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Choking Hazards

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CHOKING HAZARDS

By

Tessa Hathaway

B.A. Bates College, 2014

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2018

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CHOKING HAZARDS

By Tessa Hathaway

Thesis Advisor: Jennifer Moxley

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)

May 2018

The following manuscript is a creative writing thesis in poetry. The goal of the thesis was to expand my abilities as a poet and find a cohesion in my work. I wanted to utilize some skills gain in a fiction workshop and apply them to poetry, as well as gain influences in various fields of expertise through the other courses I've been taking in the English department. Essays for a poetics class, novels for an American literature class, and short stories for a fiction workshop gave me a base from which to work from and draw inspiration. Not only was required for class readings influential, but everyday writing such as social media, lyrics, and blogs became a source of inspiration.

By working with a small, informal poetry group in the previous semester and gaining feedback from peers in the fiction workshop, I reworked my pieces to have a sense of urgency, immediacy, and relevance. Though much of it focuses on my own experiences, people who read it seemed to find themselves relating to the work and thus wanted a way to connect even further with it, so through revision, I made the pieces as universal as possible, despite the heavy presences of the first person "I".

The critical reflection works to provide some context for the composition decisions I made. I explain how I gained inspiration and from where; the context in which I wrote some of the pieces; formatting and diction choices; and citations of some of the accompanying works.

The thesis became a way for me to express my personal experiences and interests. It is an exploration of anxiety, every day observation, relationships, and heartbreak.

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CRITICAL REFLECTION

The title of this manuscript, *Choking Hazards*, has several meanings. It's pulled from the title of one of the following poems that talks about the reasons we, as adults, should be cautious of choking on (or choking over). It relates to the three sections as well: the first, having to do with anxiety, because often, panic attacks make you feel as if you can't breathe and that you're choking. The ideas themselves are also suffocating; you get wrapped up in your own head and it weighs you down. The second section has to do largely with imagery, something separate and outside of myself or the narrator. Many of the poems in this section are lists, mostly as a way for me to sort out the overabundance of thoughts or images I encounter throughout the day. The original poem was singular, a "hazard", but the manuscript's title is plural, "hazards", insinuating that the enclosed poems themselves are items are a list of things that are dangerous. The third section, about relationships, love, and heartbreak, is referenced right in the poem "Choking Hazard": someone you love not reciprocating that love is a reason you may choke.

Many of these poems developed from journal entries, which was a new way of working for me. In my undergraduate thesis, I wrote a lot based on memories. I had distance from them, sometimes over ten years of time had passed, but conjuring up the images wasn't difficult. What was lacking (though wasn't entirely necessary) was emotion, honest, urgent feelings. I also wrote a lot based on the influence of what I was reading at the time: Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Charles Bukowski, and some Greek tragedies. With this thesis, listening to music proved more influential than literary works. Music helped me to find a space of real honesty and rawness of feeling. I was listening to music that made me really *feel*, and listening to and watching people to register how they felt and acted. I'm so much less caught up in being an imitator than I think I was trying to be four years ago. I'm not focused on working towards being like my favorite writers; I'm working

towards emoting my own truth and feelings, focused on getting it out so it doesn't sit and weigh me down.

For this manuscript, I had to work through the process of transferring uninhibited, loose writing into something more formally controlled seemed daunting at first, but I found in practice that the simple act of typing out a draft from a handwritten original did wonders. Audre Lorde has a passage about how she writes journal entries and the revision process she goes through to turn those into poetry:

For me, there are two very basic and different processes for revising my poetry. One is recognizing that a poem has not yet become itself. In other words I mean that the feeling, the truth that the poem is anchored in is somehow not clearly clarified inside of me, and as a result the poem lacks something. Then the poem has to be reflect. Then there's the other process, which is easier. The poem is itself, but it has rough edges that need to be refined. That kind of revision involves picking the image that is more potent or tailoring it so that it carries the feeling. (165)

I was very much stuck in the first part of this revision process. My journal entries were just bitter lists of how I was hurting and feeling sorry for myself (a line I cut out of the end of "Valentine"). Transforming it into something that registered as actually important felt like the key, something that was bigger than myself in some ways. Once I was able to do that, the revision process became more of the second process, the "easier" one, although that still meant sometimes changing what I thought was "raw feeling" into something more grounded and artistic rather than pitiable. That wasn't my goal, to be pitied, so I had to make those changes in order for it to not register that way. Asking for pity is asking to not be taken seriously or trusted as a writer. There's no honesty in pity.

I started with a few poems that I brought to the First Permission poetry group the previous semester: "Things I've Seen on the Side of the Road", "Horror Movie", "In My Dream", and "Scenes from a Small College Town". In a way, I had some distance from the things in each of those poems, and so much of my work starts that way. I work from observation for the most part

and as this thesis progressed, my insomnia got worse, and I experienced a messy breakup, it became more personal. Audre Lorde's essay "My Words Will Be There" expresses the importance of the mentality of moving on and growing; she says that "the only kind of pain that is intolerable is pain that is wasteful, pain from which we do not learn" (163). Throughout this thesis, I'm using that pain, that restlessness, that heartbreak, and learning from it, especially since that comes in the form of fueling my work.

I was in Professor Greg Howard's fiction workshop last semester, which helped me tremendously. Being in a fiction workshop as a poet is initially intimidating. As a kid, I wrote stories, but they were always short and part of a continuing "series" of which I never finished. I should have realized a lot sooner that this was because I'm terrible at endings (or at least I think I am). I never really know how to end things in a way that doesn't result in killing off a character or having a cheesy pan-off-screen moment where the "odd" character accepts their oddities. I'm much more detail-focused and spend all my time dedicated to writing characters instead of plot, and fiction is typically associated with having a linear plot. Luckily, that's what grad school is for, moving you away from those conventional ideas and opening up new paths. I was able and encouraged to find a way to bring my poetic inclinations and attention to detail into the class and create two of the pieces in this thesis.

