

RAW MATERIAL

By

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Keith Taylor and Mairead Small-Staid

For mom, Sydney, and Nana – my strong family, all women.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I use nature and the body – and sometimes both at the same time – as a lens for viewing everyday life. With these two themes serving as a baseline, these poems alternate between exploring big life events and celebrating nature and the body in their simplest forms.

This collection is divided into four sections. The first section is rooted in specific places: Northern Ontario and the American Southwest, to be exact. The second section leaps to places that can't be defined as easily – they take place elsewhere and elsewhere. The third section only mentions nature and the body sporadically in favor of discussing the family, which can arguably be tied back to both nature and the body. The fourth section is a resolution of sorts, alternating between acceptance and praise.

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SNAPPING TURTLE

Steamed Michigan August, the things
you take from me. Slicked snapping
turtle in Nevins Lake. I float

through lily pads, fingers curled
around the gunnel of a red
canoe. From shore, a shout

about dinnertime soon. I float.
Snapping turtle takes my calf
with its teeth and sinks in. I

crunch and bleed. Swim ashore
for dinner. Let the apple-shaped
bite touch the breeze and harden.

IN MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA, THIMBLEBERRIES

only grow in August. Little fire hydrants with so many seeds – always ready to burst. Red hands catch them. So many seeds that no one ever worries they won't grow again in the late afternoon of next year. My friends and I, we pick handfuls of thimbleberries and rest them on our tongues and wonder why the berries taste like jam, but not the other way around. Why they taste like they came from a jar and then landed on the bushes and why we don't mind at all. My friends and I, we come from the suburbs and drive to Michigan's Upper Peninsula in August. We eat leftover pasta from leftover jam jars on the drive up and thimbleberries once we arrive. Our hands turn red so quickly.

ADAMS TRAIL, LORAX FOREST

In early summer, we notice
the forest is gone. Someone took

it all: strong trunks, branches,
leaves that only had a few more

months until the cold. Brought
an axe and walked away, leaving

a jagged stump yard for our
young knees. We know it's bad.

We really do. It's the first time
we crane our necks and don't see

trees in northern Michigan.
Birches. Our knees prickle.

We want them back. Twinge
of tendon that someone cut.

When we feel the snap,
we run.

THOUGHTS WHILE DROWNING IN LAKE SUPERIOR

A canoe is crushing my
 shoulderblades and spine?
 Its gunnels pin my body
 to the muddy sand. Get it
 off get it off get it off.
 Lake Superior is a glacial lake.
 I forget the cold. Everything

weighs a lot here: lungs,
 sand crumbs, promises,
 their cycling swirl.
 I disregard my eyelids and
 their shutter. My hair,
 abundant tangle, swims and catches
 around what might be a canoe seat.
 (I've cut my hair since.) Waves are not
 beautiful here. Waves roll
 my vertebrae in and out,
 crackle, in and out.

My neck ploughs deeper
 into the sand-mud,
 closed mouth. I apologize
 to my skin for holding onto
 too much. I remember
 there are two other skins
 next to me: Justin, Susan.
 Their faces in the sand-mud.
 I can't reach them. Can't –

When lungs are stagnant
 for too long, they seep
 through the holes in the ribcage
 and become sand again. Ribcage,
 that series of slick skipping rocks.
 Don't spend them. Won't exhale,
 no. But Lake Superior, still
 my favorite place. Lake Superior, still.
 Serving me stagnant, chilled –
 Lake, you are courteous. Lake,
 you harden me. Lake –

You choke. You spit
your insides
out.

LAY ME IN A LANDFILL

of Mojave sage instead. Prickled
sweat beads, blue petals
on the scorched rim
of my nose. I drove to Arizona once

and wanted to sleep there forever.
It was because of all of the blue: petals
and sky and road signs vibrating against
cracked dirt. I loved it all

to exhaustion. I was a visitor.
In Arizona, there were cacti,
and next to the cacti, dumpsters.
I'd rather fill the land

with Mojave sage and dust. Fill it
with blue. Let me sleep in it
until my body belongs.

