
a reminder that any color can be so dark
that it appears black. Her cadence luffs
like white sails softly, like the world's own heart-sickness. Please,
do not stop your recitation, child. The grandfathers
hold back tears. The fish need this dream to go on and on.

The New House

When we visited, the stairs led

nowhere and the men left small
coffee cans, rimmed with tobacco spit,

in the red yard. We stood inside

the belly of the house, breathing
in sawdust, naming each room, while

our parents laid hands upon

the banisters and door frames as if to sand
them further, love them softer. Everywhere,

the falling sun. Across the new field,

birds wheeling and calling above something
dead or dying. Down the hill the dark

of the creek, nest of bramble and choke-

cherry, the *too far* where I turned and through
the house's ribs, saw only my brother in his skeleton

room: lying still in the place he felt

his bed should go as if to anchor him there,
in the bare dusk, to the aching windless timber

of that house where nothing could hide.

Inverted Cedars

By now I know the old myths
are dead when an article circulates
the web claiming *dragons have been found*

in Indonesia complete with a photo a finger-
sized lizard with pearly, wretched eyes
and, yes, wings, in shades of ochre and red.

Elsewhere, snow obscures a dim, defiant
wood where Big Foot has been uprooting cedars
and driving them head first back into the ground.

We look for signs of machine aid and find none.
We look again, circling the base for broken claw,
shed tufts of fur clinging to splinters, for a note,

a promise that says *I'll come whenever you call*,
but we know now that this will not be enough
to fix us. Not enough to explain how we got here;

these new myths of heartbreak, inscrutable
ghosts, always reminding us what the body is not.
I know that when my father calls to tell me

he hasn't seen the deer moving through
the backwoods in months, he is talking about
his father dying. The sound of his voice, a question

shot through with bright pain, tells me that every
portent is a placeholder for something
far worse and each time, less real.

Disappearing Disease

Bees sometimes abandon the hive. I imagine
this happening all at once. They wake before

dawn, a texture of morning, divide air
from air, leaving, through their secret door,

the unconscious combs. Like shoals of squid
exiting the sea, like flocks of birds appearing

to hit invisible barriers mid-flight falling dead,
dying in clusters like fruit. Where will I flee

when the call comes out of branch or reef or cloud?
The one that makes a balloon of the heart and lets go.

I have never trusted the body to do what needs
to be done, though she does surprise me some mornings.

Her pale machinery leads us to a window, a silence
etched in the day, yellowgold. When she tells me she wants

to be a finch, something the size of a cupped hand,
I love her. Not because she cannot change, but because

she confesses all to me, to all. Because she cannot help
but reveal herself like a daytime moon; a scavenger's

desire to return again and again for the dead thing,
a garish bloom in the middle of a busy road.

Werewolf

Moonlight is as slippery as any god. Again the wolf
arrives, a hand ungloved, a mouth open wide,

then wider till the jaw whip-cracks the stilled air.
Beside him, a strange shadow rides the cornfield

of night. Cicadas are winding up in their canopies;
the neighboring farm's peacocks are screaming

the name of the one he will take over and over.
The man inside the wolf is winter, memory

of sleep, something caught beneath lake ice. What
wouldn't I give to climb out of my skin violet

and brutal. He pauses on a hill, rising up on two legs
as if to meet the clouds that cling to the shallows

of Heaven. He is enormous inside a sudden volley
of rain. All the tenderness of man radiates

as the skeletal thunderheads sail on.

Barabbas in the Dakotas

Barabbas feels
his way along

some back road
he is dressed

and that is all
he lives now

and that is all
the cedars

to his left
look so pretty

still wet with rain
and darkened

by that wet
he thinks *a crowd*

a silent crowd
and almost laughs

something shadowless
tracks him

on the lake
to his right

these long years
it glides patiently

breaking the skin
of water or sky

this one wild blue
belief and never

makes a sound save
Barabbas

precious lament
you son

of the dead country
not born a twin

but made one
chosen for release

you should have died
July's branches

vault violet
above Barabbas as

he prays once more
his ransacked heart

beating a tattoo
give us give us give us

Bananas

I could smell them softening in their freckled skins
before I even entered the kitchen. Moments earlier,
I awoke in the plush

of another morning full of need the sky
already a hot memory of summer and I

its impossible child. The light betrays an afternoon
of rain; the bananas, barely sweet, betray
a future of rot, crying out for fruit flies.