The first poem in the manuscript, "Running Figures", began as a few lines I imagined to be poetry: "I made my bed at 4 in the morning." After reading Claire Louise Bennett's short story *Pond*, in Professor Howard's fiction class, I was tasked with writing a short piece in which nothing happens. I wrote a page about making a baked potato in the microwave. I returned to the page in my journal where I had written the above line, and knew it belonged with the baked potato story. I'm guilty of scrutinizing over details and remembering things that other people don't, or won't,

which is also sometimes to my advantage. I worry about Bono. I stare at one picture of a boy for too long. I drag through every suggestion you can read about how to get back to sleep. My brain never turns off, which is an advantage for my writing but a disadvantage for my energy levels. Thus, it's what fueled almost the entirety of this work.

Slam poet Jae Nichelle wrote and performed a piece called "Friends With Benefits" that really resonated with me. She talks about the relationship that she has with anxiety, who "occasionally fucks with her", and the conditions of their relationship. Nichelle put a bit more distance between herself and anxiety, which seemed intentional, but I liked this personification and how for me, anxiety is much more of a lifelong companion. The "Soulmate" series was born out of this influence. It also largely came from a lot of reading and rewriting some of my pieces. In some ways it was actually a byproduct of "Horror Movie". The fears in "Horror Movie", as Jennifer Moxley explained it, are more canned, universal fears that people (especially women) have from watching these films. This poem initially read as a set of worries, rather than things that actually happened, but putting it into the first person and creating a reality as if it were things that actually happened made me think about the things that were more specific to me. The first "Soulmate" talks partially about being in a theatre alone, as the end of "Horror Movie" does, so I wanted to make that fear a little bit more pointed in terms of my thought process in that situation. Something as simple as going to the grocery store is sometimes a task due to the self-consciousness that anxiety creates. The paranoia and fear of loneliness after someone leaves your bed is replaced by the physicalness, bodily response of anxiety, the familiar embrace, so I wanted to personify all of these moments.

Roy Kesey's novel *Any Deadly Thing*, another text I read in Professor Howard's fiction workshop, was a model for the poem "In My Dream." Kesey's section titled "Scree" was about a

father falling in and out of consciousness, passing between dreams and reality, while staying in bed with his sick son. The way Kesey constructed this so perfectly captured the blurring between wakefulness and dreaming, the seamless way in which the two narratives can sometimes collide. It flowed perfectly (and rarely has any paragraph breaks, only section breaks indicating the character waking up). As an example, within the first page, it reads, “He draws the curtains tight. Lies down carefully again. Slips toward sleep, away from it, back toward it, is driving down a Beijing side street and that sound, he knows that sound—idiophonic, the fish, muyu” (152). He seamlessly transitions into this altered state and you spend a lot of time believing what is happening. After reading it, I had this dream about getting stabbed, but I didn’t think much of it. When I had to return to the piece to write about it for class a few days later, I immediately stopped the work I was supposed to be doing to write “In my Dream”. It came out all at once and I could remember everything so clearly. Kesey’s piece had such clarity to it that it made my writing and dream feel even more accessible.

“At 6 AM” and “Tossed” both came from a bad bout of insomnia I had (which is actually when I’m writing this section as well). Sometimes, no matter how tired and heavy your eyes feel and how confident you are, rooting for yourself, that you’ll get back to sleep, there’s too much going on inside your head for that to happen. I was thinking about the emails I have to send, and what I wanted to call my mom about, and when I’d be able to get my favorite breakfast sandwich from a bakery 30 minutes away again; all problems that can’t be solved at 6 in the morning. They’re building off the theme from “Running Figures” of restlessness that seems uncontrollable. Minor movements and attempts to shut my brain down feel as if they’ll bring me back to that same state of sleep, but that in itself causes me to continuously overthink, so I tune into the surroundings, the noises of cats and neighbors and blankets and try to find patterns in them. The

only thing that brings me comfort and relaxation is writing about it. The brevity of them was partially due to the hour in which they were written, but also are meant to mirror the fleeting thoughts that occur in those times.

I write on my phone while driving. I know this is dangerous, even criminal, but I continue to do it to avoid forgetting something I've thought of while driving, an activity that's often relaxing for me and allows me to think more than other activities. "Things I've Seen on the Side of the Road" was a continuous process of swivel-necking. I was constantly noticing (mostly morbid) things that were bizarre as I drove from my hometown up to school, a 45-minute straight shot on the highway that can often lead to wandering thoughts. Initially, the title was "Things I've Seen Lying Dead on the Side of the Road", but with the advice of the First Permission group, and the evolution and building of images/sights seen, I realized that not everything I listed was dead. "Scenes from a Small College Town" was much the same. I'd often get bored or anxious and would take drives around the back roads of Orono where I noticed more each time I drove them. The hipsters were a funny image to me, because who stands outside a closed Wendy's at 9 at night? It was obvious due to lack of uniform that they weren't workers, and they weren't eating, either, so it felt very much like something that I'd really only see in this town. The only scene that was obviously not from my car adventures is the second section, with the woman breastfeeding her baby at a bar, which again, felt like something I'd really only see in a college town at a brewery. "Disembodied Night" was also written this way, though only at night, and I liked noticing images that were detached from actual people, although I knew they belonged to someone. The lack of articles (besides "a") and qualifiers in many of the poems in this section has to do with the distance I have from these images. Not being involved in them allowed me a specificity in evocation but lack of assumption, so giving definites was something I avoided.

