WE
WERE
MORE
THAN
KINDLING

POEMS BY
JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS
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POEMS

Jessica Morey-Collins

BLACK LAWRENCE PRESS
for survivors

and for Riley, who takes exquisite care
with my no and my yes
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By the time I got home, the raccoon had chewed through the hen’s neck and fled. The remaining brood was shrieking in their coop. Cycling back from campus, I had listened to paraphrased accounts of people who survived the East Area Rapist-Original Night Stalker (EAR-ONS): blindfold, lotion pump, Coors can. I devour these stories like I’ll callous. My roommates hovered in the yard, shovel, broom, and un-thrown stone at the ends of slack arms, eyes trained on the raccoon clinging to a high tree branch. Blood wet feathers parted to expose puckered skin and tooth punctures.

Years ago, a philosopher whispered isn’t this natural while he dipped his fingers in my inert body. Amazing the way a tiny wound, precisely placed, can devastate. Who hasn’t aspired to a thicker skin? Only one year later, my future husband will press me against a cedar between graves, and wet and not yet dead, I will allow him to love me. But the next day, I audit a bus station. I think of the raccoon, my roommates clapping, brandishing. Sidewalks slip into shaded neighborhoods. Industrial blocks cleave west; saplings bush at car level, block the eye. Speed limits: 35mph, 45mph. People rattle shopping carts full of redeemable cans to the bottle drop. No sidewalk, no landscape buffer. Not a single street-tree to shade the pavement. Christine texts me a video of a red fox playing in a vacant parking lot. Hope twinges in her belly. I tick boxes
on a clipboard. 45mph, 50. Across from the bus station, I duck into a rock shop and pay $5 for a fragment of lab-made bismuth. The shop-keep saw somebody struck by a car just last week, a cyclist pulling a full cart. Cans rolled helter-skelter and the rider ran off, must’ve had bigger problems, the rock-seller says. The EAR-ONS cinched ligatures so tight that hands blackened, numbed. Raccoons thrive on proximity with the human habitat. Years back—after I repeated that I wasn’t ready—I laid still to wait for a philosopher to finish. The EAR-ONS forced wives to bind their husbands, then re-tied them himself. I guzzle stories; my heart stays raw. The hurt rubs even where I’ve singed it, methodical, listened again and again for a bone-splinter until I stop flinching. Crunched cans. A man in a red truck plucks the glass from our trash cans twice weekly. The rock-seller installed a fence to stop the cart-pushers from walking across his parking lot. Outside of the rock shop, a wheel jams and cans tumble into the street. Someone screams Fuck. That night, I make a map of the bus station and then vape with my future husband in a pioneer cemetery. Christine wants her foot tattooed to resemble a paw. A philosopher’s work aims to integrate man with nature. Isn’t this natural, a philosopher whispered. Christine texts that she saw the mangled corpse of a red fox in the gutter, run over. By then, I had stopped wanting flesh. Sprawl and jut; spruce and swale; second house from the corner, single-story, sliding glass. These skeletons are so old we don’t feel disrespectful getting stoned. Shoelace ligatures; fox neck bent all the way back. By then, I want flesh so bad my bones howl. When I get home, the garbage has been collected—bottles and cans
picked from the recycling, the chicken’s broken body on its passage to a land-fill. We will eat her last egg without knowing it.
WHO CARRIES ABOUT CONSENT

