Crossword: Trauma and the Re-Creation of Self

Lydia Hall

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Hall, Lydia, "Crossword: Trauma and the Re-Creation of Self" (2023). Undergraduate Honors Theses. 338. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht/338

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Honors Thesis

CROSSWORD:
Trauma and the Re-Creation of Self

By
Lydia Hall

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for
University Honors

Comparative Arts & Letters
December 2023

Advisor: George Handley
Honors Coordinator: Michael Call
Reader: Ann Dee Ellis
ABSTRACT

CROSSWORD: TRAUMA AND THE RE-CREATION OF SELF

Lydia Hall

Comparative Arts & Letters

Bachelor of Arts

_Crossword_ is a short story cycle consisting of five short stories set in Seattle, Washington, that revolve around a single character, named Basimah. Her experience with trauma is portrayed through a magical realist mode and explores themes of selfhood, language, art, absence, and presence. These five stories are a representative sample of a larger project which contains twenty-six stories, one for each of the clues to a crossword. The crossword acts as an organizing agent and one of three creative constraints which structured the creation of each story. The short stories are titled with a clue from the crossword puzzle with the answer included in the story’s text. In addition to the stories themselves, this thesis includes story notes detailing the process of writing each story, including the use of allusions, explanation of metaphors, and literary influences. The process of writing these stories taught me the short story form and allowed me to experiment with narrator, voice, style, and genre while keeping the scope manageable. This process also helped me to heal from my own encounter with trauma and find my mature artistic voice.
This page is usually called “Acknowledgements” but that has always felt formal and a bit begrudging to me. So, I have renamed it “Gratitudes” because that is what I want to express to the many people who have guided me, taught me, and shaped me, both in the process of writing this thesis and in my life during said writing. All of them were indispensable.

First, to Dean, my husband, the love of my life. Thank you for taking care of me. Your love and support buoyed me up when I was sinking and helped me through the darkest times.

To my parents, who never doubted I would do it. You gave me books for every birthday, took me to the library, and weren’t surprised when I said I wanted to write books as a career.

To my siblings, for wildly cheering me on, even if you are not exactly sure what it is I do.

To the writers of H.E.L.L, Hannah, Emma, and Lyndsey. Each of you read many drafts of these stories and gave amazing feedback every time. You helped me cut sentences I loved but didn’t make sense anymore and didn’t balk when I asked you to read the whole thing, again. Truly, these stories would not exist without your support and cheerleading.

A special thanks goes to Lyndsey, the first person I show my writing. Thanks for telling me that “Edible Decapod” worked when I freaked out about this strange thing I was writing.

To Crystal, who showed me that there's more than one way forward. Thank you for helping me find myself again.

To George Handley, professor and mentor. You shaped the trajectory of my humanities and Honors experience during the course, “A Sense of Place.” I see the trees, shrubs, flowers,
and creatures different than I did before. Thank you for your example of faith, gratitude, and dedication and thank you for your guidance as I worked on this project.

To Ann Dee Ellis, reader extraordinaire. I am not sure what you were expecting when I came to your office during the first week of classes this fall semester, but I am so grateful that you agreed to be my reader. Your expertise and care for my work and the work of my classmates exemplifies what it means to be a good teacher.

To Michael Call, I am a gamer because of you. I don’t know if I would have seen a crossword as a possible story if I hadn’t taken your class. Thanks for shepherding my project between the Honors Program and Interdisciplinary Humanities.

To whoever left that book of time fillers in the office, I owe you one.

And finally, to God, my first example of what it means to be an artist. You who gave me my life. You who carried me through the fear, the pain, and the heartache. You who set me on my feet and told me that I could create again.

All my love,

Lydia C. Hall

November 28, 2023
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title........................................................................................................................ i  
Abstract.................................................................................................................... iii  
Gratitudes................................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents.................................................................................................... viii  
Table of Figures...................................................................................................... viii  
Introduction........................................................................................................ 1  
Methodology.......................................................................................................... 2  
  Fiction and Trauma................................................................................................... 2  
  Creative Constraints............................................................................................... 5  
  Story Cycles.......................................................................................................... 8  
Crossword................................................................................................................ 12  
  “Edible Decapod” ................................................................................................. 13  
  “Fruit Pulp” ......................................................................................................... 19  
  “Shelters from Light” ............................................................................................ 25  
  “Carnivorous Bird, Such as the Eagle” ................................................................. 30  
  “Type of Makeup” ............................................................................................... 36  
Outcomes............................................................................................................. 44  
Story Notes........................................................................................................... 47  
Works Cited.......................................................................................................... 56  
Appendix 1........................................................................................................... 57  
Appendix 2........................................................................................................... 57

# TABLE OF FIGURES

High-Speed Crossword............................................................................................. 12
Introduction

In August 2021, while at work, I flipped through a book of word and number games that someone had abandoned on a shelf in the corner. On a whim, I took a picture of a blank crossword puzzle before I left for the day. I had a vague idea about using the crossword as a starting point for a story, though I wasn’t sure what kind of story. That moment of serendipity evolved into a huge writing project, one that pushed my capabilities as a writer, editor, and human being.

I put the picture on a document and labeled it “Crossword, contemporary experimental” along with a few preliminary thoughts. At that point, all I knew was that I wanted it to be radically different from anything I had done before and that I wanted it to be set in the modern day. In January 2022, I revisited the document and decided to write a short story based off the first clue I solved. Thus, was born “Edible Decapod,” the first story in this collection. The direction of the project wasn’t yet clear, but I decided to go on writing one short story a month, each one inspired by a crossword clue until I figured it out. Reader, a so-called “High-Speed Crossword” took me two years to complete.

Crossword is a collection of twenty-six short stories exploring the themes of selfhood, language, art, absence, and presence set in and around the city of Seattle, Washington. In this thesis I have included a representative sample of five short stories. Each short story is titled with the clue of a crossword puzzle. The answer lies buried in the story, sometimes a key prop and sometimes mere set dressing. These stories exemplify the best response I have for the breadth and depth of human art and life I have encountered as a student of the humanities. Crossword is my first addition to the conversation that enfolds me each day.
Methodology

_Fiction and Trauma_

As I explored Seattle, my characters, and their stories, themes began to arise. Motifs and metaphors reappeared time and again, characters grappled with their circumstances, fought to change them, worked to accept what they could not change. In each story, the character’s problems were outsized, and demanded a more expansive telling than a realist depiction of the events would portray. Since _Crossword_ started primarily as an exploratory project, I allowed my writing to turn towards the bizarre, the surreal, and the magical real. Some of my primary influences during this project were Franz Kafka, Frida Kahlo, Clarice Lispector, and Eduardo Galeano (see Appendix 1 for a more complete list of influences). Each of these author’s works straddles the boundaries between genres, forms, and modes, pushing against the constraints of language and of structures to communicate trauma—indescribable pain that is nonetheless real. As the themes of _Crossword_ deal with trauma and its effects, turning to a magical realist mode of expression fit the story I was trying to tell.

For the purposes of this thesis, Magical Realism is defined using primarily scholar Amaryll Chanady’s _Magical Realism and the Fantastic_. Both thorough and concrete, Chanady’s definition becomes a useful analytical tool. Chanady reviews and synthesizes the work of European and American scholars including Luis Leal, Angel Flores, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and ultimately rejects the commonly held belief that magical realism is a genre or movement inherent to Latin America, though notes that Latin American writers have produced a significant body of magical realist work. She postulates that Magical Realism is a narrative mode in which the fantastic and the real coexist without enmity within the narrative, even when they are directly contradictory (Chanady 24-25). The real and fantastic elements are
often correlated with two opposing, or seemingly opposing worldviews—early examinations of magical realism (Carpentier) claim that Latin America is seemingly magical when compared with a European worldview. For the narrator and characters of a magical realist story there is no difference between these two juxtaposed worldviews. Further, no explanation or special notice are given to the fantastic elements in the story; they are treated equally with the real. This refusal to explain or differentiate between the real and the magical forces the boundaries of reality to swell and shift to accommodate the fantastical elements. Unbound by the limits of realism and realistic depiction, fiction becomes a crucial vehicle to understanding and truth. It focuses on the minutiae of life and explores the assumptions that we make in order to live. The magical realist fiction I strive to emulate in *Crossword* is dense with meaning, profoundly human, and deeply emotional—undeniably real no matter how fantastic it may seem.