ARIZONA DRIVE, OKLAHOMA STOP

On the overnight drive to Arizona, we slice
through yellowing grasslands, only
it's far too dark to see much.
We wear our world: lycra, wool,
college sweatshirts. Airy eyelashes lifted
by caffeine. Westward promise and caffeine.
We look at each other through rearview mirrors
flecked by dark. We fill the dustbowl
with radio music, our boom voices, radio,
and move on and on to the next song.

In a gas station in Oklahoma, a woman scrubs
her knuckles in the bathroom sink, only
they don't look any cleaner. Three o'clock
in the morning: she wears a fuchsia sweat suit
but no shoes or socks. Wiry hair clutched
by elastic, wispy speech to rusting faucet.
The woman turns to me, late night dim
in fluorescent eyes, and says
"My mama taught me to clean my hands
real good."

TO THE LITTLE GIRL FROM TUBA CITY, ARIZONA

My friends and I stopped at the Sonic
on US-160 – Navajo Trail – because
the name of your town made us laugh.

You ate a cheeseburger with some milkshake sludge
at three thirty in the afternoon. Stomped in all bossy
with a purple Dora the Explorer tee-shirt, took
your seat across the room, didn't care that you came too early
for dinnertime. Maybe springtime in Arizona came too early
for you. The tall boy who looked like your brother
agreed, ordered a milkshake, drank it so feverishly
it didn't matter what flavor it was. The desert
would never get him. The desert would never
give as much relief as the milkshake
in your hands. You drank it slowly.

I ordered the number three combo meal
from across the room. The waitress said
I was being picky when I asked for a glass of water
instead of a plain cardboard cup of it. The waitress
greeted you and your brother by your names.

Right before dinnertime, you and your brother
left Sonic and jumped the fence
behind the asphalt parking lot. And you kept going,
a purple tee-shirt blaze, running in the topaz dust
toward adobe walls and roofs. Tuba City:
it sounds like it belongs somewhere else.
I looked through the fence one more time
before returning to US-160 – Navajo Trail –
but you were already home.

WHATEVER WAS LEFT

The lantern was humming and forgotten indoors.
Under the sky, we felt lakewater through our legs,
rocking us in the animalistic dusk. We found out
the pines were really spruces. It didn't matter

to our legs, to the sky – we felt like lakewater.
Stripping down to whatever was left,
it didn't matter. The spruces were really pines.
Black bears don't fight it. This is what we know:

whatever was left, we stripped it down.
Our knees' cleave and crescent. We thank them.
This is what we don't fight – black bears know this.
The air is getting darker. We run out

of thank yous – knees to chest, cleavage. Crescendo
and hold, mosquito vibrato and fade. We know
nothing is darker than air, but run out of reasons
to remember. The lantern stopped humming hours ago.

INUKSHUK

The pile of rocks has arms, legs, and a spine. It stretches
its fingers in the morning. Strokes cracked northern roads.

When there isn't another human around, it welcomes
you. Yes, you. Welcome to empty highways.

Welcome to spruce. You're used to softer bodies.
Here is the next closest thing. Here is a pile of rocks

that resembles your slicked, winding body.

IN A DREAM, YOU WENT TO FRANCE

Don't you remember? France was a blue house with honeyed daisies in the front yard. It smelled like mountains. You'd never been there before. Never crossed the Atlantic during your entire landlocked life. Once you realized this, you sputtered.

Coughed yourself awake. Paid more attention in French class. Learned all of the different ways to say you're waiting:

J'attends de venir. Des attentes. Je n'en peux plus d'attendre.
You used to hate citrus. Now, you decided you liked oranges

because they grew someplace else. Bit into a slice and felt its flower burst. Bit into it with what used to be

a snaggletooth. How your mouth used to bite and snatch. Before you knew you'd want to be anywhere else.

SMILE, LONG-WINDED

I consider you against the windowpane:
snow going wild around February
glass. And your fogging heat, beer in your sweet
hand. Balance the temperature. I decide

to photograph you against the windowpane
and more colors appear in your face. Glow.
You tame your smile. This is the beginning
of many new pictures – we pace ourselves.