I tell myself that you did love me once
until the idea thinned darkly around the thing inside it

like this: the two of us

watching each other from across a room. Now, I stare
at the corner where they rest and think how easily
the body is opened, how

its name in your mouth is the finest way.

The Yeti Finds Itself in a Corn Field

People say I live
beneath mountains

that I am as dull as a spook
in a child's haunted house.

What do you say?
I hear you whistling

like a blizzard deep
in the stalks. I know

this world is
paper-thin, but I am

so well hidden.
I could snatch you

flaw your moony limbs
until you tell me

what you see that makes you
sing. I am not myself. Not

with all this warped gold
spearing its way

into my creature heart.
Soon it will storm and you

will be called indoors. People
say the thunder is my own

bellow. Please don't go.
I want to tell you

a secret. It is awful
out here to witness

the flashing hand
of creation. To know

it will not hurt.
That nothing ever will.

Holiday

It's a feast day, precious and good, in the month of white.
The spirit boils over on the stove, slips inside the white

bell of an onion while the girls correct their red bows,
polish their skin with lemons and salt. They go on white

feet filing down the hall; little saints with little candles.
The aunts are impolite, their hearts like lap dogs, white

and dull as a work shirt. Outside the sky is a ceiling
descending, a winter fruit, a harvest of collarbones white

pretty, pretty and tumbling. Inside, the father stirs a glass,
sure of his beauty, his whiskey, while a fire licks yellow to white

a dream of subtle invention. The spirit is a mystery
feathering open for the girls like a cry exploding white

and merciless as the sound of gulls. Nothing has changed.
A beast sweats and swells in the oven. There is white

cake and brandy for after sitting up high on the cabinet,
a coil of cellophane with sugared roses white on white.

On the Farm

yesterday I discovered
footprints
in the snow

leading from
the woods
to the house

but none leading
away
we searched

our rooms the barn
woodshed
and coop

it has not snowed
again the prints
froze

overnight this
morning
the house keys

went missing
a strange
newspaper

appeared
in the hay loft
I heard

footfalls overhead
coming from
the attic

we searched
rooms barn
woodshed

and coop
it has been
three days since

the baby
vanished we
have not

left the kitchen
with its doors
and windows clean

and pearly
in the winter sun
the animals

will die without
us soon
we hear them

scratching
lowing
impatient

their belief
in us
in the dark

Late

I wish you would
help get this thing
out of my chest, this

swarm of bees,
this little, laughing,
faceless bird. It should

be born. It belongs in
the garden, somewhere
where angels are

gathering for battle
where the outcome
changes nothing

in the visible world.

IV.

Articulate the Skeleton

Mary calls and says,
sometimes I feel like I'm wasting the body.

She means the skeleton bodies
of the animals she hunts for in the backwoods,

in meadows of bleached
saw grass, or dry creek beds sunk in shade,

the bones going cold *possum, bovine,*
cottonmouth, crow. This time she found a near

perfect canine *domestic,*
she says; *a family pet.* Except the forelegs are missing.

The mystery of this is secondary.
I only wanted the skull, she tells me. And I can see her,

earth beneath her nails,
the smiling dog before her curled as if upon a hearth.

How carefully she would have
lifted the spine, her fingers on the daggered ribs, unable

to resist carrying away what was left.
Even as we speak she has begun preparing the bones.

A warm bath will soften what tissue
still clings, and soon after a solution designed to lift

white from white. I want to explain
why suddenly I see winter light passing through

a window, its phantom
impression rendered slant upon the wooden floor

another house-bound artifact.
Mary says, *I've never done this. I don't know where to begin.*

Advent

After church lets out, we spill onto the sidewalk.
It's the first week of December. My mother is thinking

these doors weren't always painted red. And my father
forgiveness comes to this the sermon still inside him.