The world is a dangerous place. Pluckable love thrums petaled in infinitely tender chests, taunting predators! Taunted, predators venture their plenitudes to get some—kingdoms for mere peaks!—all these sleepless knights over mere squeezes!—but if her heart’s not barbed, her teeth not sharpened, how’s a flesh-starved architect to avoid erecting his land of plenty against such a fertile soft? But what’s lost is lost—straw bombardiers pop and scatter sawdust through the clear air. Silt laced valleys basically beg for settlement; and the river scum wants and will want forever for an honest sieve, for cheeks in which to slosh, a throat in which to gargle. Meanwhile, men astonish at how wet I get, when it has nothing to do with them. Watch! my moist weeping, the geologic seep of me from headwaters through the plentiful nectar-dripping mythos of candid romance. Myths of candor—of love snatched and snatchable—pander to the masculine impulse to rip fistfuls of dahlias from neighbors’ sockets. Where is the flaw? I wanted what I took.
I looked at what I saw! Ok. Lenticular defects seed differences in perspective. Let me get you your flowchart, let me hold your breath. Let me wretch on the land-owner’s natural altar. Let me attempt to get it, this deposition: how power slithers through love, eroding its inside curves, piling sediment against its outside curves, until force is the more recognizable signifier for love, looming, even, over affection. Much how gentry settled where wetness left remnants, where blessing-fed flowers loudly begged to be cut, and pluckable love thrummed thunderous, wonderful, unsafe in all its scope and detail. I’ll never understand it.
Promise to Recede

A few hours before I ran into my rapist at Whole Foods, an older teacher suggested I bathe myself in the blood of Christ to rid myself of the curse of the nomad. She had lived through Hurricanes Betsy and Katrina, learned to stay on high floors in downtown hotels whenever floods are forecast. I had drifted for a decade—from brushfires to typhoons to hurricanes, nowhere felt like home—so when my colleague asked why I’d shipped my books cross-country, I told her about the fortune-teller who said I’d never settle down. That night, after I ran into my rapist at Whole Foods, I asked my lover if it was my fault for saying “no.” He asked why was I foisting this on him. At Whole Foods, my pulse scaled my esophagus and battered the backs of my teeth. I don’t often open my mouth for fear of thunder, haven’t found a high up refuge, yet, a place where I can loft my inconvenient, improbable “no” over the lapping fantasy that I am, above all else, a receptacle for sex. That weekend, it stormed. I stood in the shower while time grated forward and soap slid off my body and into pipes,
and when I finished and looked out the window, a foot of water stood in the yard. Wrapped in my towel, I hovered on the front porch, where my roommate smoked cigarettes and watched the flood inch up our cars, tip garbage cans, lift oil from asphalt and ferry the newly potted pomegranate tree into the street. The storm stalled, the sick water wouldn’t promise to recede, but I didn’t think of the strong women who lifted their children onto rooftops or spent wet days dehydrated—I only thought of myself, ducked behind the kale chips, clawing at the license to my body. I didn’t think of the blood of Christ, only of my own nomad heart, pumping mud. Nowhere will be home as long as my body is not mine. I thought of the desire that surges uninvited into my every crevice, and wanted nothing but to lay down under the floodwaters.
DESCRIPTIONS OF HUMAN WOMEN

I.

Breathless—this is how it ends for you—the whisper network crept, crept

roars today, the “whores” swabbed:
their bodies caught you

II.

I admit it—my nipples are never not present. No matter

how clothed how bone tired how dehydrated
how incapable of smiling how tied up
I’m not crying how wired my politeness into my body thoughts my rage a crime scene you’re crying how violently dramatic how slapstick riddled with holes how holy holy how often I told you what happened it’s obvious, I’ve got them somewhere under clothes.

I promise, I’m less my body than the noise I make with it—

III.

Eventually, creations totter off beyond their authors—they caught him, Michelle, god bless the redolent planes, the haystack, the unmarred flank, the baby grown and holding her own
body as if
it belongs to her.

IV.

The rape-kit backlog clots. The body is a crime scene, stripped and swabbed. Trauma on cotton, the stalked night, the knocked over table, the mattress made a hell of, Pollock, blood, the body become a crime scene, the body, her body, her, my body, me.

V.

For your amusement—
the fluid Muse—

the blue-sky truth
tooth cracked

and clattering, featherless flap
our falls to earth

where we’re nicer to you
in your imagination
where to us you fap
and we’re rapturous, glad,
so glad to be touched

like we’re flammable,
time-stamped twenty-one,
 wonder dilated

violently desirous, wild
for you, for you only

VI.