My lips are red. Later that night, the lipstick
is almost gone. Almost gone, except
for the little berry of red smeared
on the bottom coast of my lip. No drink

can clean that. No kiss. Little color mark,
still there. I decide when it's gone.

RAPID EYE MOVEMENT

I've gotten really good at sleeping
quietly, eyelashes completely still
and wispy. This body
will crystallize soon. It'll find
any reason to grow blue
with stillness. To lie

in the same linen creases for hours. Lie
in the standing water of sleep,
perforated with algae instead of blue.
It isn't so simple. I'm still
trying to unearth and find
solace in this rickety body.

Once, I found a humming body
of water and tried to float by lying
on my back with my arms skyward, only I found
myself sinking further into sleep.
I held my breath and stayed completely still;
I didn't thrash at all. Underwater blue

everywhere, underwater blue.
Sometimes, I wake in my body
and want nothing more than to stay still
and fool them all. Eyes closed. It's a lie,
pretending to be serene, but sleep
is more honest than anything else I'll find.

Make no mistake: this isn't an apology. Finding
a person mumbling in their blue
dreams – finding them asleep –
is the closest way of knowing a body.
I'm a dishonest sleeper. I lie
curled, limp muscle, completely awake and still,

even when I'm not sleeping alone. Still,
under my eyelids, I try to find
a way to convince myself that this lie
is allowed. Dim air. Blue
walls. I feel the heat of someone's body
grow warm and close. I "sleep"

and grumble and reach for a nighttime blue
finger. In this way, I hold his body.
His blurry smile. My eventual sleep.

NEAR LONGYEARBYEN, NORWAY

This is where we keep our genes: in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. We build underground sanctuaries in case a global crisis occurs. Here lies chili pepper, wheat, thirty-two strands of potato. The island lacks tectonic activity. Moringa bean, canavalia rosea. And isn't that good? Nothing moves. Chilean hazel, Indian beech. There is permafrost. There is also a sealed bag of juniper seeds. The vault is far above sea level. Buckwheat and wild rice. In case we melt the ice caps.

In Norway, all government-funded construction projects must include artwork. In the Svalbard Global Seed Vault: the seawater colors of Arctic light. There are many plants that grow in the Arctic. Even still, we fill the vault with mirrors.

THE WATERING

The girl in oversized boots,
The dried northern dirt in
The boots' crevices, cracked dirt canyons, and then
The rainy, floodplained return. The next morning:
The brick, the burs, the briars, and then
The slick inlet of Lake Winnepesaukee.
The stucco clay bowl wedged in
The lake's igneous.
The forgotten piece, stucco, slippery in
The water, wave, water,
The tide and its lichen, stuck to
The clay bowl. It always comes back.
The girl takes off the boots and claims
The greening bowl. Feet in water, in
The water, the water, it always comes back.

ST. HELENA

St. Helena is a sparsely populated island located almost halfway between South America and Africa.

Even Napoleon could die on that blip of space. And he did. The end of an exile – the British wouldn't let him leave. Today, the islanders live in gorges. They kiss the highlands on either side of their dwellings. Kiss them on both cheeks. When the lightning and rains come in, they hope loudly that the evaporated ocean won't slide down the highlands and gather in the middle, where homes are. Soak the taut clotheslines and steel storm drains in the sea. St. Helena receives imports by boat twice a year. This includes people. Tourists, maybe. There are no exports. There are no alternate means of transportation, no airport. In St. Helena, there are only two arrival dates per year. There are also two departure dates. In Napoleon's memory, the islanders never got an easy way out.

NECK

That stiff overpass between head
and chain-linked spine. It's off

center now – tilted
completely to one side

and stuck. Unknown cause.
The right shoulder is a pillow.

Learn to hold an unexpected
offering. Neck, so much

slack and sway. After years
of foundation, after sharing

everything with shoulder blade
and jawline, neck has had enough.

Go find another way
to feel tall.

