

NEITHER HONEY NOR THE BEE

by

Holly Morgan Mason

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 2017  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Neither Honey Nor The Bee

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

by

Holly Morgan Mason  
Bachelors of Arts  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2011

Director: Sally Keith, Professor  
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2017  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

*Copyright 2017 Holly Morgan Mason  
All Rights Reserved*

## *DEDICATION*

To the friends and family who have loved me unconditionally, holding me in sorrow, and rejoicing with me in times of celebration. Also, specifically, to my brothers, who taught me how to laugh in the midst of pain.

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

I would like to thank my professors, Sally Keith, Peter Streckfus-Green, Jen Atkinson, Eric Pankey, and Susan Tichey for your guidance, and to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year Poets for your inspiration. Also, thanks to my UNCG faculty for breathing life into the fire—Stuart Dischell, Michael Parker, Jennifer Grotz, and James Evans.

# *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

	Page
Abstract .....	vii
SECTION I .....	2
Garden .....	3
Cold Front .....	4
Vulpecula: A Shifted Constellation .....	6
Waiting .....	7
Frostbitten.....	8
August .....	9
Straight Hair .....	10
Kourban.....	11
Female Peshmerga in Two Parts .....	12
On Maternal Caress.....	14
Walking Poem.....	15
Nocturne .....	17
Water Moccasin.....	18
Teenager .....	20
Evening.....	21
Moving Sonnet .....	22
The Snap.....	23
Self-Portrait As Fish: On Coming Out Of The Water.....	24
Parable.....	25
SECTION II.....	27
It Calls Me Back.....	28
Cardinal .....	29
Cottage at Flint Hill.....	30

A Church To Fit Our Needs .....	31
Mount Pisgah.....	32
Botanical Gardens .....	34
Without.....	35
Great Falls .....	36
Love Poem.....	37
After It.....	38
All I Can Think Of Is One Thing, So I Won't Write About It.....	39
Late-Autumn Orchard .....	40
How Would You End This Poem?.....	41
False Prophet .....	42
For Toph.....	43
Renwick Gallery: An Opening.....	44
Seeing .....	45
Drinks With O'Hara .....	46
Flamingo.....	47
Section III.....	49
Holiday Party.....	50
<i>Cat in Window / American Dream</i> .....	51
Aubade With Honey, Lemon, And Feather.....	52
Fire .....	53
At Once .....	54
Katy .....	55
7:59am.....	56
Potluck.....	57
Sunday Aubade .....	58
Hymn.....	59
White Oak Canyon Falls .....	60
Mountains Beyond Mountains .....	61
References.....	62

# *ABSTRACT*

NEITHER HONEY NOR THE BEE

Holly Morgan Mason, M.F.A

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Sally Keith

This thesis is a collection of poems, most often narrative-driven. While exploring concepts of identity, sexuality, religion, love, and familial complexity, these poems investigate the “tenderness of pain” (a description borrowed from Pema Chodron). These poems are also interested in “wisdom,” and how we know what we know? The speaker in many of these poems asks questions, and then strives to accept a lack of answers. Keen to rest in uncertainty, the speaker is eager to be patient, listen, filter, and find one’s core. Some poems are grieving, and others celebrating, and many both at once. Lastly, another layer of this thesis is a curiosity in what we can learn from the natural world. What does nature teach us about the human condition?

*...when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself.*

—Pema Chödrön  
“The Noble Heart”

# ***SECTION I***

## Garden

The petals are tired  
from this business of opening.

When I was young,  
you dressed me in floral and frill,

white socks trimmed with lace.  
The apple of your eye,

the cherry on top. *Buttercup*  
you called me. The girl

picking honeysuckle from the fence  
while her brothers built forts

in the woods. I once followed them  
but got lost.

We cannot prepare for these things.  
We will not know how it unfolds.

The yard is in full bloom,  
and we are taking a photo

in our Easter clothes before church—  
the sun squinting our young eyes,

you are smiling behind the camera.  
A perfect picture of your three.

It is exhausting to think of words for this.

## **Cold Front**

An emerald patch of light  
sifts through trees  
and my love tries to hold it in her hands

This time of year  
is promise and decay  
both and

The whistling wind  
a kettle's song

Her hands holding space  
this negative capability

\*

I think of a broken bone  
if it were to belong  
to my mother

Her strands of greying hair  
like whale bones

I feel responsible for what  
nature is doing  
and undoing

\*

I know sometimes  
coincidence  
is simply coincidence

and dreams  
simply dreams

Just as the frost is not a sign  
but a progression

\*

Boiling water cracks the glass  
then shatters it

I recall a story  
of shards from  
a too hot baking dish

I was learning *parable*  
at the time  
so searching myself for the lesson

## **Vulpecula: A Shifted Constellation**

Gathering darkness is balm and fine in this season

Even Vulpecula changed shape or even god the universe she

Changed Vulpecula's shape

Little fox carried in your jaw the goose

Now the eagle and vulture side you

in the language of light and dark

in the same breath speck *and* explosion

## **Waiting**

Winter branches  
silhouette

the darkening sky.  
In trying to be tender,

I slice a pear  
and add cinnamon.