Pubic hair. Fluids. Chewed nails. Blue eyes.
Ribald. Fine hair. Quiet, lively, chime laugh.
Haven’t you? I have. Mild clapper. Pussy
flaps. Trap door—can you believe it?—
the white male feminist says she slammed
it. Treasure chest. Rectum. God bless
the threaded needle, dangling above
the haystack. The scent pool. The clues,
the ruses, the truth, at last, the truth.
I created this chapbook from within a network of dynastic colonial privileges—some earned, many not—and with momentum built upon the white supremacist professional culture that simultaneously infantilizes and empowers people who look and move through society like me.

Thank you to Black Lawrence Press and chapbook editor Lisa Fay Coutley for seeing value in this manuscript, for skilled editorial insight, and diligent work to bring the chapbook into being.

Thank you to my parents who, each in their own way, supported a decade of self-inquiry and risk—without the leeway, patience, and capital they have provided, I do not know if I would have written at all. Thank you to my spouse, Riley Clark-Long, for putting in the hard work of supporting creative labor. Thank you to my friends and community; you make hope and creativity possible, and I love you.

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*Barzakh Magazine* – “A Burn a Burn”
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The Boiler – “To Quantify Exposure”
DIALOGIST – “Exit Interview”
Heavy Feather Review – “Specimen”
Ghost Proposal – “Rubberneck Diorama”
Lunch – “Prophylactic Routine”
Prism Review – “Promise to Recede” (winner of the 2018 Prism Review Poetry Contest)
Rascal Literary Journal – “Post-Mortem”
RHINO Poetry – “Toponymy of Entitlement”
The Rupture – “Who Cares About Causality”
Sundog Lit – “Climate Adaptation Planning”
Sycamore Review – “Irresistible”
“Descriptions of Human Women” includes fragments of text from Michelle McNamara’s *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark*.

“Prophylactic Routine” is in conversation with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.
JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS is a poet and land use planner. Jessica is the author of the chapbook *We Were More than Kindling* (Black Lawrence Press, 2023). Readers can find Jessica’s poems in publications such as *Prairie Schooner, Pleiades, Cotton Xenomorph, Maudlin House*, and *Tinderbox*. Jessica earned an MFA in poetry at the University of New Orleans, and a Master’s of Community and Regional Planning from the University of Oregon. Her research and writing focuses on organizational, emotional, and community resilience. Jessica has worked as an urban planner, educator, GIS marketer, curriculum developer, and graduate writing consultant. She is a mental health advocate, trauma survivor, and a straight-passing queer, who spends her spare time doting on her angelic friends, handsome spouse, and ridiculous cats.
“A few hours before I ran into my rapist / at Whole Foods,” the opening clause of the poem “Promise to Recede,” captures the audacious spirit of Jessica Morey-Collins’ debut chapbook, _We Were More Than Kindling_. Here is a world where the horrific and the quotidian intersect in poems that consider human consciousness, our capacity for destruction and love, and nature through a metaphysical lens; the eco-poetics and feminism of the manuscript are inextricable from the personal lyric. Through elision, interrupted syntax, and doubling, the writing demonstrates the inadequacy of language and conveys the complexity of human experience. Lyric and rhetorical, this vital collection reflects the flux and agony of our time, for “to grow is to access a flow state from grieving, to blow each moment like a fuse.” I look forward to reading Jessica Morey-Collins for the rest of my life.

——CAROLYN HEMBREE, author of _Skinny_, and _Rigging a Chevy into a Time Machine and Other Ways to Escape a Plague_

“The poems of _We Were More than Kindling_ by Jessica Morey-Collins bring us characters with uncanny awareness of their place in the universe, whether battling hostile weather, interacting with plants, animals, and bodies of water, or recounting the perils of lived trauma. In “Passage,” the speaker remarks, “Amazing the way a tiny wound, precisely placed, can devastate. Who hasn’t aspired to a thicker skin?” These poems triumph in their ability to convey pain without flinching, sharing testimony of natural disaster and human violence, ultimately leaving us emboldened and aware.

——MARY BIDDINGER, author of _Department of Elegy_