RAW MATERIAL

Frosted silence on
northern backroads.
Ice, slick. Driving
past spruce
for hours. A wolf
farther up the road.
A wolf closer now.
The shudder and burst
just after its howl.

LA PAZ, BOLIVIA

On Thursday night, I pick and thumb
through flights from Detroit, Michigan

to La Paz, Bolivia. Nine hundred and seventy two
dollars: Detroit to Charlotte to Miami to

southern hemisphere. The equator's hoop
and slice, my game of jump rope. I don't

speak Spanish. I still want to go. I want
to go and when I tell people, they worry.

On Friday night, I sleep in your bed
with you. I dream of dusty market shacks

and salt flats. Salar de Uyuni – no translation.
I wake up with my cheek to your chest and

the first thing you say is *South Ah-mehr-ee-ka*.
I'm not sure if I sleep talk. I'm not sure if

you worry. I'm not sure if I woke you up, body
heat to chest, not sure if I've already left.

CARNIVAL

Little girl next in line at a chocolate stand, stomach
swirling sick. Grandfather leans down, creaks,
asks her to pick out her favorite sweet. He'll buy it
for her, don't worry, don't cry. Chocolate ice cream?
Chocolate candied bunny? Please, what do you want?
Little girl can't even look at the stand. When the nausea
digests her, her hands curl back toward her body.
She grips the pink balloon tighter. Didn't even want
that opaque balloon to begin with. Didn't want anything at all.
She watches the other children parade their want
all around, letting it ripple in the greying sky.
Cloud-fuls of want. Cotton candy-fuls of want.
Little girl dreams of going to bed hungry. Dreams of
passing carnivals untouched. Dreams of
giving a saccharine pink balloon to the sky.

MIGRATION SEASON

On the way home from the Detroit Zoo,
my father bares his teeth. My mother and I, we talk
about peacocks and orangutans, their silly walk,
but my father has had enough. He pulls over
on M-10, a crocodile slicking the shoulder.

There's nothing else to do, so my mother and I
leave without him. I go home and play jumprope
on the parched driveway. Sun and perspiration
and my father is gone. Relief. I forget I have a father –
he can't slither all the way from the highway
to my driveway. Can't, he just can't, can't,

and then he does. He's sauntering up the driveway, all
sunburn and snarl. I continue to sweat – fight or flight.
One of us coming home and the other drowning in salt.

SPICY FOOD

Mother comes home around seven at night on a burnt August Saturday. Her hair is straight now, like little sister's, except the humidity goes easier on her. Mother

is wearing a faux leather jacket. She went on her first post-divorce date to the nice little Mexican restaurant just down the street. Mother

doesn't even like Mexican food. She ordered caesar salad with dressing on the side. I ask mother who kept her

company tonight and she keeps on walking to the living room to play with the cat.

Mother doesn't answer me. She swallows, says questions are

too spicy for her taste.
Mother's tongue

is already
burnt.

SMALL HAND(WRITING)

I.

My father's handwriting looked nothing like mine.
His signature was a different set
of one hundred miles per hour interstates every time he wrote
his name and no one could hold on long enough
to get through reading the whole word
Michael.

II.

Mom's handwriting is cursive – large and antique.
So is Nana's. They ask why I can't make my words
look like that. Then they ask my little sister
why she started writing the same way as me. Sister bites
less than half of an Oreo slowly and shrugs.

III.

My sister and I, our handwriting
is not the child of our parents. We were raised
on the same bubble-lettered boxes
of Kraft macaroni and cheese as everyone else, but
no kid in America could shrink words like we could.

IV.

In third grade, small handwriting was a disappearing act when the kid sitting next to me couldn't copy my spelling tests. In third grade, I wrote check-yes-or-no love notes to a boy whose handwriting was too harsh to read. I never sent the notes.

V.

Last year, there was another boy who would pick knots out of my hair to wake me up the next morning. He never saw my handwriting, either.

VI.

People tell me that my handwriting looks like a Microsoft Word font. They say I should open a thank you card business. I never know if I should thank them.

VII.

My friend asked me for my handwriting in a tattoo. The text: live. Just that word, just my handwriting, over and over on someone else's forearm.