The stretching of reality to accommodate for the unreal or fantastic elements mirrors the relationship between trauma and reality, where trauma is equated with the outsized, inexplicable elements that nonetheless exist, integrated with the real. Trauma, like the fantastic, is often unbelievable and irreconcilable, and yet, must be believed and must be reconciled. Trauma occurs not in the experience itself, but in living through the experience and being unable to understand it (Marstine).

Both physicians and scholars have pronounced trauma to be a particularly thorny issue, thus my definition of trauma is twofold. The first definition is medical, summarized from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) which includes updated diagnostic material for PTSD. The abbreviated definition is as follows: PTSD occurs after exposure to actual or threatened death, injury, or sexual violence, and includes the presence of intrusive memories, flashbacks, dreams, etc., avoidance of stimuli associated with
the traumatic event, negative alteration in mood and cognition (amnesia, negative self-beliefs, self-blame, detachment, depression, etc.), and alteration in physiological responses (anger, self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, etc.) (Pai).

In addition to these criteria, the DSM-5 includes an addition that specifies that the patient may experience dissociative symptoms, either depersonalization—“Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body”—or derealization—Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings—or both. In researchers David F. Tolin and Edna B. Foa’s study of the effects of PTSD on the self-schema, they identified how faulty connections between stimulus and stimulus, stimulus and meaning, and stimulus and response create pathological fear structures in the trauma victim. Seemingly random stimuli become linked with feelings of danger, incompetence, or fear; these associations don’t accurately represent the world and often lead to insecurity, self-doubt, and other negative self-beliefs (79). These medical criteria set clear parameters for a notoriously difficult to define malady and exist in the realm of the real.

That examination necessitates a transposition of the medical definition of trauma to a literary one—the real to the unreal. I draw from a variety of sources, notably Cathy Caruth’s Trauma: Explorations in Memory. Caruth points to how trauma exceeds the limits of standard representation. In her words, trauma is not possessed knowledge, but knowledge that possesses. Trauma’s power stems from its absence, its lack of registration. When traumatic events occur, narrative often falls short of the ability to express it and simultaneously insists on expression. Just as trauma disrupts normal life, fantastic elements disrupt realistic fiction; both create ripples in perception, identity, and reality. Through unreality, an unfathomable reality is accessible (Caruth 4-5). Magical Realism is what Caruth might call antirealist representation, movement
outside of the typical or expected boundaries of narrative when realism fails. By integrating the fantastic with the real, magical realism allows for events that push us beyond our ability to understand, to be understood. In the push and pull between truth and “fiction” is the crux of human existence. It’s the point that all good fiction aims for. When I put pen to paper that is the point I aim for. The flexibility of fiction and the constraints of the short story form allowed me space to experiment, fall short and revise myself into intelligence.

Writing, particularly fiction, and particularly magical realism, has been my greatest tool in understanding and integrating my own experiences with trauma. As my characters worked through pain, confusion, denial, fear, dissociation, and creative blocks, I also worked through those things. My fiction is not autobiographical, and in this way, it is more truthful; their stories are not what happened to me, but what happened to them. Their resolutions are their own. Yet, they are also mine. During the drafting process, each character developed from the particular mix of literature, theory, and personal grappling that occupied me. In revisions, I explored, deepened, and uncovered further nuance and clarity about who these characters were and what they were trying to say about trauma, identity, art, absence, and presence.

*Creative Constraints*

As a discovery writer, one of my biggest conundrums is how to balance my need for structure with my creative process. On one hand, outlining creative works stifles my ability to let the story develop naturally and allow the characters to speak for themselves. On the other hand, a story quickly becomes directionless, rambling, and boring without the movement provided by plot. In a short story, that balance becomes more precarious, as the word limit shrinks. There simply isn’t enough space to explore ideas in the same way that a novel does. So how does one
come up with an interesting idea, but one that can be explored meaningfully in 3000 words or less? How does one create a compelling arc in such a short space?

As a newcomer to short fiction, creative constraints were an effective tool to explore the form and develop ideas that fit within a short story's requirements. The creative constraints that I imposed structured my task such that I could begin. Their specificity narrowed my focus and the scope of the stories I could tell from infinite to a manageable twenty-six. My creative constraints are as follows: 1) All the stories are set in Seattle, Washington, 2) Every story connects in theme and in characters to the others, and 3) Each story is titled with a crossword clue and incorporates the answer to that clue within the story.

With a project like Crossword, that is born from a specific set of rules, those rules run the risk of being arbitrary, restraining the project rather than enabling it. To that end, two of my three constraints were chosen with the goal of interweaving the stories like the words of the crossword are interwoven; as you understand one story the other stories become more clear. Those constraints ensured that the group of stories would work together as they evolved and create an overarching sense of place and a familiarity with the characters and themes that permeate the collection. When I needed to find a character, I considered the characters I had already introduced and then extrapolated. Did they have family members or friends who I could explore? Are any of the side characters worth looking into? The stories with shared characters created a space to explore the relationships between those characters from multiple vantage points and at various stages of life, and when taken together allow the reader to imagine what might have happened in between the events of each story. The reader’s extrapolation becomes part of their individual experience and contributes to the larger story that the collection tells.
My third creative constraint—the crossword—acted as a writing prompt, a set of words that sparked an idea without dictating the details. The crossword clue was a challenge: how can I seamlessly incorporate the answer to this clue? What kind of a story would have this word in it? What kind of a character would use this word? Why? When? Pondering those questions in tandem with the words themselves guided my brainstorming session at the beginning of each month. For example, when I was struggling to find an idea that matched the story “Blow Delivered by an Open Hand” (Slap) I wrote down each of the words of the title and then listed all the things that came to mind when I thought about that word (see below).

Blow: guns, cannons, sex
Delivered: children, childbirth, nursemaid, midwife, women motherhood, gift, food
Open: doors and windows, mind, heart, closed, ajar, cracked, escape, pandora, where is the blame?
With: whom it lies?
Hand: fingers thumb, hold, write, play instruments, mandolin, rings, jewelry
Slap: sound, sensation, emotion

I found several interesting components that, paired together, developed into the final story. For other stories, the title/clue immediately connected to ideas I was already turning over in my head and blossomed into a story. By the time I was writing story twenty-two, I felt confident in the short fiction form: knowing how to pace the story, knowing how much ground I could cover, the size and shape of a short story idea, and which characters I still wanted to explore. The third constraint also solved the problem of titling the stories, something I have always struggled with.

I began the process of writing the stories by finding one answer at a time, which continued for the first six months. However, finding answers to the crossword as I went proved to be unwieldy, especially since I only had a picture of the crossword and not the paper version,
so I couldn’t write down the words and see the puzzle solved. Eventually, I drew out a grid and created a paper version of the crossword to be able to solve it all at once. I listed the answers as I found them and continued writing the stories in that order.

Crossword is all about the places where things connect, and how those connections compile to make larger shapes. The connections between words, characters, locations, and themes form the contour of the collection. That contour mirrors the way that the stories were brought to pass, that is, by connection. I was the one typing, but dozens of people and hundreds of sources ringed my table. When I read my own work, I can see the fingerprints of other people.

*Story Cycles*

When I began writing, I called my project a short story collection, which, though accurate, wasn’t the best definition. What I wrote is a story cycle, a term that I didn’t discover until I was finishing the first draft of the collection. I came across it while reading the introduction to *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, which led me to research the form and helped me to organize my work. Drawing from scholar Susan Mann’s *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* and Margaret M. Dunn and Ann R. Morris’s *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, a story cycle is defined as a literary work composed of shorter texts that stand individually, but whose interrelations create a deepened reader experience when considered as a whole (Morris et al. xiii, 1; Mann 12). Unlike chapters in a traditional novel, which generally build on each other in a chronological progression, each individual story in a story cycle functions as an independent unit with a beginning, middle, and end. Though chapters in a traditional novel may jump abruptly in viewpoint, setting, or time period, the transition between chapters are rarely as demanding as the transition from one self-contained short story to the next (Mann 12).
The Story Cycle, or composite novel as Dunn and Morris call it, has roots in *The Thousand and One Nights, The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Decameron*, but matured as a form in the nineteenth century (Morris et al. Ch. 2). Contemporary examples include *Dubliners* by James Joyce, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, and *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros. Dunn and Morris identify and explore several possible organizing principles for a composite novel or story cycle. These are a common setting or geographical area, a single protagonist (which can also be the narrator), a collective protagonist, recurrent patterns, and the process of fiction making itself. In *Dubliners*, the city of Dublin as well as recurring symbols and metaphors connect Joyce’s stories. In *The House on Mango Street* it is the main character Esperanza’s voice that unites the vignettes to create a picture of her experiences growing up. In my collection, *Crossword*, a common setting and a central group of themes, as well as a focus on the process of creating and interacting with art unite the stories. For the five stories included in this mini cycle, I chose a central protagonist, who sometimes doubles as the narrator, as an additional organizing element that binds the group more tightly together.