The “Columbus” series comes from reading *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. It’s a combination of various artifacts, including captain’s logs, journal entries, and letters by Columbus himself. So much of the book is about the men feeling like they reached land but didn’t, and how landmarks start to look the same, and the monotony they wrote about feeling was the same monotony I felt while reading it. Hence, “Columbus 1”. There are multiple logs about various birds that are supposed to help indicate how close to land the ship is.

A log from September 17 says “On that morning he says he saw a white bird called the tropic-bird, whose habit is not to sleep on the sea” (Columbus 43). I really liked the image of a bird commonly seen on land being located on the sea, and because I’ve never been good at biology, I didn’t realize birds were restricted in that way. The (maybe more precisely, my) assumption is that their ability to fly means utter freedom, but that not being true made me rethink the romanticism usually given to birds. In my undergraduate thesis, I wrote an Untitled poem in which I say:

I’ve never wanted
or needed
to be a bird
or a fish.

I turn around and say I wish I could live on the backs of whales like a bird in “Columbus 2.” It seems like birds have the best perspective, whether they be on land or sea, and I imagined it as being able to physically watch history pass by. Being a bird, watching Columbus and his men going to invade an island and slaughter and enslave groups of people, would have been the ultimate perspective. Or, it could go the other way, and you could get swallowed by a seal, murdered mercilessly just as the inhabitants of the island.

“Columbus 3” is a found and erasure poem, a technique I’ve never used before, and was really fun to generate. The source material was “Letter of Columbus to Various Persons Describing the Results of his First Voyage”, and the title tells all (as all the chapters of the book seem to do). He writes as if the inhabitants of the island should be, and are in fact, extremely grateful for his presence. The fourth stanza is pretty accurate to what the original letter says. His passage reads as such:

I gave them a thousand pretty things that I had brought, in order to gain their love and incline them to become Christians. I hoped to win them to the love and service of their Flighnesses and of the whole Spanish nation and to persuade them to collect and give us of the things which they possessed in abundance and which we needed.
(117)

I hardly needed to change anything because of the way Columbus vilifies himself, taking claim of lands in the name of Spain and God. Colonization portrayed itself as well-intentioned but lacked the scope and awareness that we now have in seeing the cultural significance of preserving and respecting native people’s lands. The found poem that came out of this whole letter was largely easy to piece together to illuminate the cruelty and sometimes absurdity of Columbus’ writing about his voyages.

“When It Was Easy” was difficult for me to categorize, to put under one of these three sections, because it’s really about anxiety or heartbreak, and is more a memory, a series of images, so it seemed more observational in nature. They’re all parts of my memories from college, when things were easier because they could be; we were in this limbo of technically being adults, but still not really having responsibilities except for showing up for and passing classes, in whatever state that was. Now, there’s uncaged anxiety and heartbreak to grapple with, uncontained from the guise that is just making it through college, fueled by the energy of others.

I wrote “Contents” because I have a constant need, an urge, to write lists, as a few of my other poems are like this as well. It’s a way to organize my ever-present thoughts, even if it’s about arbitrary things. In some ways, then, it connects to “I’m Obsessed with What I Used to be Obsessed With.” It’s not necessarily OCD, but it’s a system for managing these frequently occurring images, and when something reoccurs, I feel like I have to make a note of it. On the other side of that, if an image sticks out to me, I also have to make a note of it (which is where “Things I’ve Seen on the Side of the Road” and “Scenes from a Small College Town” come from).

The entirety of the last section is about relationships, . It’s extremely personal and not inspired by any particular poet. They’re largely reflective of and in conversation with popular culture in the form of self-help blogs, pop songs, and social media, which are usually veiled in positivity and don’t help with real heartbreak. It’s easy for someone outside of yourself and who doesn’t know you to say, “surround yourself with friends”, and it’s another to actually do it yourself. I opened with “how to break your own heart” because yes, there are numerous blogs (we get it, *Thought Catalogue*) about being free and open with love, the lack of caution in giving your heart away. It’s not that I was consciously trying to follow that advice; it’s that I accidentally *did* follow that advice and then came to resent the idea. I get the “you’re only young once, why waste it being careful” mentality, but the aftermath, to me, tends to be much worse than the high of falling in love with someone you’ve known for a month. I’d had the line “I wonder what it’s like to break your own heart” written down in a journal for over two years, and now, I finally found a use for it.

I spend some time reminiscing in “2007”, “Birchwood Terrace”, and “Soundtrack”. It’s not all positive or longing, but it showed me, in some ways, how I got to where I am. The blissfulness of making out at 15 was all that it took to claim you were in love, after which point, things start to devolve. If you keep loving like that, loving endlessly and over trivial neck kisses, you

wind up blasting Fiona Apple and writing a creative thesis in poetry. These poems are also much more explicit than I'm used to (although it doesn't really go beyond lips touching). The aforementioned Fiona, as well as other female rockers of the 90s, were blatantly, unapologetically, and overtly sexual. They owned it, talked about the real dirt, scratching your nails down someone else's back. My goal wasn't to get to that graphic of a point, but I think the anger and power that came with writing some of these pieces enabled me to be more open with that expression.

"Guidelines" comes from a similar place as my low-key resentment in "how to break your own heart". There are tons of blogs written by 20-something, self-empowered, independent women that say the same things: *learn to love being alone, and here's how*. I took these "tips" and turned them into a poem about how I can't do those things, logistically and reasonably. Then, I have my own *alternatives* for them, like getting a tattoo and eating burgers in my car. (If you can't tell by this point in the work, yes, I eat my feelings, good or bad.) In "Guidelines", I was juxtaposing the typical blog suggestions with my reasons for not being able to do it, physically setting them across from and in relation to the advice I felt I was supposed to be taking. The next poem, "Things that Mend a Broken Heart" is my own advice, as specific and seemingly trivial as the points may be, to myself and to anyone else, really, about how to be okay on a day-to-day basis. These are list-based poems to reflect the listicles that blogs often take the form of, so I was lightly mimicking that style.