My brother has spotted a small brown thing
darting past the withered foxgloves. Across the street

the shops are opening. Their lights are warm and sad.
Church is like that, I'm thinking. The fast-food place

never slept its lights on and on and on against
the steel hours. *Church is like that, too,* I'm thinking.

All the cars in the packed lot are flecked with spidery
legs of frost, and we move toward them securing

the top buttons of our coats. The smell of cooked meat
distorts the air, but it feels like the most normal thing of all.

My mother is thinking of how she woke with a start
this morning to the house ancient with cold, strange

and bone-gray. My father converses innocently
with his dead father. The red doors gather back their spirits

and mercies; they have shut us out. It begins to snow.
Understanding is like this, I think: a tender creature

touching a cold mouth to you in places. And my brother,
walking behind, is still thinking about what it was he saw.

Minnesota

In the center of our town,
the lake is spread with shapes
that vary by degrees of
stability: flimsy nylon tents,
patched-together shanties,
heated cabins devoid of windows.
Inside one, my father turns
a delicate shade of himself.
Careful not to move, not to send
vibrations through the ice, he tugs
at the smooth line he has cast
down into the pupil-black
waiting for life to stir beneath
the perfect, carved hole. Nearby,
within the fist of an inlet,
a mermaid waves, her features
hammered into metal. She faces
the lake, leans out to the lonely
men in their lonely fish houses,
mute as the world within.

Eurydice

In the dark, snowfall
is no different from
winging bats: a knife
blade, mere suggestion
of air, the disturbance
so slight we would not
detect it if not for the skin
of our faces turned up
each one a moon
in the slow uncoiling
miles of hell: my hair
no different than imagined
wings, the snow, whose
memory sings of gathering
urge, descending design. No
song. No kingdom come to
hoist this soul. Everyone
I know is a child with a stick,
mud-startling, stirring puddles
in the silence, metastatic,
after a decent rain. I am
lost to corridors, rooms
I have never been in.
If you came today, right
now, I would not know
you. The eyes are the first
to go, taken before you
even enter through the
gate: the body's only light.
Dimension by dimension
we are subtracted, until
our palms, the final
divisible plane, rest supine,
unexpected as daggers
in a junk drawer.

Shape of Winter

Outside the little town reindeer move
 together through the woods deep

in secret their society so unexpected
 lost to fable we forget they might be real

might be weaving right now between
 white ankles of birch unfailing masts

of fir icicles hang chain-linked from
 their heavy sides their snowy jaws

and do not reflect without a moon to crown
 the pall of antlers more pale indecent

a gathering of crows around a carcass by the road
 while a street lamp emits a halo morbid

tonight you turn over in sleep what did it mean
 when you said winter is a face

with no mouth I cannot tell I get up pull on a sweater
 bury my hands in thin material is it ever

enough to stand at the kitchen window to search
 these woods again for signs

if only my eyes were changeable like reindeers'
 once golden drunk on summer wheat now

winter's blue a thick layer of mirror glass
which startles ghostly in the dark unfixed

Elegy

prone upon the sand
the stiff bright body

appears to be
a plain white heart

hard to believe
it is dead

but harder to believe
it was ever alive

trawling the air
crying out above

constellations
of shrimp boats

dragging night behind
itself like a net

arriving here finally
a little gritty

unbound from its breast
I scan the beach

move closer to find
the heart is open

its contents exposed
by decay colorful and sharp

and plastic
I see the bird

is a bird after all
that has swallowed

what it ought not have
and the heart

just a heart
like everything

like nothing

1993

Snow fell through the night stirring against
the windows like a far off voice in the house.

When the power went out: candles,
a piece of cake for me, my brother, to keep

our hands busy, our bodies rooted
to the island stools. While our mother fills

the bath tub, our grandparents shuffle,
sommnambulant, between rooms' stern shadow

in search of flashlights, the hand-crank radio.
But here, clouding the panes with his breath,

our father leans in profile, imagines he can see
the lake, the mound of snow rising upon it. We stay

like this, shuttered against the long legs
of winter. We have never left that dark kitchen.