VIII.

I'm losing track of the compliments, though
I wouldn't call them compliments anymore.

IX.

I spill coffee on pieces of paper sometimes
to make my words look more human.

X.

I tame my coarse hands
with ballet-slipper-colored nail polish.
The light pink feels as forgotten as cursive
but nothing like fast cars. The blue strain
below my knuckles feels like stronger letters.

XI.

But my hands are still small. I hike mountains
and when they're steep, I grip the cragged handholds
and let them rough my palms. I don't
hold men's hands this way. I wonder
if I could ever be held like a mountain.

XII.

When dirt coats my hands, it sleeps
behind my fingernails and only wakes up
when the fine tip of a pen scoops the earth out
to examine whichever specks are left. The pen leaves
blue ink interstates behind my fingernails.

XIII.

Dirt is smaller than my handwriting. I don't want
anything that touches my hands to feel so small.

ON PAINTING MY BEDROOM WALLS RED

At the hardware store, Molly and I buy a gallon of red paint. We avoid bright shades because of the headaches.

To strengthen my arms, I eat a stale baguette. Unhinge the color bucket and let the red spill over. I flex,

I paint. The furniture huddles in the middle of my bedroom. The walls are busy sweating. Red walls

on brown windowframes – home, you look like you're bleeding. Are you feeling alright? You're a wet

dustbowl. Slick and feverish mouth. Molly says her parents never let her paint her bedroom walls red

as a kid because of the nightmares. The synapses and their slice. If I'm having a nightmare, I know I need

familiarity. Fast. I push the furniture back against the walls even though they aren't finished clotting.

KOL NIDREI

In Jewish religious tradition, Kol Nidrei marks the beginning of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a 24-hour holiday marked by repentance, prayer, and the fast.

Every year, just before sundown
 on Kol Nidrei, father
 puts on his suit. Happy holidays
 and crooked tie. I hear he's gotten bigger
 this year, more Budweiser around the belly.
 At synagogue, I used to be only as tall as his belly. Yom Kippur
 with father – many, many years ago.
 But tonight, father goes

to synagogue alone for Kol Nidrei, three stars
 above the mosaic roof. He rocks back
 and forth and chants ancient Hebrew blessings.
 Father doesn't speak Hebrew. *Ush'vuatana lo shevuot*,
 meaning, *our oaths shall not be valid oaths*.
 Meaning he rids himself of future oath-breaking

without even knowing it. Father leaves us
 without even knowing it.

HELICASE

Family meals, the women gather

Serve delicacies for each other

Plates neatly on the tablecloth

Monitor blood sugar, salt

Trace cells, bone mass

The room is dimmed

Smells of rosemary

We're linked so wildly

Almost the same synapses

Fierce matriarch and onward

We give each other food,

Blood, salt, bone – trace it –

And disease, oh god, disease

The synapses

We fire

FERMENTATION

Consider the relief of a lack of oxygen. Diving into
a pool of not-air and basking for days. Years ago:

your lover is gone and you say you can't breathe.
You seethe like that's the end of it. Knead

your knuckles into the kitchen counter. All of this
because of a lack of oxygen. Meanwhile,

the cider bubbles in its container. Cucumbers
in their salt. Breathless energy figures itself out.

PORTRAIT OF THE RASPY MOUTH

I'm still waiting for the bridge
of my nose to harden, for my jaw

to look like it caught something
and tore through it. Long hair is

a net: rope in crayfish, pine needles, silt
stuck to stones. Walk down the dusty road

barefoot. Pick apart the fishbones and
slick them for lunch. I want a car

to drive by. Want to hitchhike, want everyone
to believe I left after I shut the car door.

Fingers curled around the door handle –
I hope they'll always look cracked. Praise

this mouth, these crooked front teeth,
praise them for removing all doubt.

WILD MEDICINE

I.