4 Non Blondes "What's Up" showed me that yeah, getting your heartbroken sucks more than a lot of things, but I've resigned myself to using and abusing it rather than dwelling on it (by way of lying in bed and listening to Journey); getting over it by way of anger but optimism about myself; that I made the best choices I could. The piece "Soundtrack 2" came out of this

recognition and mentions the importance of this song to me. Its influence was significant in this way and became a source of empowerment.

All of this isn't to say that writing is a cure-all for mental illness. This isn't to say I'm any less anxious or burdened. This isn't to say I want pity. This also isn't to say all poets actually do have to suffer—but it really does help. If I slept through the night, this thesis wouldn't have happened. If I didn't worry about people scrutinizing over me (more than I do over them), this thesis wouldn't have been written.

Although a lot of this work might not reflect it, I learned that it really is okay to be alone. If I wasn't alone so much, I wouldn't have finished this collection. If I was happier, maybe it would have been worse. I didn't take solace in writing, nor was it an escape, but it was more of a release. I embraced insomnia because it fueled so much of this work. I became excited to write about things I thought I had exhausted the topic of. I found new ways to talk about similar experiences. I found new ways to listen, feel, and transcribe. I settled into the uncomfortable. I became aware of the choking hazards.

BLANK WHITE ROOM

Running Figures

4:01

I made my bed at four in the morning.

I had spent more time thinking about your hands and packing a bowl to smoke weed to get to sleep than actually sleeping and I was starting to get itchy.

So I changed my sheets.

I struggled to tuck my fitted sheet into the innermost corner of the bed, got my fingers caught underneath the mattress, lost my breath, hit my knuckles on the wall, cursed, gave up, and laid down on my top sheet.

4:08

An acoustic cover of “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m looking For” started etching its way through my tinny phone speaker and I wondered if Bono had a wife. I picked up my phone to Google it, then remembered the cautions against screen time while trying to sleep.

So instead I spent ten minutes trying to picture Bono’s wife.

I thought she was probably about fifty, but noticeably so, with smoker’s wrinkles,

but she wore just as much jewelry as he did.

She always had a leather or black jean jacket on and was wearing a blue-jeweled bolo.

Her hair was thinning and dyed black.

Basically she looked like him but without a mustache.

Or maybe she was the opposite of him.

Maybe she looked like a shorter Heidi Klum,

but with bell-bottom Levis and flats as if it was still 2004.

She could be blonde, with feathered hair.

Overly-blushed cheeks. Maybe I was just thinking of a young Miley Cyrus.

Bono could have married an older Asian woman.

He could have married a tall black woman who wore hoop earrings.

I hoped he found what he was looking for.

4:18

I thought about texting you.

4:21

I thought I had fleas crawling on me and I heard someone get up, go down three stairs, hit the landing and turn left, then walk down the remaining 14, every fourth one creaking.

The hairs on my arms stood up and felt like something was running through them so I itched, trying to chase away the fleas, then it felt like one jumped off me, and I thought it would get stuck in my sheets, biting at my ankles all night, so I rubbed my legs trying to brush it off, but then I realized it’d still probably be in the bed, so I lifted the blue-and-purple checkered blankets up and started violently flapping them up and down and quickly brushing anything I could off the surface of my sheets onto the floor.

4:23

It had started to thunder in a way that vibrated through the house, rattling it enough that I noticed but not so much that those who slept did. I used to have panic attacks and hide behind the couch when I heard lightning, but now the cat does. We can't find him for hours even after the storm stops.

4:24

I rolled onto my left side,
bent my right knee up,
crushing a pillow underneath it,
and scratched my scalp.

I thought about getting up to make macaroni and cheese because a Facebook memory from two years ago said I made spaghetti at 2 AM once, so what's the difference? I hadn't grown, I hadn't changed.

4:27

I wanted to drive home and get into bed with my mom like I used to. When the storms would start or I couldn't sleep, I'd sandwich myself between her and my overheated, irritated dad, unable to comfort a child with anxiety.

4:29

I scanned my red walls for a spider I had seen crawling behind the door earlier. Without my glasses, every crack looked like a spider.

4:31

I thought about the way you bit your lip and smiled at me after the first time you kissed me against the wall of the bathroom of our friend's house and how I couldn't breathe.

4:32

I made a list in my head of all the things I had to buy at the store:
instant brown rice so I could pretend to be healthy and have cheap, easy meals after work;
broccoli, but fresh not frozen;
canned green beans, just regular cut instead of French cut because the regular cut cans have the tab instead of having to use a can opener;
Honey Nut Cheerios to try to be healthy;
milk, but maybe 2% instead of skim because skim seems like it starts to smell sour faster than the other kinds;
Dish detergent, but never the generic brand;
paper towels, very generic but in bulk because my roommates never did it;
and Oreos for when I give up at night.

I made a list in my head of all the things I wanted to say to my therapist:

how I get fidgety when I do have plans;
how I'm so disappointed if someone cancels plans that I cry;
how I get depressed if someone doesn't text me back;
but mainly, how I can't sleep because I'm making lists in my head.

Then I made a mental note to not forget to write all these things down when I officially woke up.

4:36

I thought about how easy it had been to make a baked potato in the microwave as I did earlier. It was much less delicious than putting it in the oven, but I rarely have the patience to wait an hour for one meal, especially one that I'm cooking. Usually while waiting for one to bake in the oven, you put it in and walk away for an hour, then you read, shower, apply lotion, feed the cats, and maybe it's ready at that point. Usually not. So you poke it, guess it needs another ten minutes, and scroll through social media until you almost forget you have a potato in the oven.

But putting a potato in the microwave with a few holes poked in it was way easier. There's even a preset button on most microwaves to make a baked potato. The hardest part of that was actually getting the broccoli cut up and steamed before the potato was done, and then mashing the insides of the potato with some butter and salt, reassembling it with broccoli and then cheese on top.