The gate swings on a hinge.  
Imagine

a crescent moon:  
the beloved's ear.

And in her  
eye

a silhouette  
of winter branches.

**Frostbitten**

—*After Andrew Wyeth*

Even  
to just be  
the fruit on your windowsill  
for the chance  
to be held  
in your palm  
and touched  
to your lips,  
and if  
you hunger enough,  
beloved.

## August

The birds on the line postpone  
then dip.

I once sat in a pew  
where the preacher said:  
*Stay still long enough  
for anxiety to turn  
into prayer.*

I look around  
for images to gather.  
Then I hear my love's voice:  
*Don't go down the rabbit hole.  
Come back.*

Here are the smallest red berries  
on a bush—holly?  
Summer humidity  
is declining these nights.

Soon we all go back to school.  
The parking lots fill up.  
The promise of new knowledge  
beyond the field.

Here, a child is drawing a line  
with chalk—*this side is mine, that is yours.*

And somewhere inside a house,  
clearing the plates,  
parents warn their daughter  
not to trust everything said  
in academic walls.

Windows illumine.  
The soccer team finishes practice.

Don't wrap up, leave open.  
*Understanding isn't what grief is about.*

A father is running with his daughter;  
he encourages her to keep moving.

## **Straight Hair**

Before owning a hair straightener,  
we laid our teenage heads, as if to sleep,  
on the ironing board, and a mother or a friend,  
would use the iron to straighten the hair, as if a shirt.

My mother, once, doing me the favor,  
helping me look like the other girls in dance class,  
pressed the iron along my length, the sound of steam releasing.  
But because I insisted that it needed to be completely straight, no sign of wave,  
coming too close to my skin, she struck my scalp, causing a blister to rise  
like bread dough, that I picked, and it bled,  
and I wouldn't let heal properly.

## **Kourban**

The adults would say it to the kids, *Kourban*.  
Like the sound a sheep makes, it goes “Core-baan.”

*Kourban-e-bim*, Kurdish translated into English means:  
I am willing to sacrifice myself for you. I sacrifice myself to you.

A table of 12 chairs filled with aunts and uncles playing cards—  
A young girl, I come up to my mother and whisper something into her ear,

I hear her tell them the secret as I walk away;  
I hear them say, *Kourban*.

Not knowing then just what it meant, but knowing it made me feel  
Simultaneously pleased and embarrassed— *Kourban*.

And now, when my own nephew is soft in my arms,  
Opening his little hand to the early moon, saying “hold you, hold you,”

I look at him and the thing in my chest is *Kourban*.  
Escaping my lips, *Kourban*.

## **Female Peshmerga in Two Parts**

### *Part 1- Kurdo*

My mother nicknamed her sister “Kurdo,”  
short for her given name, Kurdistan.

When Kurdo was three she balled her hands tight  
into fists and would not release.

Her spirit though  
fled from her small body.

I wish this baby did not so easily fit as allegory  
for Kurdistan.

I wish my mother was not telling me this,  
crying, even forty years later.

Her mother,  
standing over the crib, tried

over and over again to open the small fists.  
I cannot stop seeing this image.

### *Part 2- “One who confronts death”: The Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS*

*Pesh*, to stand in front of  
*Merga*, death

It would be the worst fate, according to ISIS, to be killed  
by a Kurdish woman. These men believe

if the hands of a female Peshmerga were to release the bullet  
that stopped their heart then the man would go directly to hell.

I look at photos of these women and am stilled to see myself,  
and also my cousins: Sophia, Claire, Sabrina. My green eyes looking back at me.

You see them braiding each other’s hair  
like sisters in the morning. I do not have their courage.

And in a video, these women stand in a circle dancing.

They are smiling and laughing. They are power embodied.

How is it that war changes the rules?

And I know that the woman loading a string of bullets into the chamber of her gun could have been me.

And I want to fold to my knees in prayer, praying protection over these women who after the picture is taken huddle in sand waiting for a sign.

**On Maternal Caress**

*—after Mary Cassatt, 1891*

She pulls the unclothed baby into her arms  
as if this is the end of hunger  
—her closed eyes tell us so—  
the baby's cheek against her own,  
their lips a whisper apart.

All holding,  
nothing withheld.

Viewing this, you feel your own  
childhood and wonder  
which figure you are now?

## Walking Poem

I wrote an aubade this morning, in my head, while my partner was sleeping.