The Wilderness Medicine Training Center says
if you're hiking with your friend in Alaska
 and he gets hit by a falling ice chunk
 and he seems fine for a little while
 and his heart stops six hours later,
he's dead. In this situation,
the Wilderness Medicine Training Center says
 you should hide the body from animals,
 hike out to an Alaskan backroad,
 report the situation to the proper authorities.

II.

My mother takes her prescriptions and says
I'm young. Years ago, I went to dance classes
every day after school. I ploughed through apples
using the cores of my teeth. My mother said
I would survive fifth hour anatomy. I studied
photographs of ventricles tangled
around someone else's aorta
and felt sick.

III.

I portaged too many canoes. Carried too many
wooden parentheses on my shoulders.
Needed to get from one lake to the next.
Of all of the ways I could've injured
my backbone, I hope this is it.

IV.

The Wilderness Medicine Training Center also says
 if you're part of a search and rescue mission
 during the forty-degrees-and-raining season
 and you find a woman who's been lost for days
 and she isn't breathing
 and you put your finger to her neck to touch her pulse
 and you don't feel a single thing,
 her heart is electrically unstable. This woman isn't dead, but
 don't you dare do CPR. You'll spark her too much.
 Instead, gently cut off her cold, mountain-rain clothes
 and put her in her sleeping bag
 and carry her to the car
 and take her to the hospital – they'll give her
 warm clothing.

V.

If it's dark enough that we can watch our skin glow next to wild sweetgrasses and
 if it's almost time to burrow back into our little tangerine nylon tents and
 if you think it's a good idea to kiss me on the mouth right now and
 if I feel like the roof of my mouth may as well cave in,
 does that count as medicine?

NORTH

Warm hands don't know where to point to find north,
just up, near sky, toward wild in the north.

The woodsmen inhale all they need before dusk:
breathe trees, black tea, their lovers of the north.

Frost wanders through fingers first. They were tea temperature
once, held other steamed fingers once, but now they claw north-

bound past the Trans-Canadian Highway's final convenience
store. Pull hair and scratch goodbye and just go north

where woodsmen bite their cracked lips to fall asleep at night. Cry
under evergreen. Pine. Even morning doesn't forgive in the north.

Only some of the lakes will freeze ankles into crabapples,
root them into growing through the north

and back out again in whichever way they know how.
Pride tastes like freshwater here in the north –

wounds won't even cry when they kiss. Open up.
Nothing bites harder than another's breath in the north.

THANK YOU TO THE BODY

that ordered a cortado this morning
and was too busy listening to the barista's

caffeinated recommendations to order it
with skim milk instead of two percent. Thank you

to the digestive system that's no longer afraid
to sip two percent like a cat pawing at his morning

meal. Rap at his owner's door, quiver his whiskers –
body, you drank your two percent milk. Thank you.

And thank you to the feet that even consider Arkansas.
No one else does, for the most part, but you do. You'd sprint

there if your anklebones weren't already coated in
Michigan dirt – as if anklebones were just as much

a part of the body as Michigan dirt. Thank you to the fingers
that uproot greening heirloom tomatoes. Green are your

knees in July. Heirloom is the lakewater surrounding your
knees in July. Two Petoskey stones, twins. And what about your arms?

What about them. Everything about them. Mosquito swarm
about them, but body, you don't mind. You don't even scrape

at the bites. You'll never have to feel parasitic
twinge. Your arms are their own – thank them for this.

Your arms are for heaps of birchbark, flammable
immediately. Your arms are for heirloom tomatoes – bulbous

as fists – and canoe paddles, which also resemble your oak spine. The flank of your shoulderblades. The finishing coat.

You could finish with thanking the head, that golden bulb of lamppost or sunflower, depending on the season.

It would make as much sense as evaporation,
the fact of loon song in your ears. You could finish

with skull, and thank you for skull, for its great plains
and reverberation. For goldenrod. But thank you,

body, thank you footpath, for the mind that roots it all.