I didn't have time to read or shower or put lotion on.

I had already fed the cats.

I had my books ready to read, thinking a potato would take close to eight minutes in the microwave because of all the recipe videos for poor college students I had seen. My microwave did it in three minutes and forty seconds.

I had eaten my microwaved potato while watching a makeup tutorial I was never going to recreate while sitting cross-legged in bed until my ankles got sore. Then I played a game on my phone for twenty minutes, beat one of my high scores, and then went back to find out it hadn't recorded it. So I decided to go on strike from the game for at least the next two days.

10:13

I had put my dirty plate on the floor next to my bed, my eyes grew heavy, and I pulled my blankets up, knowing I'd fall asleep at 10:00 at night, which would only really count as a nap because I wouldn't stay asleep long. I never do.

1:59

I was awake again by two.

2:07

I watched all the videos I had saved on Instagram and Facebook.

I stared at pictures of you with other girls and hated the natural urge to be jealous.

There's this one picture of you

on a big lawn—maybe it's a field—

in the middle of these two girls that I somehow know are your cousins,

but every time I see them, I imagine they're in love with you.

They're both ordinary, but that's what you seem to like.

One has long, kind of thin, dark brown hair, with purposely smudged black eyeliner and clumpy mascara, a crooked tooth, and a black fleece

jacket on. But her eyes are bright blue and she's a perfect stick figure.

The other, on your left side, has dirty blonde hair and pink-tinted lip gloss

and is wearing a dark blue hoodie. Her smile is perfect.

Mine, despite having had braces for three years, is perpetually crooked.

I thought, for the first time, about texting you, knowing you were also awake. But I didn't want the potential disappointment of you not responding.

3:03

Then I was massaging my scalp which slowly turned into itching which slowly turned into scratching which slowly turned into insane digging at nothing but knots because I wondered if a flea had wandered up into my hair.

3:05

I violently rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands and, halfway through, realized I didn't take my eyeliner off and made out the crescent-shaped smears on the heels of my hands. I got a makeup remover cloth and pressed it into my eyes, wiping away the marks I had made on the bridge of my nose and cheekbones. My eyes still itched. My eye doctor had given me drops for this, but I'd rather the sweet sensation of rubbing them until my vision goes blurry for a minute than put liquid in them.

3:07

I kept turning my pillow over because it felt flatter than usual.

3:08

I pushed the blankets off my feet because my soles felt swollen with heat. Then they were too cold so I put on some wool socks, but they itched. So I put on some regular socks, but then my feet got too hot again, but my toes were still cold, so I pushed the socks off my heels, one at a time, using the toes of my other foot, until the socks were only covering my toes.

3:14

I took my shirt off to press my bare chest into the cool sheets and noticed they had started to slide out from the corner of my mattress. As I turned quickly onto my side to avoid looking at it, I heard the final pop of the sheet pulling off the corner of my bed.

3:17

I laid still hoping it would fix itself as I drifted off to sleep.

4:01

It didn't, and I didn't, so I made my bed at four in the morning and thought about potatoes.

4:47

As I cursed out loud again at seeing the sun starting to rise, I turned towards my wall and hugged my pillow as if it were you.

00:00

When I finally do sleep, I dream of people whose stories I don't know.

Soulmate

Anxiety thinks she's my soulmate.

Anxiety walks behind me at the grocery store,
Telling me if I take too long deciding
which variety of boxed mac and cheese to get
then people will start staring and
someone will tell me,
"Make a choice for once in your life."

Anxiety holds my hand at the movie theatre
Whispering about how easy it is
for someone to start opening fire,
shooting wildly into the dark somewhere behind me
but if I sit too far back
people will share the row with me
because that's where everyone likes to sit
and then they'll get annoyed
with how loud I chew my popcorn
and they'll move

But if you move first, that makes you rude, she says.

Anxiety spoons me at night
And asks, *wouldn't it be nice if there
was an actual person here instead?*
But even then, when I have an actual someone in my bed,
she's asking,
*Should you try to cuddle with them even though they
haven't tried to with you?*
She urges, from the other side of me,
*This is probably the last time you'll see them
because you're clearly trying too hard
to be calm when they can see you bursting inside.*

Anxiety insists I try to go back to sleep.
As I drift off, I hear her whisper:
*This is how you're going to spend the rest of your life—
alone in this bed with only me.*

In My Dream

someone slowly
Inserts a small letter opener into my back
The soft spot under my right kidney
I can feel it
But it only really stings and shocks
I'm not really in pain
I'm in this bathroom
That reminds me of the one at the mall
And people come and go
But no one cares about my moans
As I slide down the wall
With just a little blood pouring out
But enough that it burns
Like a deep papercut

An ex-boyfriend appears around the corner
Once I'm on the floor
I'm yelling his name
But mostly it's my face
It's my eyes telling him I'm in shock
That I've been stabbed
And why does no one care
And he says
It's because I'm dreaming
I tell him
I know that
But still why does no one care
And he walks away saying I'll wake up soon

I'm on the bathroom floor
Bleeding and stinging and wide-eyed
When I wake up into a blank white room
Where he's sitting waiting and says
See you're fine
But I can still feel the cut oozing
And when I turn my head to look
There's a patch of gauze where the cut was
He tells me
I have extreme paranoia
And I tell him
I know but
I'm still only dreaming.
He says yes
But I'm much too concerned
About getting better

So I let the sting of the wound consume me
As I end up in the bottom of a shower
In a bathroom I was in once in college
Where I was too drunk to keep the motion detection lights on
And water is pounding into the cut in my back
But I feel it closing
Just as easily as it opened.

Choking Hazard

As children
We weren't allowed to play with things
 That had plastic wrap
 Or were so small we could choke on them
And stop breathing.

