

HOW HER  
SPIRIT  
GOT OUT

POEMS

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## **WOMEN WHO GO MISSING**

I.

I've watched women leave with nothing  
but love in their full-roomed eyes.

Walk right off their porches  
dragging their nightdresses into a night  
that knew how to mimic the dead  
they loved more than themselves.

I've seen them abandon their gardens  
not because they failed  
to coax the hearts of plants  
from the ground like magic, or because  
they didn't know what they neglected  
would overgrow and strangle, but because  
they knew if they didn't leave, they'd kill  
what they couldn't afford to nurture.

II.

Nothing plants you deep enough.  
The soil you've grown in is too much

Mama's smothering face. You gasp  
in the mulch of her strewn guts.

Some days it's easier to stare into the violent  
swinging dark and take it.

You want to stop writing to what disappears,  
open windows that look like the outlines

of black women who go missing. You understand  
Hurston's shaky shelf of fragile things,

and also what falls from it. You wish  
for Lorde's throwing knife

to hide in your hair. This world is full  
of weapons. It's hard to take care of

what comes to flower, scatters  
after a mad wind. Even your mean

great grandmother who lived to be difficult  
never knew the trees she made

from the seeds of her body were better  
than any strangled sonnet, clenched harder

than any hand working against her.  
You come from a braided clan of women

who held their tongues with their teeth.  
You tasted their blood in your sleep,

women who planted their visions  
on the tongues of their daughters.

### III.

On Askew Street, didn't she have a garden  
in the middle of concrete teeth and sirens? Didn't  
her husband sigh when she put on her boots and short-shorts  
and with her ass out toward the street give  
the marigolds a drink from the hose, fix the slouch  
of tulips? Even Mrs. Eddy tried to outgrow  
the hips of her roses, but didn't know how  
to make her soil the right kind of dress.  
Didn't the neighbors say, *How country*, and *Who*  
*this heifa think she be*? Didn't she just go about her business,  
smile at their husbands, call them ladies by their first names?  
Weren't they always a temperament of color  
she could curl her heart around, softening what made living hard?  
Wasn't it the one thing she didn't need us for? Weren't we jealous?  
We kicked their heads apart, dyed them in motor oil, blamed stray cats.  
Even then, didn't she say *Girls, I want color at my funeral*?  
Didn't we keep our promise? Didn't your purple dress  
stun the mourning out the day? You were always her Iris  
standing against a dull brick house. Sister, I couldn't tell you then.  
Aren't we here, remembering how even the bees were drunk?  
They wandered into the house like our displaced uncles. Hell, the flowers  
didn't even stay put in that small plot. Snuck out at night  
into the neighbor's kitchen windows.

#### IV.

Women in my family do not trust their dead  
to plots and cherry wood coffins. They play them  
on the inside of their eyelids when they pray.  
Projectors run their memories in blind, white light.  
Spirits fall out their mouths in scriptures.  
It's hard to tell who's speaking. They keep them in

glass jewelry boxes, locked on coffee tables.  
Frame photos of their open caskets and call them  
*Mother* and *Father*. Wear their second sight to bed.  
Converse at 3am. Call this counsel.

What the women in my family  
do with the dead is their business.  
My aunt married a corpse who built coffins in my heart.  
Told me I didn't want his dead man sadness.  
Sometimes, caught him with white marble eyes  
he let me borrow from time to time.

The women in my family give the dead  
to their daughters. My mama gave me  
her dead mother's name. I've drowned in her  
dresses, tried on her smile. My mama is looking  
for some stronger dead woman in my eyes.

I don't tell her that Grandmother comes to me in dreams.  
Grants me time in the garden of my childhood.  
Collects fears that slip from my eyes.  
They're withered peach pits when they fall  
into her waiting apron.

She shows me a place to bury them,  
near a dogwood where I buried my baby teeth.  
She promises they'll come back  
as something I can eat, a fruit so plump  
it will feed me a lifetime.  
We stare at the disturbed earth and wait,  
but I wake before the harvest,  
the squirm of trees rising in my stomach.

## ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN

I don't know how to count  
the times my father showed me how  
men hide their love, how mercy can be contained  
in quiet gestures. How many times did he  
pile too much food onto my plate, or  
pick an eyelash from my cheek  
asking me to make a wish?

Only once did he have to  
put his finger down my throat  
to make all my mistakes come back up  
on a bathroom floor. Taught me  
palms can be both cruel and forgiving  
when he pushed them into my chest,  
listened for my breath  
the same impatient way  
he listened for my lungs  
when they lifted me  
meconium-wet from my mother.

When the nurse asks me to place my pain  
on a scale of one to ten,  
I'm seventeen in a room  
of adolescent suicide artists.  
The bulimic girl that braids  
my hair like we're at a sleepover  
tells me how she did it

with a box-cutter in her garage  
while her family was at Pizza Hut.  
The goth chick says she  
learned to tie rope knots  
from Girl Scout magazines.

I grew up hiding  
matches from my mother  
so she wouldn't burn the house down.  
My father said I was just like her.  
I could let a glass slip out my hand, stare  
too hard at him or at a spider before killing it,  
could slip into her dresses and zip  
their spines up over my body without any struggle.  
I lined up barbiturates on the counter  
and counted backwards until I couldn't  
because on a scale of one to ten, how many times  
did I watch her strike a match to life  
to let its yellow head burn  
down to the tips of her fingers  
until the living room smelled like skin and sulfur,  
and the tabletop was scarred with spent  
bodies of matchsticks?

On a scale of one to ten, who cares how you measure it.  
The cheerleader says it was just an accident.  
The girl that never sleeps writes

her six-month-old daughter's name  
over and over on the chalkboard  
in the rec room like some kind  
of punishment. At some point,  
we all get sick of counting.