*Only the sound of birds and light traffic.  
Some blue out the window.  
Your neck is sweet with sweat, and I rest there.  
How is it that softness becomes body in the morning?  
Your skin, the softest thing I've ever felt.  
I try to be quiet to not wake you.  
You turn and smile with your eyes closed.  
The sweetness of this might kill me.  
What was it Donne wrote?*

I walk through the neighborhood. I walk this same path every time I have a hard conversation with my mother. I know my body needs it.

Small apples are growing on a tree in someone's front yard. A group of red and orange flowers hang over the fence where the path ends. I want to know the names of things.

Last week, at the Museum of Women in the Arts, I kept going back to the North American Wild Flowers by Mary Vaux Walcott. Watercolor flowers displayed in rows.

*Red Chokeberry.  
Prickly Pear Cactus.*

Walcott tell us, "The flowers are so beautiful that one forgets the wicked spines and the still more dangerous spicules—until one endeavors to gather them."

A dog barks at me from behind a fence. The sky turns purple before me.

I recently gave advice to a friend on the phone, "you just have to tell yourself that everything will be okay, and it will be, because it is." I think I believe this.

The Color guard is practicing in the parking lot.  
One girl stands alone waving her flag, swooping from left to right.

When I was young I walked into the woods behind my house trying to find my brothers.  
The sky turned dark. A drum beating in my chest. To just see the gate.

The yellow mum I put on my front stoop last week is already dying. My mother and father keep a successful garden every year. They know what to plant and when.

I can still hear the marching band from my house. Out of the window,

a mom is teaching her kid to ride his bike.  
It's nearly dark now.  
*I'm not, I'm not*, he says. *I'm not.*

*You* are my gate, now.  
You whisper in my ear: "You're safe."

*This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.*

I want to plant flowers—I want to keep them.

How do I know if I'm saying anything worthwhile?  
How do I know if I'm saying anything?

## Nocturne

After the last dish is set on the rack,  
a few wet strands sliding  
under gravity's hand,  
flip the light switch,  
closing down the house.

The wind is whistling  
and pushing against the window.  
Streetlamp light sways  
in and out of branches,  
casting shadows on the wall.

The day's voice is loud within—  
the world wants you at your tasks.

## Water Moccasin

The boys said they saw it  
in the creek on Fair Hill.  
They needed to trap it, they said.

I got on my bike to follow them.  
It was summer and the neighborhood kids  
seemed to always be in someone's cul-de-sac.

The three biggest boys were enlisted:  
my two brothers and Mike Stout,  
the boy I once watched from the window  
exiting the woods with red pouring  
down his face, spilling from his head.

They were pulling down a cracked tree when  
it snapped.

I could see the staples  
holding his scalp together  
as he bent to the snake  
bearing a box.

*We need to capture it,*  
was the phrase,  
the war cry.

The other two neighborhood girls were inside.  
I always stayed quiet so I didn't get turned away.

Then the rake was in the water  
picking up a tail  
as the head was lifting  
to find its place.

These little gods  
out of their league—  
the creature hot  
in revolt.

Why *need*?  
The crowd stepping back.  
The sport had turned sour.

*Let it go*  
we were all thinking  
but wouldn't say.

Then the snake overcame the rake,  
leaping back into the water.

Both parties getting away  
with their lives.  
Going on to sun or shade.

## Teenager

Summer pulsed in your belly  
The season was ripe with opportunity  
or soured fruit           likely both

The lake was grimy  
but you wanted to be impressive

Friends with older siblings bought the booze

An evening walk with your parents  
seemed boring           but then was nice  
It was summer pine and lawn clippings  
a cicada-soundtrack in night sweat

This is neither nostalgia nor hindsight  
or maybe it could be both

The frogs are persistent in the pond  
behind the house where you grew up  
You can't sleep

## **Evening**

The trees are barren,  
the river is dry and slow,  
the crow heard but out of sight.

She thinks of it all—  
the feast at the table  
and then the silent house.

What is filled must also be emptied.  
Sometimes what was lost is found.

One forgets how early the sky  
falls this time of year.

She sees the same stump again.  
The path is growing dark.  
And if only she could find the entrance to exit.

## Moving Sonnet

—for KP

Everything my brother owned fit into his car. Driving from Chicago to L.A.,  
a wrong turn outside St. Louis put us at the Gateway Arch—  
How fitting? The clichés began at the beginning.

Remember the panorama shifting from vast green to desert tumbleweed?  
And when the song on the radio was sad and slow, it felt just fine.  
As we crossed each state line, the changing landscape met our eyes like

a field of stars. The radio humming *Sail on silver girl, sail on by*.  
The sun setting over the Grand Canyon, filling the expanse pink.  
A spirituality different than the church of our childhood.

The hike down was steep and the path, thin. Earth shifting from stone to red clay.  
When I have trouble describing it, he said, “use a metaphor.”  
*Beautiful things fill every vacancy*. Learning to unlearn isn’t easy.

Finding rest  
in uncertainty.