**Common Setting**

Like Joyce, I chose a city—Seattle, Washington—as the location of my collection. Within that city, I created a street cobbled together from my hazy memories of visiting Seattle as a child. On that street I imagined a cafe and a market and a bookstore and a little further away, a church. The significance of Seattle is that there was seemingly no significance. I visited the city once, for a few hours at ten years old, and only stepped foot there again in summer of 2023 because of generous funding from the Honors Department to visit the places I was writing about. The dreamlike quality of my memories from that day teased me, enticed me, and begged me to explore it. It was exactly the kind of mystery I love, one that you make up as you go. This
common setting became my playground, a place where I could bend the reality of Seattle to the unreality of my memory, simultaneously remaining true to the physicality of the city and to my own understanding of its meaning. As Dunn and Morris discuss in chapter three, the setting is a frame of reference for the reader so they can “register meaning and establish connections during the act of reading (or rereading) the text.” Seattle and the settings I invented, particularly the Rubicon Cafe, as well as the characters who inhabit them, give the reader a space to join the story. They watch the events of the stories as if seated by the fire or looking out the window. Each story contextualizes the next to create an image of the cold wet city and the contrasting warmth the cafe provides.

Protagonist

In chapter four, “Rites of Passage: protagonist as focus in the composite novel,” Morris and Dunn discuss how the evolving voice of a central protagonist/narrator unifies the composite novel. They explore The Woman Warrior at length, explaining: “the five titled sections, which seem to focus on five different people, do indeed have a single protagonist around whom the stories cohere…thus The Woman Warrior itself is really its author’s quest for self-identity.” Likewise in my collection, the five titled stories are united by a central protagonist, called variously the woman, her, and by her name, Basimah. The psychic distance of the narrator moves closer as the collection evolves starting with the separate entity of the ghost narrating “Edible Decapod.” The narrator moves physically closer in “Fruit Pulp” as the story follows a pear tart being digested by Basimah. The story shows the reader Basimah’s insides but leaves her psyche one layer removed. The third person narrator of “Shelters from Light” is “the woman” but observing herself from a great psychic distance. Finally, she narrates in first person twice. First in “Carnivorous Bird, Such as the Eagle” where her identity feels foreign and undesirable to
her and her detachment from her body conflates her with the ghost that narrates “Edible Decapod.” Finally, in “Type of Makeup” Basimah settles in her Self and narrates more comfortably in the first person, while reflecting on her past experiences, which are told in a close third person to simulate memory. Basimah’s struggle to find identity and wholeness after trauma, her experiences with continuing pain and dissociation from self and the present, her passage through time and through trauma, and the moment of recognition, connection, and healing—these bind the collection as one. Like The Woman Warrior, the evolution of Basimah’s voice over the stories in Crossword reflects her process of re-finding and recreating herself. The final unity of the protagonist, when the ghost and the woman are revealed to be one and the same, is the culmination of the journey portrayed in these pieces.
Figure 1: High-Speed Crossword, unknown book, 2021
Edible Decapod

I am doing a crossword, that most contrived of all vocabulary puzzles. I say ‘doing,’ but my pride and my condition prevent me from writing the words even when I figure them out.

Pen in hand, capped, I perch with the folded newspaper that she left behind. I sit alone in a half-sized booth with coffee stains on the tabletop. I often float around the inside of Rubicon Café but always return to this admirable maximization of space. I like the whirring of the air vent that runs behind the wall; hearing it, I pretend to feel the heated air as it rushes along beside me.

If I let myself dissolve, I could sneak up into the vent and find out which direction it’s moving. Is it wicking cold air away or sucking hot air up from some unseen furnace of affliction to ward away the wet chill outside?

A gaggle of “tourists” surprise their way into the building with bulging shopping bags and children in tow, making loud exclamations about the rain and the wet and the cold and all the things that they should have known they were going to feel. I return my gaze to the crossword; I had hoped it would be her.

I mouth the next answer, move my pen across the paper and the word glows, nestled in with the others on the blank page. The barista calls an order, not mine. I can’t drink coffee, not as a ghost. I suppose I could have before, but I don’t remember before.

She can though. She lives and breathes and drinks coffee.

My pen tip traces circles across my tidy explanations for disconnected clues. Words can be made to fit together in ways that people cannot replicate, and vice versa. A “she” and an “I” can never overlap, yet somehow, she and I could. “She” and “I” are also never found in crosswords, so my point is moot.
I spend my days sitting in the half-booth, watching the door through the big bay window, waiting for her to return. I can always tell when she’s on her way. During those precious minutes when she’s here, the warmth of the fireplace and the chill of the wind reach me. I have a body again when she’s nearby. My lungs don’t ache so much, though I cannot breathe.

The “tourists”—from California, on their way through Seattle to visit some relative named Marlin who lives in Vancouver, the Canada side—make noise at the register, so much noise that the tiny silver bell that hangs above the door is muffled when she comes in. At least, that’s what I tell myself. I tell myself the reason I never hear the bell when she enters is because it’s always crowded here, or because the barista knocked over one of the coffee machines, or because the mild Chinese lady who owns this place lost her temper over the phone and shouted some rather nasty things.

She came in, regardless of the bell that didn’t signal her presence. We are in the same physical space yet unable to interact, lovers on Keats’ Grecian Urn. When she is here, I feel my absence acutely.

Her name is Basimah, and the moment when the barista calls it—bright and loud over the din—is the sweetest moment of each day. I imagine sometimes that the barista calls my name, calls me “sweetie” or “hon” like the regulars, or even “sir” or “ma'am” like she calls the tourists.

Basimah hooks her umbrella on the rack. The gold inlay on the handle glints and water sluices down the black fabric, pooling in the shallow container below. Her black hair is tucked inside her coat, bunching at the wide collar. A little girl standing sullenly at the edge of the tourists (her mother having given up on coaxing her to pick a pastry) notices her too. A good sign; I’m not the only one mute and captivated.
The only person who interacts with her is the barista, and that’s a conversation of few words. Basimah has mastered the art of silence, not in the way that I wish these tourists would, but in the way that I wish I could: communicating everything in a single look or nod or casual flutter of fingers. To be precise and inscrutable, to be a mystery, rather than a blank.

I am a blank, an absence, an empty crossword puzzle. I think I was a woman once, but I can’t remember. I only remember how much it hurt to become a ghost. I only know that pain eases when she’s here.

That’s why I can’t get away from Seattle; because of her. She has substance of some kind. A kind that science side-eyes, angry that an anomaly in the theory of matter exists.

She waits patiently behind the tourists who are trying unsuccessfully to coordinate their orders. The contrast between her sleek elegance and their messiness both annoys and amuses me.

The tourist mother returns to coaxing her child. When she kneels, the full, rain-soggy plastic bag in her hand that says thank you/thank you/thank you/thank you in alternating overlapping red and white, rests against the ground. It shudders. Crustaceans’ claws poke from the plastic, twitching. Salt and decay disturb the café. I start forward as Basimah frowns. Death, and the tourists brought it.

The little girl takes her eyes off Basimah and fixates on those tapping pinchers with a look of horror and disgust that her mother misinterprets as disrespect. A sibling sees the interaction, grabs the offending child by the back of her pink hood and says, “The crab, Mom. She doesn’t like that you killed it.”

I love the twisting expression on the face of adults who realize they’ve set a bad example. The mother launches into a sputtering explanation about crab and shrimp and how fish are food
and it’s okay if they die, as she ushers her daughter to the side furthest from me. This is quite a lot of philosophical concepts to give a child.

I wonder if somewhere in the memories I no longer have, someone told me those same things. “It’s okay that it’s dead. It’s okay that I killed it, this once living thing.” I suppose I would have mourned learning that lesson, as the little girl does now.

“Next!” The barista calls.

With a child’s crisis in the background, Basimah steps up to the register. I wait. Wait. My pen stills on the page. The moment her hands leave her pockets, I stare at the skin, hoping to see the light shine through it, hoping to see her substance, down to the atoms she is made of. Under the line of fluorescent pendant lamps the two hands conduct their three-step dance, trading coffee for cash for change.