No one told us that later in life
There's many more choking hazards
That make you stop breathing
 Like falling in love with someone
 Who loves someone else
 Or your best friend forgetting your birthday
 Or waking up alone day after day.

Horror Movie

Once I went outside at night
and there was a murderer in the bushes.
No one heard me scream.

At a restaurant, I ordered steak
and vomited blood
because it was raw and I got E. coli.

I was washing my hair in the shower
and while my eyes were closed,
the curtain got pulled back
and Norman Bates was there with his knife.

I tried to drive by an 18 wheeler
and the trailer hit me and I rolled my car.
I had to watch as the blood poured out of my skull.

I was sleeping in total darkness one night
so I didn't see the man who snuck into my room
and put a gun in my mouth.

At a crowded movie theatre,
everyone was sucking the air out of the room
and I stopped breathing.

I'm obsessed with what I used to be obsessed with

How I'd make my mom
Scoop around the chocolate chips
In the batter so I could have a plain cookie

How I was overly concerned with the margins
On printed pages
Being too wide

How I'd trace the letters of a big word I heard
Looped in cursive
On my thigh with my finger

How I loved to run my fingernail
Up the length of a zipper three times,
Starting over if I went off track

How I'd spend ten minutes
Picking every piece of shredded lettuce
Off a sandwich instead of asking for it without

How I counted the number of ants
Scurrying across the counter in the summer
Until their pattern slowed down

How I had to fully close the cabinet door
The first time and if I didn't,
Reopening it all the way just to close it again

How I had to pick every bit of dry skin
Off my bottom lip
No matter how much it hurt

How I had to stop the gas pump
At an odd number for the price
Or keep testing my luck until I got it

How I stirred or shook soda
Until it was flat
Because the carbonation hurt my throat

How I wouldn't call myself obsessed
How I would call myself a perfectionist
How I wouldn't stop

Soulmate 2

She makes me dig incessantly,
Scratching my scalp my thighs my elbows
To no relief

She pounds at my ribcage,
Punches into my heart
Until I can hear it in my ears

She runs through my stomach
Tying and untying knots
So I can't eat

She sits on my lungs
Making it impossible for me to breathe
Even though I'm sitting still

She's whispering that
It's fine, this is normal
And I believe her

Both

Too hot and too cold
Arms burning
Legs freezing
Too exhausted to leave this bed
Too awake to sleep
It's all this *and* this
Not this *or* that
But constant constant constant
Everything crushing at once
Eyes are heavy
Brain is charged
Heart is pounding
Breath is shallow
Care too much
Don't care at all

I want to choose to live or die
But I float
In this empty white space
When I wish it was a black hole

At 6 AM

with no one around
 except four cats,
 a snoring neighbor,
 and my self-consciousness,

and nothing to do
 but crack my wrists,
 fold my blankets down,
 and think,

I've never been more awake

I'm not a crier

but i cried the first time i had to take my contacts out
and one time when my legs got itchy when i took a walk;
from losing an old stuffed animal,
and one time when my niece had a fever of 102;
when my doctor told me my cholesterol is high for a 22-year-old;
from my brother eating my leftover lo mein,
and when a concert was cancelled because of the snow;
when my college boyfriend married someone else,
and once when my computer wouldn't charge;
when i watched London disappear underneath the clouds
from the plane.

Attack

I choke on my own heartbeat

My lung expand explode my rib cage

My veins swell out of my wrists

Dig my scalp until it bleeds

Almost swallow my tongue

Lose control of my locked knees

Go blind to everything except my white molten sanity

Tossed

I'm convinced that every position change
every removal of clothing
every Ativan
every stretch
will bring me closer to sleep

yet here we are

Soulmate 3

She tells me
I'm not good enough
For anyone but her
I'm not strong enough to do anything
But fight her
I'm too weak to figure out anything
Except how to hold her
I'm not smart enough to
Understand her
I'm not beautiful enough
For anyone but her to look at
I'm too apathetic to learn
How to not trust her
I'm not brave enough
To leave her

Construction

I am built of fear
and hope
and the scariest ego

I am built of galaxies
and black holes
and failed missions

I am built of a churning stomach
and restless legs
and a mind that won't quit

I am built of cracked feet
and bleeding ribs
and blistered hands

I am built of nostalgia
and heartbreak
and the worst kind of love

INVISIBLE FIRE

Disembodied Night

A burning cigarette—red flame igniting
From the pull of lips

A leash without a dog

Sneaker reflectors moving
Smaller sneakers running after

A rectangle of silver light spinning
Around an invisible wheel

Things I've Seen on the Side of the Road:

A deer, dead,
with a bloated white belly.

A decapitated traffic cone.

A rusted metal wheelchair
and its ghost.

Swollen trash bags.

A mangled metal guard rail
and the remnants of a blown tire
confettied around it.

The corpse of a raccoon,
half-exposed under the dirty, melting snow.

Wooden crosses
marking where a body
had been scattered.

A couple leaning against their U-Haul
while the man scans the highway for mile markers,
"Just Married" scrawled in the dirt of the door.

Columbus 1

monotony
mundanity
mutiny :
all the excuses
in the world
to become a
murderous conqueror

Scenes from a Small College Town

I.

Hipsters smoke outside
a dimly-lit Wendy's at 9PM.
They look like they should

be talking about
Marxist theory but
it's about new shoes.

II.

A woman breastfeeds
at a table near the bar
while her husband gets

a strong, dark, tall ale,
Spilling a bit on his large
green-and-white striped shirt.

III.

An abandoned, snow-covered car
in an abandoned,
snow-covered parking lot.

IV.

A group of toppled
chairs hover around an invisible fire

in someone's backyard
next to a dangerous turn
where the cars go sideways.