## **The Snap**

Twig underfoot  
Clasp undone  
Raw spaghetti before the pot  
Middle finger and thumb  
Dad's ribs after the crash  
Static touch  
Caught breath  
Tree limb from the trunk  
Split the shell for the nut  
A wishbone  
A neck

She said, "I can't take this anymore,"  
And let her palm crack across my face.

## **Self-Portrait As Fish: On Coming Out Of The Water**

Hook to lip, snag,  
you pull me  
from the river.

My gills heave  
harsh air.

My tail kicks  
when you knife  
my belly. And  
the river spills out.

Peeling the sides back,  
You yank the bones.

You slice me at the gills  
for the good cut.

\*

*Don't be the fish,  
you say,  
be  
the  
meal.*

## **Parable**

A feast is set.  
A cup of wine.

Blessed is she who comes back  
for she will inherit her parent's favor.

The wine tastes of turpentine.  
The feast turns intervention.

Fear begins in the mind,  
But consumes the body.

Fear is the wafer on your tongue.  
Fear is the tongue in your mouth.



## ***SECTION II***

## **It Calls Me Back**

The day opens  
    blush and plum

a beehive's hum—

a girl at the fence  
    picking honeysuckle

one small drop on her tongue—

the world will unfold  
    as it does

as it's done—

to mend a broken bone  
    breaking another

before repairing the one—

## Cardinal

The state bird  
of my two homes,  
North Carolina and Virginia.

Also,  
the reincarnation of your sister,  
your mother believes.

You tell me  
the females are actually lighter  
and brown.

We both want cardinal tattoos,  
reminders  
of what was and what is.

I am learning  
in life it is almost always  
two things at once.

The red plumage  
up my arm where your tears  
have fallen.

We scatter  
Rachal's ashes in a creek  
in Arlington, saying words.

Unbelievably, a brown cardinal  
touches down on a branch,  
resting there

until the branch becomes still,  
then pushing off again  
making the branch a waving arm.

## **Cottage at Flint Hill**

Summer rain cools  
the earth.

The cows are too ideal now  
with their bellied songs and their grazing.

Two calves touch heads,  
brothers whispering.

Earlier this day, Heidi likens the process of making butter  
to meditation.

And when the rain slows,  
we emerge from the old kitchen.

The horses at the fence are flexing their muscles,  
hooves in the grain.

Here, we are learning to listen  
to each other's silences.

## **A Church To Fit Our Needs**

I.

My palms together, I tell her, *here is the church*, fold down wrapped fingers, *here is the steeple*, *open the doors*, thumbs out, *see all the people*. She loves it and tries to mimic with her small hands. The stars in her blues are the only goodness.

II.

A woman I knew in my youth confesses her sins on social media. Everyone knows Truth with a capital T. I recently read a book in which the author admits to only having questions, not answers.

III.

I still see the stained glass of my childhood. A red voice talking over me. Southern women blessing my heart.

IV.

A group of strangers gather. The body feels acceptance physically. Warmth returns. This circle of chairs. A church to fit our needs.

## Mount Pisgah

—for dad

The trail smells of rot and burnt leaves.

Thick air, a smog of overripe trees, and damp earth  
fill my cold lungs.

You climb hunched now,  
hands pressing your thighs.  
You push your knees

to make those legs move up and up,  
and the rasp of your efforts alarms me.  
A grunt, slow groan, strict clearing of throat—

You grow older on this hike in my eyes.

I once was the one panting like a fox at water.  
I was the one in need of rest  
against some earth.

I have followed you up these Blue Ridge paths  
nearly two decades now.

*It's always tougher on the way down, you'd say,*  
and then on the way down:  
*Go slowly, go slowly.*

Your voice in my lungs. The mist does rise.

The air is thicker now. The mountain haze  
shakes my head. Exhale,  
my voice shakes it out:

*Let's rest here for a second, Dad.*  
*Let's lean against this tree.*  
You crack a joke.

The river lines of your hands grip the bark  
like veins on leaves,  
so raised you could trace them.

I turn my head from you, mist in my eyes.

The sky calls us back. We know it all so well—  
the turn in the path  
and the twist in the trees' old limbs.

Reaching the opening,  
still at the top,  
closing my eyes—and *hush* listen.

On the way down,  
a rock breaks loose, leaving  
a hole like an open grave.

This slack earth.

Go slowly,  
go slowly,  
go slowly.

## Botanical Gardens

Without your gasps instructing me to look at the daylilies, the bluebells, the hot house orchids. How the azaleas in full bloom recall the childhood backyard. A pink backdrop where you would line us up to take an Easter picture. Where I'd pick a flower from its bundle to put behind my ear. I'd toss it to the ground when the ants crawl out.