The tourists uselessly complain about the passage of time. They’ll soon be late for the next of a series of pre-planned destinations. How lovely it would’ve been if they stuck to that list and hadn’t ventured across the street from the market for coffee! If they don’t go before she does, they will have wasted my only time with her. I can’t even complain properly, the way they are—checking watches and phones, and kicking the baseboards with muddy shoes.

I stare at her, unseen. Am I condemned to forever witness and never partake? To sit with the coffee rings and wonder if they are cappuccino or macchiato?

The bell clangs sharp and loud over the tourists' heads as mother, father, little girl, siblings, and sundry relatives head out one after another, hoods up, opening a bobbing line of umbrellas as they go. The little girl looks back, a tear streaking down her face, before she disappears.
They go, they go, they went. She will go. I can’t follow her. This café is the only plane that allows for our coexistence; the one smooth porcelain surface that paints us both as equals, though I am but an outline and she, the finished art.

The barista says, “Here’s your coffee. Have a nice day.”

Basimah turns. Not away from me as usual, but towards me. Her eyes find mine. I flinch to know my emptiness is in them.

She sees me.

I catch fire. Not some slow and building burn, not a flicker or a candle. I am a bonfire charring the wood from brown to black, raising the temperature of the room by half. I wonder how I can burn when I have no substance, no fuel. Yet the flames are clearly licking up my legs and growing from my shoulders. Perhaps the fire is eating my clothes instead and I’ll be left naked before her eyes. Perhaps her gaze would fill my empty husk with meaning since she has enough and to spare.

If the tourists had stayed, they would’ve been burned, covered with smoke, caught in the searing creases of carbon dioxide and sparking whorls of oxygen blazing from her mouth. Then they really would’ve been late. But perhaps the fire would’ve warmed the little girl, soothed the coldness of her pain. I press the pen and the newspaper into the coffee stains and reach my hands out to warm them.

She doesn’t startle when I lift my hands, merely takes a spoon from the utensil cup on the counter and stirs her coffee. Gobsmacked, I watch her raise the spoon to those uneven lips. Her mouth edges up into a smile. She’s still looking at me. I’m still looking at her.

Mouth closed; I taste blood. I taste salt. I taste coffee as I breathe in for the first time in years.
Her lips open as the spoon slides out and she exhales. An instinctual gasp catches the tail of her breath and drags it into my lungs. Her face twitches and she looks away. The moment ends. She’s at the door, out the door, walking away, umbrella in one hand and coffee in the other.

My hands are still lifted, frozen between a wave goodbye and a call for help. Surrounded by cinders and guilt for the fullness in my lungs, I could survive on this single breath for days. Swim to the ocean floor without a tank of air or the least sensation of pressure. But I can’t hold her substance hostage. Do I leave her breath here in the café? No, outside.

Pen and puzzle, empty spirit full of human breath, I pull myself closer and step to the edge of the café. I can go no further. When the door swings open again, I let her breath plume out of my body, white steam returning to its home.

I take two steps back into the café, and something crunches under my foot. I flip my shoe to see what I’ve crushed, then knock it away sadly.

Shrimp.
Fruit Pulp

The pear knows who will eat it before the server does. It sees the woman sitting, raincoat draped over the chair behind her, boots flat against the floor and even with each other. Her body is a stack of parallel lines. Ankles, knees, hips, the Doric spinal column supporting the cross bar of the shoulders. Her arms form the evenly balanced scales of libra. She’s beautiful.

The pear wishes the server would hurry, walk with a little more confidence. Beside the plate that the pear sits on, the teacup rattles on its saucer.

“Basimah?” The server says as he approaches the table with tart and tea. He shifts the platter, and Basimah momentarily slides out of view, replaced by the server’s red beard and blonde eyebrows.

The pear doubts for a second that she’s the one who will eat it, but then the server lifts the pear’s plate off the tray and sets it down. The pear hopes the woman likes what she sees: a pear tart with thin caramel filaments resting on a perfect puff of whipped cream. It hopes that she will enjoy eating it.

The pear only half listens as the humans talk over it. The server says, “That’s a cool name. Where is it from?”

“Thanks. It’s Arabic.” The pear thinks she looks like her name too, smiling. It wishes it could smile back.

The pear’s repose is no longer restful. It waits heavily, almost intoxicated by the anticipation of mastication. It’s dreamed of this moment from the moment the flower dropped from the tree and the fruit began to swell. Its curiosity sweetens the tart.

When Basimah turns her face towards the tart with appreciation for its artistry, the pear glows with pride.
“Nice. Mine is Celtic,” The server offers.

To the pear’s dismay, her eyes flick away to his nametag. “Dylan.”

“That’s me. Can I get you anything else, Miss Basimah?”

“That’ll do it for now.”

The tart is warm from the oven, warm enough that the whipped cream is starting to melt where it sits. The pear worries that she’ll leave it too long and it will be a pool of white seeping into the perfectly flakey crust, ruining it. But then she flicks a dab of cream onto her fork with artisanal grace and pops the morsel into her mouth. The caramel threads crackle quietly, muffled by the soft pillow of cream on her tongue. She sighs. The pear sighs too, watching her, the slender jaw and uneven lips.

The crust brittles and breaks as she slices it with the side of her fork. The first incision. What a beautiful place to be dismembered once again, to meet the end of all creation, digestion through a larger system. The fork is a beautiful instrument, elegant, even keeled with its pairs of prongs and sweeping handle. The tines enter the folded leaflets of pear and sugar and lift a bite to the waiting mouth. Surely Basimah’s inside is as beautiful as her outside.

The pear that met the first death under the knife this morning in the kitchen were country bumpkins, lacking sophistication or opinion on the world they were a part of. Now they lie snug against each other in a butter shell, baked but not burned, soft but not mush, perfectly poised, elevated from the proletariat. The pear, though slightly under ripe when it entered the bakery the previous day, was pleased to have reached the peak of its sweetness and flavor.

When it entered her mouth, dropping in between her teeth, it left its humble beginnings and swelled, becoming sophisticated, mature. It feels Basimah smile as she chews.
Saliva smooths over her tongue as the pear is reduced, decreasing so she can increase. It comes to know each molar and taste bud on cordial terms, the warmth of her welcome and the vibrations of gustatory pleasure fading as the teeth get down to the business of chewing. An intimate experience to be inside Basimah’s mouth and shock her palate, sugar her tongue, influence her chemical makeup as the pear is digested.

Sooner than expected, her tongue pulsates, and the bolus moves to the back of the throat, brushing by the epiglottis without so much as a hello. The pear had dreamed of becoming a tart, of consumption and reincarnation while it grew on the branch. It overheard the orchard keeper talking of canned pears and pear pies and it longed for the chance to be plucked, ripe and ready for eating. To be eaten was a better fate than the short fall from branch to earth, absorbed dully into the mother ground without ever having transformed. Yes, the pear dreamed of it, but it hadn’t dreamed beyond the mouth. The pear wonders what more there is to learn.

Fear and excitement build as the light fades behind the bite of pear. It falls behind her trachea, into pulsing darkness. It will never see her blood, though it longs to, but it feels the steady rhythmic thumping of heart within chest as it convulses along. A journey of ten inches, a sudden startling vibration as the bite of pear passes through the diaphragm. The pear tart considers the vulnerability Basimah exposed by eating it. What is more intimate than to swallow knowing she could choke?

And there is a dim reddish light. Enough to see a sip of coffee spinning in lazy circles in the gulping acid of the stomach.

But there’s no time to be absorbed into these new surroundings because more of the tart follows, pushing through the breach like Basimah’s life depends on it.
The pear fragment, having left behind its modest beginning when it left the kitchen, is upset at the suddenly cramped conditions. It turns this way and that, trying to find some place on the stomach wall where it can be a wallflower and allow the rave to happen center stage, without its participation. This wasn’t in its plans.

Time stretches and contracts peristaltically. It may have been minutes or it may have been hours or it may have been minutes or it may have been hours. The pear fragment struggles against the acid, twisting away. If this is transformation, it no longer wants it. The pear wonders if it can go back the way it came, but that path is blocked.

The pear feels itself disintegrating, breaking apart. It begs, but the acid forces it to submit. Basimah’s stomach brooks no argument, though she herself diffuses contention with a bourgeois touch. Soon it will be nothing but puree, mixed with everything else.

It wonders what Basimah is doing, if she remembers the pear in her stomach or if she is unaware as she travels, in a taxi, up stairs, and down. The pear hopes she thinks of it, but the only hint of the outside world is when water washes into her stomach, diluting the acid in a moment of tender relief. The pear fragment remembers, in its agony, the rain washing over the tree that brought it forth. It sighs and dissolves a little more. Perhaps this pain was earned, for wanting something more.