Scene From a Panera

He's wearing an Army bomber jacket and pants that are too big.
His hair is either still wet or has too much sticky product in it
Clinging to his messy curls.
He's concentrated on his hands
While she's trying to ask him questions about his brother.
When their salads are ready, he lets her get them.
After 3 forkfuls of lettuce, he says,
I have this weird experience where I'm trying to reinvent my own past.
You know what I mean?
She doesn't.
Like, there's a whole bunch of different subcultures that just passed me by.
He proceeds to talk about Japanese anime.
Then he talks about the music producing
He does on his computer out of his bedroom
Claiming he hates Apple products but that's what he uses because they're simple.
She says she loves her iMac.
Somehow it seems like he's been eating his salad for 20 minutes
But he's gotten nowhere with it.
He then talks about this concert he went to.
I was looking around and thought,
Everything in here is like my inner thoughts vomited out into realization.
She stops stabbing her salad for a moment
to peer over her glasses
through her greying bangs.

Columbus 2

If I could live on the sea
Standing on whale's backs
Like a bird,
I would.
Either I survive to see
The birth and death
Of a new generation of sailors
Floating by in their boats,
Or I die quickly and mercilessly
By the mouth of a seal.
So be it.

Contents

Milk not yet expired
starts to smell sour

Strawberry hulls left in the carton
crowd out the fruit

Three cartons of butter
littered with toast crumbs,
scored with fork lines

Two eggs in a plastic carton
meant to prolong their life

An unsealed bag of mini pepperoni
makes the cheese drawer smells like a pizzeria

Two bags of shredded cheddar,
four containers of parmesan,
two bags of American cheese

Half a head of broccoli
clings to the moist plastic bag it's wrapped in

Bread thawing on the counter
dried out, became inedible

Boxes of bulk pantry finds:
Ramen, Chef Boyardee, donuts,
microwave popcorn, and 3 pounds of macaroni

Instant brown rice
never fully absorbs the water,
has its tab pushed in, never fully closes

Family sized box of Cheerios
sitting for months growing stale

Black, chamomile, orange pekoe, lavender, and sleepytime tea,
only brought out when someone is sick

Sugar that accompanies it
hardened after being opened then ignored

Plastic bear-shaped honey bottle
constantly dripping, sticky,

whose lid won't close because it's dried

The tall lazy Susan stacked with canned goods,
"best by" stamps three years past

Town

There's one stoplight
at a 4-way
that links
the crumbling movie theatre,
 the local organic restaurant owned by a French-trained chef,
 a dull gas station,
 and the middle school.

The tall, grey bank still has Christmas lights strung on its bare trees.
The place where everyone learns to ice skate
 has been drained for good.

The park is flooded from the melting snow
 and the tennis courts are cracking open again.

The pool behind the elementary school has stray dodgeballs
 on top of the big, blue tarp.

There's an organic farm on the outskirts of town
whose barn and cafe just burned down.

The richest man in town's 20-acre lawn is soggy and brown.
The parking lot of the abandoned shoe factory is full of potholes
 and the brick building is covered in graffiti.

There are white chairs on the front campus of the high school,
 some toppled over from the wind storm a few months back,
 some missing from local kids stealing them,
 some whose paint is worn off.

The library will likely close for good.

Writing Contest

A farmer
who can write beans all year long

An astronaut
who
because he's been to space
has seen it all

A woman
whose baby and husband drowned
can write heartbreak for miles

A therapist
with no privacy practices

A girl from down the street
who crawled into the trunk of her car
and died
so she didn't get her kids taken away
would have been able to write about miracles

An anxious insomniac
who writes her heart onto her sleeve

End of January

I need to look around me more
So I'm watching the way the wind
Blows the rain sideways
As the rain turns to snow

There are squirrels pulling open
Green trash bags with their tiny claws
And when an older man jogs by—
Slowly, keeping close to the ground
To lower the impact on his knees—
One darts into a tree as
The other hides behind a neighbor's steps

A tall man with dreadlocks
Is shoveling the end of his driveway
From the storm the night before
While his golden lab bounces in the snow
And his girlfriend tries to start her
Rusty white VW

This is only the second time I've seen them
Outside together

The snow banks are piled high,
Dirtying as mud splashes onto them
From the passing cars,
The tops of them turning black with soot

Everyone has to back out of their driveways slower now

A group of three pre-pubescent boys
Shuffles by, dragging their heavy-booted feet,
Kicking stray twigs
As a fourth scooters by quickly
Dodging icy puddles in the road

I'm looking out this window
This big, bay window with the cat
Taking up part of my view
Trying to worry about others more than myself

But all I can see is settling fog

Columbus 3

From: "Letter of Columbus to Various Persons Describing the Results of his First Voyage"

Inhabitants fled
I continued
Marvellous

Singing
Wonder
I discovered
All the weapons

Broken
Animals

I gave them
Pretty things
To gain their love
Persuade them
Of the things
Which we needed

I came
Despite all the
Running and shouting

I
Richer than I yet know
Taken possession
Of
The women
Not
Shared

Understand
Singular
Faith

They
Human monsters
More ill-shaped
Than
I

Give them
Impossibilities

*A victory
For
All Christendom*

*Thanks to
Profit*

EVERY IMPOSSIBLE THING

how to break your own heart:

love
endlessly
like all those inspirational blogs tell you to

Kindness

Who here has been in love?

Okay, good, everyone.

But what kind of love?

The kind where you finally have waffles
after going without them for six months,
or the kind where you spend a whole day constructing how you're going
to greet them in your head?

The kind where you can't stop thinking about
their hands and their teeth and the flecks in their eyes,
or the kind that feels the same way as when
you make a baby laugh for the first time?

The kind where you stutter when you try to talk
to that person,
or the kind like the feeling you get when you're greeted
by an overly excited dog?