How foxgloves look like wedding bells. To make a bouquet of snapdragons. The shifting sun sliding behind the clouds. Forever is both a long time and nothing. You will come back to me or you won't. I am a spring baby— "buttercup." You taught me about redbuds actually being purple. And that loving you is most important. *No other gods before me.*

Some learn to unlearn, but some things can't be unlearned. A yellow rose plucked from the vine. The shifting sun behind the clouds. *A jealous god.*

## **Without**

In heartache, the whole world is a dial tone.  
*A Please hang up and try again.* But you don't  
want to try again because every combination is wrong,  
fruitless.

You eat sand and drink sand and your belly is full of it.  
You hold in your guts and you hold in your heart  
with a gesture like a promise. A pledge. A pregnancy.

When a dog eats grass, you know it is unwell.  
We don't eat grass, but everything else is a sign.

## Great Falls

We have come here to honor Rachal—  
you cradle her ashes in your hand.

Whispering into your palm,  
you bend to place your sister in the running stream  
that meets the river.

I walk away to give you some time alone.

There are teenagers jumping off high rocks.  
The surface of the green water reacts to their bodies.

But when the world is quiet, the water reflects  
a border of summer trees.

In stillness,  
one can see the water bugs skimming the top.

I say words in my head, looking out.

Words for my late cousin Katy,  
passing five days ago, at nineteen.

Then you come over to me,  
ash on your lips  
as always  
from where you kiss her

before you let her go.

**Love Poem**

—*for Dani*

We eat orchid for breakfast.  
This love is an outlier.

Interpreter of my sighs, you ask  
*what is it?*

When I bought the print,  
I didn't yet know it would be of *us*.

My heart,  
trouble builds above our valley.

Beloved, your neck is soft and sweet  
in the morning.

The image is usually of rock,  
but I see more a feather—

that is your willingness to be blown  
in the wind of my grief.

My mouth moves *anger*,  
but means *gratitude*.  
You cannot, will not know.

Luminous point,  
incandescent,  
a star is both light and bomb.

## **After It**

Use the old twisted limb  
low to the ground  
for rest.

See that intricate web  
wet from the rain.

The drops  
resting on each strand  
like little perfect round globes.

The spider isn't home.  
The web pulses  
with each  
                    gust of wind.

How delicate  
the threads  
yet strong;

How much  
like the human heart.

## **All I Can Think Of Is One Thing, So I Won't Write About It**

How about the corner of this room, cobwebbed and shadowed. How about the eggshell blue nightstand, the mustard-yellow lamp. How about the mold on the cream cheese. How about the night sky, the ideal moon. How about that time in New York, bartering cigarettes from the Swedish girls on the rooftop overlooking a city alive. How about all the shades of pink this time of year. How about the red mites in the bricks by the mail box, the junk mail. How about the one night stand the night before Thanksgiving. How about the soap overflowing the dishwasher. How about the friend writing a poem. How about this sound, this silence. How about the tattoo on her arm. How about the tear in my navy sweater, the loose button on my pants. How about that time riding horses in Tennessee. How about the watercolors, the canvas. How about the storm that stole the power, the lines buzzing like bees behind the house. About missing my mother's voice.

## Late-Autumn Orchard

*“sun fluttering/ like a signal! Upon the open flesh of the world.”*  
—Frank O’Hara, *October*

At the base of the trees      a skirt of lost fruit  
bruised and abandoned      bees hover

The harvest still left      is too far to reach  
The ones we can grasp are small and bitter

You bite to taste      tossing the core into dead grass  
Uphill shows promise      a fuller foliage

*How many do we need*      you ask  
*Twenty*      I say  
We are planning to make a crisp at the cottage

Live with me    in leaves      in this mountain air

You are the image    Don’t go too far ahead  
the trees will take you from me

I find the sun to sneeze      squinting  
Turning back    you are tangled in branches

Somewhere a girl is crying  
She has lost her favorite apple

You emerge holding one in your palm      *Look, it’s perfect*  
*We’ll have to peel it*

Leaves are crunching under our feet    like apples between teeth  
Zip our coats to the neck now

Returning      a skunk at the doorstep  
We quiet our feet in the gravel      stay still      and wait.

### **How Would You End This Poem?**

The night of my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday,

my love had a dream that I was sitting in the street

while traffic sped past, barely missing me.

She begged me to move, but I ignored her.

My mother emails me that morning

to say that she had a nightmare last night

that I was walking off a mountain cliff,

and she was begging me to stop.

**False Prophet**

*By their fruit you will recognize them.* – Matthew 7:16

If a ferocious wolf came to us wearing sheep's wool, we would not be so blind as to say, *Oh look at that sheep.*

Would we say, *My, what gruesome mouth you have, how unusual, but, please come in?*  
No.

It's a metaphor though. Not meant to be taken literally. We have been translating translation, and we are calling it Truth.

On the *goodness* of fruit: The farmer plucks a fig, tosses it to the ground, calls it unfit. A boy walks by, picks up the fig and consumes it, calling it fine.