Beaten down and eager to be through the stomach, the puree that was once pear finds its way into the intestinal tract. Theseus, yes, but Basimah is no Ariadne.

This labyrinth will take no prisoners. The pear enters hesitantly, passing around the long, curved hallway that twists around the pancreas. It jumps back as the gallbladder squirts purple fluid into the darkness. Two presses forward and one push back—The pear aches, pressed from all sides.
For a place inundated with liquid from all sides, it is excessively dry. Arid waving hairs draw in the pear’s liquid, leaving it parched and fainting. Hot and dusty, this desert of the digestive tract.

This is nothing like the heat of summer days that birthed the pear when it ripened under a kind and golden sun. This is sweltering, suffocating, siphoning all the water there is to spare and then more. Basimah requires everything. In this furnace, the pear repents of its pride and longs for the cool comfort of grass, with only bruises to show for ever having lived.

Were the moments of splendor worth the pain of digestion? The destruction? The pear wonders, what will it be, if anything, after the refined extraction of every possible nutrient through a series of increasingly convoluted tubes?

The pear realizes then that it is forgotten. That it was never more than a diversion, a moment of pleasure, that it offered itself without realizing what it meant to be eaten. It realizes through muffled sounds and sensations that Basimah travels, sleeps, wakes, walks, drinks, laughs, smiles, while the pear waits in misery for the next step.

Flattened, pounded, compressed, the pear waits. It cannot see the way forward, nor the way back. The wait becomes eternal. While waiting, the pear is always waiting, an open-boundary system, where the tiniest fractions of time are explored to their furthest extent, ever smaller and ever more infinite. Until the infinite is quantified, the waiting ends, and the pear proceeds.

The pear doesn’t notice the change in torture methods until it begins to move against the pull of gravity. Traveling the width of Basimah’s abdomen, it can hear the pounding of heavy music through the layers of muscle wall and skin. The bass makes her entire body contract and expand; the vibrations shake her to her bones, to her flesh, to her colon, to her pear.
The way a body is filled is so much more than the way it is formed.

Silence in the churning darkness. An age ago, a hand picked it, plucked the leaves, carried, bathed, and dressed it, and presented a pear tart before a smiling queen. Now crushed, compressed, pureed, it wonders when this will end. The pear despairs.

But as the scattered remnants of the pear press against the inside of her skin, a soft exterior warmth touches the mangled fruit. Basimah is outside, sun on her skin, like a pear ripening in an orchard. She smiles, eyes closed. Through the aching, the pear knows the end of its journey nears.

With bacteria gnawing on the remnants of the pear, it tips over the edge. Down and down and down and down and down, trapped-fall. Nothing about this is free. The sounds of swollen sacs deflating deafen it.

Defecated, it emerges, stunned by the light it hasn’t felt in days. Power and energy leached out of it down to the last drop, it has passed the way of all the earth. Processed first by the orchard owners, then by the fruit sellers, then by the pastry chefs, then by the woman’s innards. Sic Transit. All things shall pass away, even pain.

Here at the end, as at the beginning, there are fruit flies.
Shelters from Light

Alki Beach at 4 AM has a sedated charm, a tableau waiting for the etherized night to fade into oblivion. Cold water licks coarse sand. Burned out campfires dot the beach, surrounded by heat-shriveled chip bags and charcoal marshmallows. A forgotten wristwatch wriggles further beneath the ground with each passing hour.

A tufted smoke ascends out of view then stops, hanging above the tops of vacation houses, lingering to blur the water from the sunrise gaze climbing the trees to the east. The smoke skips along the roadway, trips over a telephone wire, and falls flat into a window, thinning into non-existence.

Inside the window, the woman lies swaddled in the bedsheets and blankets. Larva in its cocoon of mucus and membranes, she does not writhe or unfold her twisted limbs. Her abdomen heaves rhythmically, breath to fuel her metamorphosis. Her childhood shattered last night, stolen rather than grown out of.

Her blankets, sheets, and body are damp with sweat and fear. She jolts from her uneasy sleep. Pain, like a jar shattered, spills the formaldehyde of memory across her body, then leaves her lying alone. She whimpers as pain rips up her legs and into her belly.

She curls tighter, face pressed against slippery sheets. Their slick dampness breaks down into the rough grit of sand. She opens her eyes to Alki Beach.

Darkness slinks away from the approaching sun, but still shades the place where she lays, sheltering her. She reaches out with one arm then the other, dragging herself towards the ocean. The pressure of her body parts the purple-gray sand, churning and grinding the tiny grains still finer. In the slippery sand, it is easier to remember that the earth is not solid, but a liquid rotating in a far larger, watery fabric.
On sand stiffened by the lapping tide, she crawls towards the womb of the world.

In the bedroom, the woman stares at the ceiling, trying desperately not to cry. To cry makes yesterday a reality, rather than a nightmare. She glances at the bathroom door. On a normal day, she would get up and shower.

The chrysalis cracks and the wet, wrinkled butterfly emerges, slithering out of the discarded blankets and to the floor in a heap. She has been unmade, an empty hollow where a woman once was. Sweat is not the only fluid on her legs; blood when it should not be. Last night, she did not say no. She meant to. The woman walks to the bathroom, turns on the shower.

The shower sputters, and froth bubbles up the drain, dancing over her feet. The floor becomes silty, squelching between her toes. The ocean laps at her, gentle, welcoming. Her eyes close at the gentle touch. Entering the water, she enters herself. All that lives, lives because of water; all that lives, lives because of her.

She scratches the outside of her legs where the memory of vestigial scales ache and pain her. One foot in the frigid water. The other. Ankle deep. She shivers.

Faded light from the narrow window tints the tile and the mirror a green-blue. Her reflection moves across the glass, her skin the blue of bruises, hair the black of mourning. She wraps her tresses around to the front, a shield for her tender skin. She cannot look her reflected self in the eyes. Cannot bear to see the knowledge in them. But when she looks down, the ragged membrane of her wings, the dead brokenness of it, forces her gaze away. She presses her hand to her uneven lips, holding in the pain.

Memory crowds in from all directions, clawing at her back and legs and neck, confusing and fragmented and branding. Her skin burns.
Through her fingers, she takes a shuddering breath. Sea salt and a gull’s cry accompany the patter of water on the floor of the tub. She steps inside and pulls the curtain across as a veil.

She wades into the sunlight zone, first calf, then knee, then thigh deep. Waves caress her naked legs, and chills ripple up her back. The first cool brush of water against the sticky heat at the juncture of her thighs soothes the raging itch of desecrated altars. The physical remains of blasphemy enacted. Her eyes close. The question rises to her lips, *can you make me clean?*

The water washes with a mother’s touch and rocks her side to side; she sways, languid, in an intangible breeze. There is no answer, but the water no longer feels cold.

That burning sun creeps further over the trees, threatening and invasive; she flees the land. Water closes over her head as she falls into the bay, walking sedately further in and further down, body cushioned by the current. The continental shelf drops off as she reaches the mouth of Puget Sound into Salish Sea, passing by the midden pile of a sleeping octopus and the sweetly fluttering tendrils of ghostly white anemones. Sleepy rockfish swivel unblinking eyes in her direction, hailing their long-departed sister.

The ocean folds her within its arms. She reenters the bastion that birthed her and every organism that crawls and creeps and scuttles and swims.

In the shower, head bowed, eyes closed. Water runs down her face, her neck, over the clavicles, down the arms where they wrap across her chest. Finally, she cries. Droplets fall from the curve of her back, mingling with rusty-colored blood on their way to the drain.

She opens her mouth to take in water, wishing that it could wash her insides too. She coughs, and the tears come faster, harder. She sobs, leaning against the cool tile wall to keep from collapsing. Great sobs so close together she can barely breathe.
She sobs so hard that she drops to hands and knees and retches, vomiting over and over again. Nothing comes up but bile. She is empty, body and soul.

Time suspends on silken fins, floating in higher waters, while she heads into the open ocean. She moves gracefully, timelessly, in this primeval caldron. These are the waters above the earth and the waters under the earth, the depths which hold all that is pure and holy and incomprehensible. Further west, the light has not touched even the foamed caps of the waves, and she walks on, serenely down the drop into the yawning twilight of the sea.

Her two legs form a tuning fork that vibrates to the pacific frequency. She raises her hands above her head and lifts the sky—the water above the earth—another inch, a graceful caryatid.

This water is all she needs.