PORTRAIT OF THE TIP-TOE

Just curl your toes. Not *just* the toes –
 the whole foot, too. Cradle a lemon in your arch.
 Or an orb lined with sequins. They make lights for

 dazzle feet like yours. And beat your thighs
 into their muscle time and time again. Watch them
 as they gorge after each earsplitting jetté. Earsplitting,

 in that your feet leave and find the floor
 without making a sound. The ear doesn't understand.
 It's a dance, a jazz dance, and you move like a wolf. Sink

 into the floor, you're on the hunt,
 and arabesque skyward. Watch your leg
 tower over your ponytail. It's just a dance,

 but you're on alert. Now touch
 your curled toe to your knee, cleave
 and make space for air – for a minute –

 to breathe. Passé. The body is a series
 of triangles with the occasional kick, whip,
 in protest. The body curls, tongue around lemon,

 finally knowing the taste of self-
 made wind. You're candlewick
 curled over. Flame hit the cedar floor.

 You smolder and endure. Glissade and penché.
 People are watching. You begin the final pirouette.
 You wonder what would happen if you kept going.

YOU TELL ME ABOUT VENUS

while we walk home from the bar in January. The moon is out. I watch it shimmy and I love it for that. You tell me that Venus doesn't have a moon. Doesn't have a companion in orbit. Venus came home empty-handed and pretends not to be sad about it. You grip my red fingers tighter.

You tell me about Venus and its axis. It takes Venus two hundred and forty-three days to rotate around its own spine, meaning it takes two hundred and forty-three of our days for Venus to have one day of its own. To see the sun rise and set again from the planet's front porch, beer in smoldering hand. And it takes Venus two hundred and twenty-five days to orbit the sun, forming the length of its year. You tell me about Venus and how in its atmospheric swirl, one day is longer than one year. Every day is Venus's birthday.

(If one day was longer than one year, I'd never sleep. I'd spend all day fitting lightbulbs to the streetlight orbs because nightfall would take months. I'd keep moonsong in my throat to make up for Venus's lack of one. I'd give you as much moonsong as you want.)

Venus. Think about it. All atmosphere and volcano.

Venus. The goddess. Thick and fire.

Except Venus the goddess was born from sea foam. She calms the fire of Mars. Julius Caesar claimed Venus as his ancestor. Men come to *her*. Venus was born from sea foam and doesn't need a moon to move the tide. She can turn it all into ice. Freeze the whole planet over.

And then you tell me this: Venus's orbit is backwards. It's clockwise when every other planet is counter. The entire solar system insists that Venus has it all wrong. Venus stamps its volcano feet and slips on its smokiest shade of lipstick. Venus does what Venus wants.

You tell me about Venus while we walk home to your apartment. On our planet, a thick layer of ice is covering the snow. I detour, pull on your hand a little bit, to walk on it. With each tipsy footprint, I crunch through that ice. Through that glass. Through that atmosphere. If this is what it takes for me to feel like a goddess, then so be it.

RIVERS BECAUSE

I don't know what I'm talking about. Because my ankles love the freshwater rush and my mouth can't replicate it. My mouth – I want to make it useful. I write to try to make more rivers, but the rivers never notice.

I wring my hands in the water and look: now they're too cold to hold a pen. Now they have to hold maps and navigate. Bury themselves in muddy embankments. Let them stay there for awhile, face to the simple sun. Because I have nothing left to say, because rivers.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT HANDS

in the air? Springtime sway. We raise palms
above hair, palms above thoughts (planted kindly

by muddied fingertips), palms will take care of it.
When wrists fall limp: running with soft, airborne

hands. Fingers curled if the wind says so. Lush
underbelly of forearm meets the sun

for the first time this month. Hello.
Your shoulders are misplaced, they're skyward,

but they don't mind. Something worth praising,
worth hands, worth everything in between.

DESOLATION LAKE

Spruce is a soundboard for
mosquito swarm. Glacier water.
Wildflowers and wildflowers again.
Clap of beaver tail. Loon calls – both
the blissful and the lonely kinds. A forest
green sign at the hipbone of the highway.
A sign saying this is, in fact,
named Desolation Lake.

I sprawl across the perimeter
of the blue, bury my toes
in sediment until I don't care
if they're found. I don't know
who this poem is for. Nothing
around here does. None of these things
can understand me back.