PASTORAL I

We long for what
We had not

A serene progression of thoughts
Intimacy with streams and clouds
At home inside the wool of cloak

Once we did not graze on each other
Spiritually against everything

Time was something you were born with, or not

In our songs, we found a dry spell
Our staffs were like harvested polls

And we moved inside a system that suffered
But never died

The undeniable necessity of land
Makes me chew through life

Living makes me spit it out
I gave my youngest sister a spoonful of oats
I gave my younger sister the chance to be good

I must lift the toilet seat to spray the grime and wipe and dig the swipe around the shit of the objects in the bathroom of the gas station and pull my ponytail through my red cap and accept the compliment, “You’re not as lazy as she said you was,” and hand the hot chicken to the woman who is three days sleepless with rage and offer to let her beat my ass with hands transformed into Swarovski crystals and eyes the color of uncooked meth

I gave my younger sister a marigold
I gave my youngest sister AI-generated perfume
I am the eldest sister and therefore a thief

I must go back to the Southside Clubhouse The city pool where the water is acrid and mine to watch from the stand the bodies browner than my own and tamed by the Lion’s Club It takes less than a whistle to summon cops Crawling up the walk reptilian sons of white hens Just to chat and glare standing under my thighs placing one pink hand near my foot the gold below the knuckle just sinews and chicken bone

I am the eldest sister and therefore wealthy

I have to man the register the mother has left to nurse her sick child and at day’s end I must find it short and alert the woman
without papers who got this job her first at 12
By saying 16 and an American citizen and though
She claims it’s my mistake I hear it in the mother’s
voice when I call But I also hear it when this woman
cries “They’ll fire me,” and I see her beads of pleas
that circle of prayers on her throat when she sobs
I’d played it before this big bow we do when risks fail
I could take this one I could afford to lose a job I’m 16
I’ve been known to make math mistakes to be high
and even to steal but we are all so innocent as clean
as the next broke girl with her plush bed of cons Her
lies The hairs she broke with a dollar store comb
are more split than leaves in a forest fire

I gave my younger sister a decent name
I gave my youngest sister bad advice

I have to unfurl the hose and drag it from kennel
to kennel spraying the shit into the drain
under the watchful sun of community service
It runs in brown rivulets and the stench is
sad sick of spirit and terrified sweet more
like an outpouring of defeat unlike the shit
of humans which is recalcitrant and brash
This summer I am not eating I am doing penance
for a petty crime Nor am I buying the tail of this
war a man speaks of as he twirls a possum
like a lasso over his head, “They don’t scare me,”
he says He tread a river of dead bodies in Vietnam

My geraniums have been decapitated
by a creature with strong flat teeth
Father flinches at amputated limbs
His sober held still and high these days

I gave my youngest sister a Bishop’s hat
I gave my younger sister a creeping blue star
It surrounded her son
like a cape of moss like the coat of Joseph
like a gasping magic breath
that made him appear golden and precious among the rot

I am the eldest sister and therefore I must sort
one paper from the next peering over an edge
Where a blonde woman on her last leg has built a palace of
beige dust in plain view of her employer Her fragile
grip on the hem of her red skirt as she tugs knit over
an unmoving chain of joints which she dragged to a corner
of an attorney’s office once and never returned From
here I can watch women behind a bulletproof lens and
tomorrow I’ll put my body between a hedge fund and
an elevator as the earth quakes her way up 32 floors
How quaint these working girls in pencil skirts around the
fountain unwrapping their lunches in 2012 calling
their moms their roommates twirling their drizzle of day pearls
turning magnificent tricks with every coffee stirrer
pinched between chrome nails Their weight loss journals
their savings their hangovers and schemes the husbands
with second families on an island our sugar daddies
our cocaine straws I’m wearing the dress she wore to
her mother’s funeral It’s black and white I keep it and
That night we dine on her dad’s credit card I remember
our need to be filled up The sound of her being penetrated
as the tranquilizers wrapped me in a mother
Remember I don’t have a mother I have another sister
I gave her a handbag on fire which she buries in the day
and exhumes at night like a firefly Coco Chanel of the frack lands

I gave my sisters rising flurries of pebbles which sumptuously
overflow their champagne flutes

I must speak to the boss over an empty desk as he
tilts in his pool of vodka and urine A buoy near an offshore
rig What can a man who has never worked teach me of
this work? So much, it seems He moves his father’s
fortune from one property to the next peninsula A building
a sale a rental an asset a liquid tide coming in with
promises and contracts leveraged against my liable farm
beset with Bo weevil And when I move my hand to my mouth
to show him how we’re living he says, “Go watch her. She’s
not like us.” So I walk to my seat and study the smooth wrist
of my friend at work every eyelash every greeting The gangster
realtor says somethings-in-it-for-me for us but what
A porky man reaches as if to strangle her neck
I pull at his haunches My friend and I scream No one
comes We don’t call the cops We call the cops and later
when the hired guard is escorting us out
she demands, “Treat me as you would treat your own daughter.”