## **For Toph**

We go for a coffee  
    There is a shop in the corner of the lane  
    we sit on wooden crates  
        silent  
        blowing holes in cappuccino foam

My friend takes a sip  
    lights a cigarette  
    ready to talk  
        “I got bashed leaving a gay bar last week”  
        “ Oh, my god,” I say  
        “I had to go to the hospital”

I look at the stiches holding together an eyebrow  
    “I’m sick of it,” my friend says looking away from my eyes

We walk to work,  
    I hold the silences in my chest  
        When we arrive, a realization hits my friend:  
        Pocket without a wallet, forgotten

Head-in- hand, the tricky universe spills and spills and spills.

## Renwick Gallery: An Opening

It is 9:00am on a Saturday, and my partner wants to go meet friends at an art museum in the city. And I don't want to because I want to sleep and work and be quiet.

I go though. And feel fine about it. The Renwick gallery on 17<sup>th</sup> just reopened, featuring an exhibit on *WONDER*. Pieces that *use* the space "to inspire awe." And they do.

Patrick Dougherty's *Shindig* is a large room taken up by reshaped branches woven into what my partner describes as nests. The nurtured nature reaches the ceiling, spiraling across white walls.

And in another room, John Grade's team used a half-million segments of reclaimed cedar to fashion the suspended hemlock tree taking up the entire room, horizontally, swaying.

I say I like the movement. Someone runs into a branch and is scolded by the docent. The crowds are packed tight in these rooms where art takes up the space, reaching out to touch you.

The next room is a rainbow made of thread, scaling from floor to crown molding. Gabriel Dawe is remembering childhood skies above Mexico City and East Texas. We take a picture

in front of the spectrum and laugh about the cliché in this. Maya Lin's fiberglass marbles spread across hardwood, across white walls; shaping rivers, fields, canyons, mountains.

To build a nest.

First: find branches. Second: strip the leaves. Third: bend, twist, weave.

And if lucky, fill with music and wine and color. And if luckier, with children.

## Seeing

### I.

“Koi,” in Japanese,  
is homophonic for the word “love.”

Koi fish can recognize  
the person that feeds them.

Circling your mother’s  
pond,

they open their wide mouths  
to vanish the pellets.

### II.

Klimt’s ladies in gold

Flowers in their heavy amber hair

Subject of the female body

A hunger

### III.

“Don’t look directly at it,”  
you say, “I know it’s hard not to

because I was doing it, too.”

“I’ve never seen it so close,”  
I say, “and so bright orange.”

“It’s pink,” you say,  
“I think we see colors differently.”

## Drinks With O'Hara

The train I need isn't running today, just my luck. So I get off at the closest stop and walk the rest of the way. I'm meeting my friend, the receptionist, at noon in SoHo near Spring Street. It's a hot New York Monday, and everyone is hung over from the weekend, but jazzed to be alive. Mac says he will be off in an hour and we can go for drinks. In the meantime I smoke two cigarettes waiting. I talk on the phone with a friend in the south. She is working on a project about honeybees. Mac says *let's go for champagne*. We walk to Chelsea. It's 2:13, and the prices are too high. The couple next to me talk about their gallery. They are deciding whether to serve pear or plum at the opening. Whether to call the exhibit "hair" or "life." I turn to Frank, *boy, how pretentious?*

Mac's boyfriend Conor has a show at The Joyce in an hour. One more champagne, then a quick bite of ramen. We go swaying through the streets. It's still light out. And a pedestrian is giving the finger to a cab. *Fucking animal* he is saying. We walk through China Town and the smells take up house in my head. Mac is saying *Conor has been training for months, day and night for this show. He has a solo. He is really trying to push out of his comfort zone*. The show makes me miss dancing. I turn to Frank, *do you miss it?*

We leave for the after party, stepping out into a dark sky. But all is lit by neon lights. The cast shuffles into a bar on Bleeker Street. I have been here before I am thinking. I find the secret room, packed so tight the liquid is spilling out of my glass. I am the glass. I am the people. I am the couple. I am the song, and the sweat. *Do you know what I mean, Frank?* He does.

## Flamingo

It's not easy, I'm sure, to stand beside me  
    these days,  
with my wild fits and uncertainty.

    But you bring home the shrimp  
and set the meal before me.

    I cry into the dish.

You stroke my salmon plumage;  
    we wrap our swan necks.

I never thought I would write poems  
    out of grief from my own belly.

I also never thought the situation  
    could get worse.

As in, when I told my parents  
    of our nesting, and they voiced  
they are done with me.

    I once stood on two legs not my own.

Now I've learned to stand  
    on my own two legs.

But if those give out,  
    you'd break the table and fashion me stilts.

I don't know if I could do that for you.

*Keep wading,*

I say into the glass.



## ***SECTION III***

## **Holiday Party**

Arguing the entire walk, six blocks

from the bakery to the front door.