The retching and coughing subside enough to get a breath in. It goes out as a groan, low and heavy and deep with grief. She rocks under the shower's stream, with her knees drawn tight to her chest, hands on her head, holding what remains.

Water falls over her wounded body, soothing the burning. It rinses her crumpled wings, mourning with her. She looks down at the stream running towards the drain and watches as it runs clean.

Eyes closed or eyes open, all around her is inky midnight, divine and dark. Absolute silence to her ears, but the vibrations of the planet’s core strike through her like the taut skin of a drum, the instrument of creation.

Urged deeper not by curiosity but by instinct, she climbs still further down. The abyss welcomes her with slow throngs of highly adapted creatures that no man has seen. Vents from
the earth's core belch minerals and heat into this apparent desert, sustaining all the thousands of feet of water that rise above it.

Primordial creatures greet their own with gentle rhythms, hailing her with waving tentacles and appendages, a procession along the abyssal depths. The decor is funeral, but the mood has a curious majesty; from murder, the queen rises, wounded, but alive.

The curtain stays closed, the lights stay off; the only hands that touch her now are her own, tugging hair as she detangles, rubbing her scalp with fingertips. A thinned layer of dermis sloughs off and washes down the drain, leaving rubbed-red skin behind. She moves the soap over her legs and up them, rinsing, sluicing away bitterness and allowing her native sweetness to emerge from the cloying, cloaking scent of another person's touch. Pubic hair, untrimmed and curling, shields her even when clothes do not. The mist that rises around her is filled with singing.

Floating in the mist, deep within her ocean, she finds the answer.

The sea creatures have guided her here to the deepest chasm in earth's crust, the hadal zone, a place where no sunlight has ever penetrated. At once goddess and child, creator and creation, she swims out over the edge until it opens welcomingly around her. She kicks once more and opens her legs.

Vulva, labia majora, labia minora, with gentle fingers she washes herself clean.
Carnivorous Bird, Such as the Eagle

Sitting in the Rubicon Café, I am reading a book. First one poem and then the next, I gulp down whole words and paragraphs to drown myself in the poetry of another being. A human, a man, put these words down on paper. I am reading them, reading him, reading his lines and between them, drowning.

Drowning in words is much like drowning in water, only more pleasant because there is no surface to break through, no possible hope of rescue for me, this lonely shell of a woman. God, it would be nice to not feel empty. It would be nice to feel something besides pain or numbness. I would like to lose my empty self in language, be swept away entirely and replaced by perfect diction. Then maybe I’d find words for what happened to me, maybe I’d be happy.

Words and water are life-giving: strictly essential. Like Noah’s flooded earth, words inundate, superfluously powerful. “The waters of the flood were upon the face of the earth…all the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights.” I am forty days under this rain. I am broken up, with no window to heaven or doorway to purgatory in sight, no writ of manumission forthcoming. This is a drowning devoutly to be wished.

I usually vacation on the seaside—California—where I have never drowned. Once I stayed at a house on Alki Point. I can’t remember nor can I forget that night. I push away the thoughts, the memories, and claw downward into the poem, seeking release from myself.

Bobbing in the great expanse of the wine-dark sea, currents that I cannot see or understand tug around me. Theirs is a conversation among friends, disturbed by the basking beachgoers, disturbed by me. I’ve forced myself into the dialogue and caused a scene inside a poem. I must drown if only to belong.
I stop treading water and let my arms fall upwards and my body narrow out into a pole, driving toward the sandy bottom. For a moment, the Words create me; the Words are all I am.

But my feet impact seconds after my head goes under and my hands are left silly out in the air. Too shallow to fill me; or else I am too empty to be filled. Surely there is something here I can focus on instead of the pit in my stomach and the tightness in my chest.

The sand is green and soft as fleece. My toes find a stone, smooth as satin. But the inevitable buoyancy of the human body lifts my stubborn frame from the ocean floor, and I rise, breaking the surface face first.

I try for hours but the waves refuse to drown me. I cannot escape my meaning, even when poetry offers a chance to escape my being. I jump into another poem as soon as I have caught a breath, avoiding myself at all costs. I get one whiff of coffee and pastry before the poetry sweeps it away.

I chose poetry because it doesn’t mean anything at all, it simply is. These lines smack of salt water, reek of fish, coat my arms in sunscreen, and douse me in the ocean. I turn a page, tracing the drowning strand of words with my eyes and my fingertip, mouthing the syllables that choke me on the way down. Breathe. Breathe through the water; there’s oxygen in there. Back along an evolutionary chain, I am a fish. Yet I have supposedly evolved as much as any other creature that exists on the earth, including the fish I used to be.

I think I lost myself somewhere along that chain. So, I swim upstream, towards the scent of home that my fish-brain says is mine, bumping joyfully along with these other croakers—or are they salmon? Fishing has never been my strong suit, though it’s a family pastime. I never understood the appeal of baiting a creature into death. Although—catching myself is easy, I find myself in my other hand.
Claws. Wings. Ripped from the stream. I gasp for water. Empty lungs ballooning with suffocating air. An eagle grasps me in its talons. I cannot drown, but perhaps this raptor will rip my guts open, and I’ll feel myself alive again as the blood beats out, lapped up by the tongue of earth and love. Maybe if I die again, I’ll somehow find a way back to life.

The state bird of California is a quail, known for launching into explosive flight when disturbed. I’ve never seen a quail fly, but I have been a human quail, eyes darting side to side, proud plumage slicked back in fear. I have been afraid. This time I don’t struggle. The eagle’s need is greater than mine. She doesn’t eat for pleasure but for strength, and my entrails won’t even give her that. You can’t make substance from absence.

My captor drops me gently into its nest and flutters gracefully onto its favorite perch. Its eyesight must not be as good as science says, for she thinks it’s found a meal in me. I have nothing within me to consume, emptied by a different predator. A gaping dead-eyed fish mouth, opened in a stare.

Eagles are known to eat other birds; implying that the difference of degree is enough. The eagle is a bigger bird, a raptor. Such a thin divide between a bird of prey and bird of predator.

One craves substance, one has substance. I am neither.

Still a fish, still gutted, I consider my empty ribs. I know what happened, and when. I was there, though I wanted to be anywhere else. Trapped. I shudder, a fish in its death throes. Could I have protested more? Would it have been better to die before knowing this kind of emptiness?

I do not know, and now, with my Self emptied, I may never learn.

I crawl out of my fishy skin, shedding scales on the ground. The eagle is nowhere in sight, perhaps repelled by my emptiness; perhaps she’s off finding birds of predators.
A rustling page. The last scales fall from my skin. For all that water and words can do, they evaporate under closer scrutiny, vanishing away into memory, seeping into the open earth. My attempted drowning failed to baptize me into something more than what I am; the eagle exposed my emptiness, neither brought me peace.

I drink my coffee, bite my croissant. Around me, the Rubicon Café bustles with life. A lover laughs, a friend consoles, shadows flit about as the day winds to its close. I feel too much and nothing at all. I sigh and turn the page.

Beside a riverbank again, I watch the salmon (or are they croakers?) jump upstream. Joy fills every fin flip. Why shouldn’t it? There are other fish whose lives will not contain talons and torture. They deserve to be happy. I sit with my feet in the chilling water, the distorted vision of my toes is the most accurate image ever made of me.

Along the stream, blueberries grow, dipping towards the water like willows. I reach for them. I’m not a bird so swallowing stones does me no good, but sometimes when I need to feel the sensation of pebbles in my mouth, I eat blueberries or grapes. Fruit has the tactile thinginess that marbles or glass beads lack, they taste like stone, the same silken skin. Water-polished. Heavy.

I pop them in my mouth and close my eyes. My mouth is full of pebbles, round little weights, so satisfying, so cute.

When I bite down, they burst, a dozen surprises in my mouth. The juice trickles down my throat like water over stone, cooling the burning and loosening the tightness in my chest. But even they cannot fill me, cannot replace my blood or restore my body.

“Bit of a mess there.” He, the poet, sits beside me on the bank, contemplating my gouged-out fishy remains.
I look on instinct, then wince away. I am outside that body now, but I still experienced its destruction. I was there when I was ripped apart. I lay there, frozen, unable to move, witnessing my own dismemberment.

The poet points to the blueberry bush, where leaves rustle. A quail emerges from the bush and walks in a zigzag towards us. It pauses at the water’s edge, then bends and drinks.

I watch it with a strange swell of tenderness rising in my throat. My mouth is full of broken berries. I gulp, trying to swallow down the flesh and skin of fruit to say something, to ask the quail to please come closer, to please don’t be afraid.