Good news: hunger has ended in the United States!
It ended more than 50 years ago

I gave my younger sister an $18 cocktail
I gave my youngest sister microgreens dressed in preserved lemon
Ring pop yacht yacht yacht gunshot automatic
Yes I am talking about being poor in America
Suck my dick I am no longer poor I’m high-salaried
I lubricate the hinges of information design
with spit from my glands I write billions to you
Please attend would you in a cloud Every question you
put to it is gas vacuumed into cotton where it remains
Just put it up there put it right there put it where you need it
so you may always look up and feel paid floating
petted from above There is a swirl to our world
I feel it too swirly like an invisible currency
My work is seated now and dignified

Now when my sister takes the debit card
To the grocery store it will not be declined and now
when we put the cake on the table it will not be
stolen by a hungry child named after a luxury car
with golden hair Mercedes with your ashen face
Mayra with your lottery ball Monica and the slot
machines lining the street Sell them out for a degree
a seat at the bar a platform from which to blink
They say I must twist the key on some prison cells First
I must tie my ankle to a sector? Choke on it Fuck you Bye

My sister cut my hair to my shoulders where I could watch it

I must serve my duty to profit with this debt
An ever-present pile I take into my shovel and move from
One bed to another the rocks and red mulch expanding Beyond
the picnic tables I find a head bowed
over a poker like a staff which herds litter into a ballooning bag
while overhead the clouds are swollen with white wool
I could write a psalm for us just as soon as I’m returned
To my desk under the steeple of brick but I’m here
on the side of the highway on the bench in the courthouse
In a cell in a county jail There’s flour on her forearms When
the cops burst in she was making tortillas When
the car pulled out we were high on ecstasy When
they handed back my underwear I said thank you

My father said haircuts are an art
It was the first time I’d heard him say art
I gave my split ends to my sister
My daughter a scythe
THE CARROT AND THE STICK

A horse’s exasperated approach—
two strung legs lumbering, weary-wise, with knees
like acorns in a basket, or a bank clerk’s drawer, and back
legs, too, clomping toward might-as-well, might-as-well.
A girl holds out a bouquet of refrigerator rot; their eyes meet.
Every stalk she offers expired last month.
but the teeth take the wilts. Still the sway back holds.
Theirs is a courtroom tenderness—a man crying into the
scalp of the cop who killed his brother. Her apple-scented shampoo.
Sentences will be held in a rattlesnake’s mouth on a desk far away.
But here, in this wiry, golden moment of hair-sensed trust,
the bouquet girl is recorded on an iPhone patting an emaciated horse.
Watching her tan shoulder, the biteable tender,
one mistakes this gesture for something better
than a carrot on a string that will twist
through grains of autoplay, slipping a bridle
around a thousand public thumbs.
A field mouse escapes the rattlesnake’s mouth
and her gingham skirt brushes the gate, as if there’s a message
beyond this placing on a grave a carrot with a public stick that snaps,
besides reporting animal abuse to a dog catcher
with a long pole neck, in a town of oatless people and starving horses,
where crude oil and Maw Maw’s food pantry haul is off
before it gets home, spoiled as this injured land, what is happening?
Meekness is a baton traveling down a river, pausing at every dam.
Blessed are the crimes of the American poor
for they will inherit horses.
REVENGE

I brush it from my forehead
I spill it on my wrists
I pull it up in an incognito window
I smother it with soap beads
I smear it across my thigh
I watch it snail in the sunlight
It drains from a root
I wake up and take pills for it
I warned them about it
When it billowed over steeples
I took it to the treatment plant
I wiped it on closed tanks
I changed its name in LastPass
But I remembered it anyway
It expected quarterly results
It restarted with a chime
So I hummed it back to sleep
PASTORAL III

Someday child wants to sleep forever
On the job I lie down in green pastures

Now there are acres on which to become
Precious, kept, and lovely

I was given a rod so fine
So full of wrath, a lamb so plump
With a lion’s share

Wolves carried my message on their fangs
To cities where gates jingle
And slaughterhouses overflow

Money, they say, is uninhabitable

But I promise
My sheep will guard you as I have guarded them

And in this way, you’ll never owe