The door opens and

everyone smiles champagne,

and they are playing the Everly Brothers.

We shed our snow-flecked scarves and boots.

I help you with your mittens,

a gesture, an olive branch.

Your eyes go soft, and I know it means *sorry*.

Mistletoe in the doorframe garners

a chorus of *kiss her, kiss her, kiss her*

and obliging, what were we even angry about?

This is family. All love happens here.

Later, when I see you stuck in conversation

with an x-girlfriend's new partner,

I laugh, then decide to bail you out.

At home, in bed, you lay me down,

a song passes the window,

the scent of spice still on your breath,

if I burst into blossom it will be that I'm a sparrow

and you are the barren branch.

***Cat in Window / American Dream***

*—after Charmion Von Wiegand*

Outside the panes, a blanket of snow.  
Mail comes to this house, letters from friends.  
You know there is goodness here—  
maybe a fire burning  
or a kettle about to whistle.  
Probably scarfs on hooks  
and mittens.

And in warmth, he is dreaming sardines.

## **Aubade With Honey, Lemon, And Feather**

Succulent on the window ledge,  
profiting from the sun.

Somewhere beyond the hill,  
children's voices.

We delight in the morning  
without a clock.

Boil the water,  
add honey.

A morning suspended in air,  
I think I could love you forever.

Somewhere in this house,  
letters we've exchanged.

Somewhere in this house,  
a box of sorrows.

Somewhere,  
the lemon tart recipe.

A single feather  
on the concrete.

We open the sliding door.  
Small chirps asking

We are all born  
with this soft hunger.

Hold it in your hands.

## Fire

My father would have me collect  
    small twigs with him  
in November.

In the grey light between day and night  
    we would walk the fence's perimeter  
scouring for kindling.

Then inside, he taught me how  
    to breathe life  
into the wood, how

to not suffocate the flame.  
    Then once the fire was at full,  
my brothers and I would take turns

with our backs to the heat.  
    My mother with a cup of tea  
would sit on the couch watching

the perfection of this life.  
    Often, at the start,  
at the first blowing of the flames,

the smoke detector would protest—  
    I can still hear its scream.  
I can see my father fanning

below the machine.  
    Mother opening  
the windows.

Then when the fire dies, just before  
    bedtime, I learned to separate the ashes  
to avoid resurgence.

## At Once

A Japanese Maple through the window,  
so perfectly delicate,  
reminds me  
how much I want be,  
I want to have a generous heart.

I meditate on being soft,  
being soft to strengthen.

When a crow served Apollo  
a cup of water  
with a serpent in it,  
the sky gained Hydra.

Turning out of Persimmon Drive today,  
my father says on the phone  
he is talking to a *stranger*,  
referring to me.

Then, at the side of the road, a dead dog  
on the concrete  
nearly made it  
to the goldenrod,  
mayweed,  
sweet white clover.

**Katy**

*—for Betty, Bruce, and Houston*

I.

A family farm in Franklin, Tennessee.  
A house with a wide porch, maize on the red door.  
The hills stretching out of sight.  
The barn cats. The horses at the fence.

\*

Katy wants to lead me on a horse.  
She is 10. I am 17, and afraid of everything.  
On the horse's back, I tell myself not to feel fear.  
Katy, holding the rope, is proud.  
She walks me in small circles.

\*

Our older brothers are off climbing high rocks.  
This was just after Thanksgiving.

II.

I read about a horse found with crows pecking at its wounds—  
dehydrated, malnourished, lesions, infections.  
While waiting for the vet, pedestrians stood by  
shooing birds away from the patient.  
The horse was given rest.

III.

Today, on what would have been your 20<sup>th</sup> birthday,  
your parents release bundles of turquoise balloons, and one gold,  
at the farm where you rode.

They put in your obituary that you lost your life to drugs.  
I know this world felt like burden to you.

When I think of you now, I picture you  
leading me in slow circles,  
your long blond hair swishing from side to side.

**7:59am**

Yellow light sneaks through the gaps in the curtains.  
Before I close the door, I turn to look at you sleeping.  
The room is olive-hued and all is soft.  
The fan whirs in the corner.  
Your lips are sweetly apart, breathing sleep.  
You hold the pillow in your arms, a substitute.  
You look so soft, I can feel the silk of it.  
This is gentleness. Sacred space.

Before bed last night you read to me from the Greek myth's book.  
The chapter was about Triton and his four white horses.  
I hold onto names but usually start falling asleep to your voice, missing the plots.

I close the door so the coffee-grinder won't wake you.  
I open it again slightly, slowly, to get out some poems.  
But I stop to look at you again before I go.  
This is my favorite part, when you open your eyes  
and in a groggy voice say "hi." I say, "hey, go back to sleep."

When other entities press so heavy on my heart,  
I have to hold onto these feather moments.  
This is called *gathering joy*.  
I collect it, a rare collection.