The poet watches too, he extends his hand to me and wordlessly offers me a handful of seeds. The tiny grains pour through his fingers into my palm. A gift.

I sprinkle the seeds on the ground and the quail slowly walks closer. I bend my hand towards it and the quail pecks the pile gratefully. I look at the poet with tears beginning to run down my cheeks.

The poet smiles magnificently, all the creaks and lines in his face pulling towards the white tufts of hair at his temples.

Somewhere overhead, the eagle screams. The quail startles and dives into my lap before holding perfectly still.

I look around, but the eagle is nowhere in sight. I put my hand on the quail’s feathers gently, reassuringly, and feel its breath slow.

The poet clicks his tongue gently, “Ay Codorniz mia, asi eres.”

The quail coos softly, almost a sob.

“Sí, mija, sí,” he agrees. “You cannot be anything but what you are.”
“What if I don’t want to be what I am? What if I got hurt because of what I am?” I say. I want to scream the words, but I don’t because I’m holding the quail. I don’t want to scare it. It doesn’t deserve to live in fear. “What if I don’t know how to be what I am?”

He looks at me, a knowing sadness in his eyes. “Will you take care of her?” He nods to the quail.

“Of course.” Its body is so small, but it is warm and alive, and I will protect it.

“Bueno.” He nods again. He hasn’t really answered my question. I’m not sure what else I expected from a poet.

The quail snuggles into the crook of my arm and its warmth fills something in me that blueberries and stones could not. I cry with equal parts relief and sorrow.

The poet pats my shoulder. The poem is ending soon.

I try to smile in gratitude, but my uneven lips and wild emotions make it more of a grimace. He seems to understand regardless.

I feel the quail stir and stretch its wings. I open my arms and we fly together through the final stanza. Rising, rising, until I break the surface and land in the Rubicon Café.

I sit up from my slouch against the wall, looking up from my book. The barista stands with a broom in one hand and the other on her hip; she looks concerned.

I close the book, and collect myself, tucking my scales and a spare quail feather into my pocket. I thank the barista for letting me stay until close.

Outside the sky is breathing in, the hiccupping gasp between sobs of rain.
Type of Makeup

Today, I’m not in my favorite café; I’m at the bakery across the street. I like the pastries here better, though the tart I had a couple weeks ago gave me a stomachache. I systematically shred my croissant, watching flakes crack and fall off, and the soft interior stretches and rips. I eat it slowly, trying to prolong the wait as much as possible.

I have to face the specter.

It’s waiting for me in the Rubicon Café, across one narrow street. The painted letters on the big glass window are so familiar I could trace them with my eyes closed. I’d draw every dot and line in the right place, I know it.

I know that place so well that I didn’t notice the specter at first. Imagine, not noticing a ghost. You’d think that would be hard to miss, but I did.

I had a lot on my mind.

…

Cold rain pelted the streets of Seattle, pushing pedestrians, plastic bags, and newspapers hither and thither. Streaks of orange and red and white—cars—flashed across the window at irregular intervals. A gust of wind pushed Basimah into the door of the Rubicon Café as she opened it. She huffed, pressing her hand against her chest where the wooden door impacted, it wasn’t a hard hit, but her body was bruised already.

She stepped inside, sweeping her rain-soaked hood off with one hand and drawing down the zipper of her jacket with the other. The café provided coat racks to avoid tracking in water and making the floor horribly slippery.

The barista waved at her, and Basimah waved back. “The door get you?”
Basimah nodded, out of breath. She rubbed the base of her throat, begging the tightness there to ease. Between the wind, rain, and her own twisting emotions, finding words was difficult. “I know it’s close to closing—” Basimah started.

“Take the time you need.” The barista smiled. She seemed to know how much Basimah needed the warmth of the fire, the smell of the coffee, the community bookshelf, the unchanging familiarity of the point of no return, converted into a destination. Basimah came to and left the Rubicon, but never had to cross it.

Basimah sat with her coffee in her favorite fireside seat. The fire crackled and its gentle heat warmed her legs through her soggy pants. She tried to take a deep breath but found it hard to get air into the bottom of her lungs. Her chest rose and fell, fast, then faster.

Basimah closed her eyes. *I should’ve stayed home.*

A tear snuck out and trailed down her face. She flicked her eyes open, but thankfully the barista’s back was turned. Basimah didn’t want to talk about why she was here instead of at the house on Alki Point that she’d been so excited to stay in. She smudged the tear away and sat up straight, forcing in air, breathing until her belly expanded. The tightness building in her sternum eased slightly.

She sipped her coffee, relishing the scald on her tongue. The burning helped chase out the cold. Much better than being numb.

A movement caught her eye, and she glanced over to the smallest booth in the café. She blinked. The person, if there was one, faded like an afterimage.

Basimah pressed a hand to her head as she settled back in her chair; she’d spend the day jumping at shadows. *Everything is normal. Normal day, normal yesterday, normal me. Please?*
No one is looking at you. Read something, that's normal. She unrolled a damp newspaper left on the ledge in front of the fireplace and started on page one.

She read about the local political campaigns and the fires in California—she checked, but the town where her family vacationed was out of harm's way. She skipped the missing persons section—she could’ve been one yesterday—but did read the obituaries. By the time she got to the funnies, the paper had dried with the warmth of the fire and the pages crackled. She kept reading, the words holding her together. Poetry was better for holding oneself together usually, but she didn’t have the strength for that today.

Basimah paused on the crossword but didn’t have a pen to write in the answers, so she saved it for someone else. She folded the paper in half to read the last page, there was a feature on migratory birds she wanted to finish, and yelped.

A specter stood in front of her, arms akimbo, gray, hollow, featureless.

She jumped, standing and throwing her arms out in front of her. Her heartbeat doubled and her ears rang with the extra blood. No no. Not real, not real, not real, not real.

She pressed her fingernails into her palms, the pain grounding her enough to plan.

“I’m leaving now!” she announced. She meant to continue, but the words wouldn’t come. Her throat sealed with panic.

“Sounds good!” the barista replied from the kitchen.

The specter didn’t move.

Basimah tried to look at the ragged silhouette, but its empty flatness chilled her despite the fire. She threw the newspaper at it, grabbed her bag, and dashed for the door. When she had her umbrella, she turned, ready to whack the thing.
It hadn’t followed her. It just stood, holding the newspaper, with the faint glow of the fire shining through it. Basimah pitched her umbrella and ran into the storm.

…

Thinking of that day still makes me squirm in my seat, reaching for non-existent itches on my ankles. After that, I saw the specter every day. The more I tried to ignore it, the more real it became. It developed features, clothes, postures. I let that go on for months, for years, because I didn’t want to believe it was there. It was only a glimmer off the window, or a shadow cast by someone passing by.

I thought that if I did what I had always done before the specter appeared, that it would fade into the wallpaper. I thought that if I read Poemas and Marcus Aurelius and Plato and Beauvoir and Butler; if I annotated every book on the bookshelf; if I ordered coffee and kept myself busy; if I drowned myself in other stories, my own would make sense. I wanted to edit myself like fiction, rather than fact.

I’m stalling, but what does one say to a specter? I’ve always been taught to be polite to people, but is a ghost a person? I’ve passed it every day for years now; I should know how to speak to it, but I don’t. I haven’t. What might be the simplest thing in the world has become more difficult the closer I’ve gotten to this moment.

When I look across the street from the bakery and through the glare on the Rubicon’s bay window, a shadow faintly flutters at the table where the specter sits. It’s never approached me since that day at the fire, it just sits at the smallest table in the café and watches. I feel its heaviness, its heartbreak, even now.

I think it knows that it scares me. It must, otherwise it would’ve tried again.

…
Basimah took a deep breath as she stepped down from the bus. After several weeks of subpar coffee, she was going back to the Rubicon Café. As her hand closed around the door handle, she told herself: *It’s been a month since Alki Point; you’re fine. Just get the coffee and go. You have things to do.* A thought lingered lower, darker. *I don’t want to remember that again.*

She opened the door. Waved to the barista, who immediately put on her order, remembering even after Basimah’s time away. She waited behind another couple whose eyes were fixed on the menu, tracing the recently redrawn lines of chalk. Faint chatter rose from the other patrons and Basimah smiled. *Nothing to be afraid of.*

She paid and got her coffee. As she turned to walk to the door, her heart seized and fainted. *No. It was supposed to be gone. Surely a month was long enough.*

The specter sat at the little table with a newspaper and a pen. It was almost opaque, wearing clothes, boots, and a jacket. Its face was hidden behind the paper, which she recognized from the headlines as the one she’d thrown at it, but it must’ve been looking at her the whole while.