Burial

That year my father planted the Christmas tree
at the edge of the field. The same day, a bird
appeared inside the house. I imagine my mother,

a portrait, clutching the speckled blue pot, potatoes
misshapen and naked within. And my father laughing
and curious, in love with the world's small things: the bird

wick-boned and startled. Who did it, finally? Upstairs,
I could smell the ribboned apples, brushed with butter
and cinnamon that would soon become a pie. I marvel

now at sound. Did the blow resemble a wing beat?
I marvel at the way a room is changed by an act.
When I came downstairs, the kitchen was empty

the potatoes still there like soggy reflections of moon,
the apples heaped, spine to spine, and glistening.
And through the gleam of porch light, my father

outside next to the tree, turning the already turned
soil again, moving steadily against whatever battered
darkness the field beyond had summoned.

February

This morning she is still there
in the window sill crouched inside

her careful web. "She" because I want her
that way, though it does not make me

hate her less. Later, I am downstairs
slicing grapefruit thinking about legs

and loneliness how she has learned
to be all her small life; how what we fear,

we learn to covet and pin as close
to our hearts as we can possibly allow.

When I've finished, the rind blushes
indecently on the countertop,

and I am no nearer to knowing what
it is I want. Out the window,

I watch a few crows slip from a tree
like the last fragment of sleep.

When I return to my room, she is dead,
was always dead. I see it now: the limbs

curling inward to touch one another
as if only shy.

Barabbas Recalls the Ozarks

It was not yet spring
in the mountains

when I thought
to hang myself there

I had tried
many times before

always with
the same rope

a talisman I wore
like a belt

tied round my waist
this time it was

the verge of rain
that scent

a promised ghost
the birds

of that place
frightened me

how they did not
hide but were

hidden
like memories

when I paused
beneath

my death tree
something happened

a narrow fox
disturbed by

my arrival
slipped past

my ankles
like the darling

family dog
I called this

fragile encounter
love fleeing

over the mountain
and I left

my rope
in pursuit

Doppelganger

I see her from a distance on the shortest day of winter.
Strange how she wears my body, a metaphor that needs

none, alone in the bread aisle of the grocery store. The low
light reduces her to lines and shapes, her fingers pressing

against the loaves like my mother. She, too, coiled things
in her arms: scent of yeast, a carton eggs. *A mistake*, I think.

I can't see her face, its helpless geometry; what she refuses
to show me. Days go by, hours long as streets. I watch for her

to come down each one. Last night she crawled through
my window and lay down beside me. I cried as she combed

my wet hair. I do not want to die. I told her desire is oppressive;
I am only human a condition like snow falling on an unfrozen

lake a skeleton of syllables dissolving. Morning comes, a cold
stone between us. The house is undisturbed by her going; she left.

I sit now, painting something difficult to look at. If she had stayed
I could have told her more of what I know. That if she opened her mouth

it would be filled with snow, the body's fraud revealed, another girl
spread cold among leaves the wood inside the woods devouring her.

NOTES

EPIGRAPH (page 1)

From *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* by Flannery O'Connor

FROM OUT OF THE DARK DOOR OF THE SECRET EARTH (page 20)

Title is also a line from "The Snake" by D.H. Lawrence

ELSEWHERE (page 38)

Inspired by the paintings of artist Giorgio de Chirico

DISAPPEARING DISEASE (page 41)

The phrase *pale machinery* comes from the poem "Windfarm at Sea" by Philip Gross

ON THE FARM (pages 48-49)

Inspired by the Hinterkaifeck murders of 1922

BIOGRAPHY

Alyssa Dandrea was born in Minnesota, raised in Virginia and received her Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Mary Washington in 2011. While at George Mason, she was awarded the 2014-2015 Heritage Fellowship for poetry. She currently lives in Richmond, VA with her boyfriend, Michael, and their cat, Phoebe.