## **Potluck**

You should have been there with us that day around the potluck table.  
You should have smelled cinnamon, roast vegetables, and booze.  
You should have heard crooning slide out the radio.  
You would have warmed your hands, too, over the fire  
of conversations and looks between lovers and friends.

You should have followed us to the Green Mill at the corner of Lawrence and Broadway  
for the sixteen-piece band and the cocktails and the red lips  
and the sharp suits and the back doors and the packed tight  
and the tapping boots and the holding waists  
and the swing and the heat and the time shift  
and the laughing off balance at jokes barely grasped.

You, too, would have stuttered a curse at the wind  
on the drag back to the train, swaying in the huddle and the chatter.

## Sunday Aubade

My knuckles slide the cotton sheets in morning.  
I stare out and back into my youth—  
glint of amber, kitchen clanking, coffee fogging through the vents.

*Today is communion*, the pastor says.  
*Christ's flesh, Christ's blood.* A dry wafer, a thimble.  
*Eat not, drink not, without a heart of repentance.*  
And if you move too much the pew does creak.  
*Close your eyes; meet your palms in prayer.*  
I remember it was something like awe. Certainly fear.

My eyes focus on the power lines— clean blue sky.  
A hymn rolling through. No, not a hymn.  
It springs up and out, a whisper:  
*This hour of clear coolness*  
*The hour of waking together.*

## Hymn

Blessed are the eagles who stretch their wings across—  
till death do them part.  
And the swans,  
the French angelfish,  
the black vultures,  
the wolves,  
the albatross.  
Blessed are the stars.  
The trees in winter light.  
Those who remember to be patient.  
Those who plant bulbs for spring.  
Blessed are the nesting eggs.  
The worm that slides from beak to beak.  
Blessed is the body.  
Blessed are the palms.  
Blessed be the hands at bed's edge.  
The slow dance at the altar.  
The wick outlasting night.  
Blessed be your soul.  
Blessed be the wine.  
Blessed be the morning bird  
for it sings of the earth.  
Blessed be the rams  
for they couple with the same.  
And Laysan albatross,  
bottlenose dolphins,  
bonobos,  
the penguins at the Danish zoo.  
Blessed is the bee returning to her hive.  
Blessed is honey teaching time.  
Blessed be rosemary.  
The basil plant and mint.  
Blessed be the iris,  
her violet hands.  
Blessed be the church that sings a song for everyone.  
Blessed be the darkness.  
Those who sweat.  
A weak heart.  
A tired mind.

## White Oak Canyon Falls

On your birthday, we hike  
up to a waterfall.

When we get to the top, we place our packs  
on a rock and take off our socks and shoes.

Dip a toe and the water is shivering cold.  
Miniscule fish, like minnows, peck our ankles.

We swing our arms to build up confidence.  
*One, two, three— I can't, I say.*

*Okay, okay, I can do this, you say,*  
and you do jump in.

You are always the more brave of us two.

My ankles turn ice. I swing my arms. I stop myself.  
I swing my arms. I stop myself.

When three little girls yell “get in,”  
I finally do. I swim to you.

And I knew it would feel like this— extraordinary—  
my soul lifts up and out of me. My lungs.  
Made fresh, made new. Your name shivering on my lips.

## **Mountains Beyond Mountains**

A wildfire. An exchange:  
Out of the ashes, life.

Rime Ice gives way  
to flame azaleas in spring.

At the Craggy Gardens Pinnacle,  
a panorama of mountain ash.

Red berries like holly, but  
more orange. Mountain ash

in winter gives way  
to the Rime Ice. You see?

And as the small blue-grey Junco pokes  
around for flies, the thaw gives way

to mountain laurel.  
A giving and a taking.

And to be silent on a mountaintop,  
is to be fog, is to be fine.

When the sun surfaces— an offering  
of varied blue peaks,

the ridges, a watercolor print,  
a sign, a symbol:

to be still,  
with and without.

## *REFERENCES*

Versions of these poems previously appeared in:

“August” and “Renwick Gallery: An Opening” in Foothill Poetry Journal

“Female Peshmerga in Two Parts” in Rabbit Catastrophe Review

“I can only think of one thing, so I won’t write about it.” in Outlook Springs

“Kourban” in The Northern Virginia Review

The thesis title is from a translation of Sappho by Guy Davenport: “I heave neither honey nor the bee” 80.

## ***BIOGRAPHY***

Holly Morgan Mason is originally from North Carolina, where she received her undergraduate degree from UNC Greensboro. She taught English Composition, Literature, and Creative Writing at George Mason University, where she was the blog editor of *So to Speak*, a Feminist Journal of Literature & Arts. Her poems have been published in *Outlook Springs*, *Rabbit Catastrophe Review*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, and forthcoming in *Foothill Poetry Journal*.