Is it the kind of love that makes you forget about
the eye doctor appointment you made three months ago,
or is it the kind that keeps you up at night
because you're counting the number of times you made them laugh?

Is it the kind where you lose your breath
whenever you hear their name,
or is it the kind that feels like when the ice cream stand
opens back up for the summer?

Is it the kind of love where you get excited
every time you see a car that looks like theirs,
or is it the kind where you only listen to songs
from your teenage years?

Is it the kind of love that you dream about
and wake up excited about the day,
or is it the kind where you don't need to eat
because you're full on love like you mom says?

Is it freedom?

Is it comfort?

Is it lightness?

Is it grounded?

Is it the kind you can't do anything
but write about?

Now ask yourself:
Is it kind at all?

2007

Neck kisses remind me
Of a trailer park
Where my second high school boyfriend --
 Who I only liked for his tight pants
 And swooped hair --
Lived and we'd kiss each others necks
For hours in his bed
With the door slightly open
So his mom wouldn't get mad

And that was how I defined love

Birchwood Terrace

You're kissing the back of my neck
But all I can think about
Is my ex-boyfriend's house
with its supply of organic sandwich meats
and three bathrooms
And maybe this is only because I drank
too much vodka
But I don't think it is
Because when you kiss my thigh
 I giggle -
You probably think I'm trying to be cute
But really it just tickles in an uncomfortable way.

Soundtrack

you remind me of
every song i listened to in middle school

you sound like the lyrics,
You're the reason why I burst
And why I bloom...
You hold me down

your eyes are the reason
i can see through all this fog

your hands are the reason
i didn't hit that snowbank

your lips are the reason
i keep eating

your laugh is the reason
i remember to breathe

if i wrote how i actually felt
it would just turn into a song from 2005

This may sound bad
And don't take it the wrong way
I love you
However
You hold me down

Island

you showed me
that it's impossible
not to fall in love
on the coast of Maine

When It Was Easy

We lived off \$5 wine and midnight paninis
Enjoyed the hangover
Broken bones from drunken falls
Never cried
Loved (but only in small doses)
Short walks to dive bar breakfast
Long walks to pad Thai on fall nights

We wore wristbands from the bar until they fell off in the shower
Wrote music in an amphitheater
Smoked behind senior dorms
Ate the same meal every Saturday at noon
Didn't gain weight
Stashed vodka in the ceiling
Laughed (every morning)

every impossible way

I don't give a shit
but I'll cry if you don't, either

I'll fight you
but please don't fight back

I'm open to discussions
but you're an ass for not agreeing

I'm confident in who I am
but need you to tell me I'm good enough

I'm stubborn
but will overly apologize if you're upset

I like to be alone
but only by choice

He says,

even if I wasn't me,
even if I was someone else,
I wouldn't love you

even if you weren't you,
even if you were her,
I wouldn't love you

even if we weren't here,
even if we were in Rome,
I wouldn't love you

even if it weren't winter,
even if it was summer,
I wouldn't love you

Wishbone

i wrap my pinky around the smaller half
my sister wraps hers around the bigger half

she wishes that it would stop snowing
so she can go outside with her kids again

like a child,
i don't care about the snow,
i'll play with fire,
so i wish for you instead

Valentine

It's 2 AM and I can't fall asleep
because you love her instead of me
So I'm in the shower
with my head pressed against the
damp porcelain tile wall
while hot water pounds on my back

It's 3 AM and I still can't sleep
because you love her, not me
So I'm writing this
on my glaring phone
which is only keeping me up longer

It's 5 AM and I can't get back to sleep
because I'm not her
So I'm smoking a joint
in the dark with dawn
peeking around my curtains

It's 10 AM and I got 5 hours of sleep
because you chose her over me
So I'm laying in bed
wishing you were here but
know she's the one getting to wake up with you

It's only 6 PM
And the clock never stops

I Sleep With A Guarded Heart

i sleep with a guarded heart
one arm crossed over my chest
hugging my own shoulder
so you don't sneak in at night
to poke more holes in it
and deflate me.

Soundtrack 2

The only time I felt truly free

Since you

Was doing 65

On the dark back roads

Singing 4 Non Blondes

Loud enough for the people in their houses to hear

Guidelines

I didn't dance in my room	It's much too small for that
I didn't go out with girlfriends	I only have one
I didn't travel anywhere new	I don't have the money
I didn't kiss a stranger	I don't go out enough
I didn't sleep the day away	I can't shut my brain off
I didn't go to the gym	I hate exercise

Instead

I bought expensive mascara I wore once
and went to the same movie three times
and got a tattoo
and ate burgers in my car

Things That Mend a Broken Heart:

Kentucky Fried Chicken

Your therapist saying you're a good person

Seasonally-themed Oreos

Tyra Banks promoting body positivity

Texts from your mom

Ignoring social media

Buying a fifth foundation that probably won't match

Painting your nails with \$3 polish that lasts two days

Cursing at the cat who rubs against you anyways

Staying sober—I promise

How It Is

This isn't about some boy.
This isn't about heartbreak.
This isn't about you.
This isn't about how I hate you.
This isn't about how I hate that you left.
This isn't about how I hate that you didn't explain why.

This is about some girl.
This is all about me.
This is about me losing hope.
This is about me losing energy.
This is about how I wasn't patient enough.
This is about how I regret everything.

But it's also about how I won't apologize.

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Tessa Hathaway was born in Aurora, Illinois on February 5, 1992. She was raised in Pittsfield, Maine and graduated from Maine Central Institute in 2010. She attended Bates College and graduated in 2010 with a Bachelor's degree in English. She stayed in Maine and entered the English graduate program at The University of Maine in the fall of 2016. After receiving her degree, Tessa will be teaching Rhetoric and Composition at Husson University. Tessa is a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2018.