*Waiting for her. A reminder.*

She took a deep breath and walked straight and upright out of the Rubicon.

The next day, she returned at her usual time, determined to treat the specter as a fixture of the place, like the faded wallpaper or the fireplace. If she ignored it long enough maybe it would go away. She walked in, bought her coffee, and walked out. In and out. In and out.

The funny thing was, it worked. Little by little, the specter stopped seeming remarkable or otherworldly. The jolt of anxiety when she saw it became familiar. The ghost became part of
her morning routine; after dressing, applying eyeliner, and packing her bag, she bought coffee from the shop with her ghost in it then continued on with her day.

So, it sat at the table with the newspaper and watched as she walked in and out of the Rubicon day after day. Each day, the weight of the specter’s gaze warped time around her—slowing her steps, quickening her heartbeat—then was forgotten.

The routine wasn’t pleasant, a fact she remembered when she skipped her café trip due to the occasional holiday and the reprieve made it hard to return. But something brought her back, the specter brought her back. It seemed to need her.

Though familiar, Basimah still couldn’t bring herself to look it in the face. What had happened to make the specter so? What might she see in those washed-out eyes? Would she recognize what she saw? Did she want to?

One day, she resolved herself to it. Maybe if she looked at it dead on, it and the pain would finally go away.

As it so often did in Seattle, it stormed. The weather pushed a family of tourists laden with white plastic shopping bags into the café ahead of her, clanking the silver bell above the door a dozen times and mixing a fishy harbor smell into the brown smell of coffee.

She jittered in line, only half paying attention to the touristic drama playing out around her as a child began to cry, wondering when the time would be right. The specter was there as usual, newspaper in hand. The moment swelled in her chest and throat, potential energy begging to be released.

Basimah stepped up to the counter, traded cash for coffee. She stepped back, braced herself, and turned to meet the specter’s eyes.
She planned to be unflappable when she looked, but then she saw it. Recognized why it
needed her. She exhaled, saw as it breathed in and stole the breath right out of her. Basimah
looked away, she couldn’t face it, not yet. She clutched her coffee and fled.

Only afterwards, when she could breathe normally again, did she cry.

... 

My croissant is gone. The check is paid. I’m out of excuses and delays. There is only the
matter of standing, crossing to the Rubicon and walking inside. I stand, I cross, I walk inside. I
have to lay this ghost to rest.

The barista is busy at the counter with a line that reaches almost to the door. I slip by
easily. I wind through the tables towards where the specter hides behind the newspaper. I see
from the facing page that it must be looking at the crossword.

I should not say ‘the specter,’ or ‘it.’ I know who it is. I sit across from her, but her gaze
stays down, her shoulders hunched and tense. I reach out a hand and gently tilt the newspaper
down, bringing it to the tabletop.

“Hello,” I say as I look at myself. “It’s been a while.”

I nod.

“It hurt,” I say, remembering the night before the specter appeared. Remembering the
house on Alki Point. Remembering what was torn away from me.

Another nod.

The swelling in my throat threatens to spill out as tears as I look steadily into my own
scared eyes. “It doesn’t need to hurt anymore.”

For the first time, I speak. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say. “After all, I’m here.”
“I’m here too,” I reply, and I cry as the tension drains out of my shoulders and my hand releases the paper. The memory of that pain dwindles and slinks out the door, not forever, but for now.

I turn the newspaper ninety degrees, so it sits in the center of the table. “Would you like help with the crossword? I think I’ve worked out the answers.”
Outcomes

Shortcomings

I dedicated a month for each story, picking up speed towards the end, since I wanted the semester to be dedicated to editing and polishing the stories. I knew from the outset that twenty-six stories was a lot, but it only became apparent to me that it was outside of the scope of a thesis when the semester started. Though this was a setback initially, writing all twenty-six stories gave me the practice I needed to improve and the space to explore ideas that do not fit neatly into linear narrative. “Type of Makeup,” the final story in the collection, wasn’t possible until I had written the other stories, both within the concept of the collection and in my own life. The first stories I wrote needed to age enough for me to see them clearly. I needed to do my own healing and create temporal space between myself and my experiences to see clearly the direction that my characters’ stories needed to go.

I chose to focus on five stories that form the framework for all the other explorations within the collection. Limiting my scope to those five stories was a difficult choice, but one that made the project manageable. As I’ve edited and reflected on these stories, I can see the shape of future revisions to the rest of the collection.

Successes and Future Directions

Academic Outcomes

Before this project, my short story output numbered in the single digits. I didn’t understand the form and I didn’t know what the idea of a short story looked like, felt like, or behaved in writing. Setting the goal to write one short story a month for two years taught me the form better than any class or textbook could. It gave me a structure that was easy to follow and
felt achievable. Each of the twenty-six stories I have written since January 2022 was a chance to try a new style, voice, genre, tone, narrator, etc. while working within the bounds I’d set for myself.

I experimented with first-, second-, and third-person narration. I chose unconventional subject: a lamp, a dog, a pear. I wrote one story without the letter J. I wrote mysteries, ghost stories, and allegories, I wrote braided stories and stories in a single scene. I explored locations in and around Seattle, setting a horror story in the downtown library and a budding romance on the Space Needle. A baby was born from the ground in the Japanese gardens. A flock of crows watched a boy grow up. Paintings came to life and danced in the airport. My love of descriptive imagery ran rampant.

In addition to experimentation and producing a large quantity of work, I also produced my best, most polished writing. By starting well before the deadline for the proposal, I gave myself the time to accomplish something I am truly and unabashedly proud of. My writing technique and style have developed into a mature authorial voice that I plan to explore further in later projects. I know what I’m writing about and why, and how to revise to make the what and the why clear for the reader. Working with these five stories as a group has been a masterclass on how to revise. Working with my committee, as well as my writing group, has been invaluable in this process; their insights and responses to my writing have helped shape and clarify each story and the larger narrative. After completing my thesis, I intend to turn my focus to the other twenty-one stories, not included in these pages, and do the same development and revision that I’ve poured into these five stories, with the aim of submitting them for publication.
I have previously submitted several individual pieces and received rejections; however, the process of this project has brought a deeper understanding of my craft and of my subject matter, such that in the future, I hope for success in publication.

**Personal Outcomes**

Writing has always been a deeply personal endeavor for me, something that I always make time for and savor doing. I’ve written several novel-length manuscripts, dozens of essays, and a few short stories. All my creative output stopped after I was assaulted. I could not create. I was in intense survival mode for months. When I finally recovered enough to try to write again, the story I wrote was the first draft of “Edible Decapod.” That story meant I could heal, that I could create again, that I was not lost to myself.

As I wrote the twenty-six stories in *Crossword*, each one formed a guidepost on my journey back towards myself. Creating helped me heal and find my way forward. I grappled with what my writing meant, with what my existence meant, with what it means to make something beautiful out of the aftermath of pain. I wondered how to talk about something I’d rather forget. When confusion dominated much of my life, writing made things clearer. I wrote my way back to peace.

When finally, I came to “Type of Makeup,” the ending of the collection was clear, because I had found myself again. When I wrote the final sentence, “I think I’ve worked out the answers,” I knew that I had. I knew the answer to the question I’d been asking for almost two years. I was home in myself again.
Story Notes

Notes: Edible Decapod

As mentioned previously, I solved the crossword incrementally at first. The clue “Edible Decapod” was the first one I solved. The other inspiration for the story came from the hazy childhood memory of being at a fish market in Seattle with soaked feet. It wasn’t even a full memory, more of a flash of neon orange against a dark reflective street and a press of bodies in raincoats and the sound of plastic and the smell of fish. I borrowed from my memory to create the tourists and the disruptive presence of death and pain in the center of the story. The suddenness of it jars the narrator and makes them remember life and death.

The character of the narrator was important from the conception of the story. The voice appeared on the page easily, but I wasn’t allowed to look at the narrator. I knew nothing about them, and they seemed to know nothing about themself either. The narrator was bodiless, featureless, and genderless. I didn’t understand why the narrator existed; I only knew that it was important. I resisted several workshop suggestions to clarify the narrator, even though I knew that the story didn’t make sense as it was, because changing it felt wrong. The story stayed in that confused state for over a year, until I prepared to write the final story in the collection “Type of Makeup.” I knew I wanted the last story and the first story to act as bookends and have the same characters and setting, but told from the woman’s point of view, which meant I needed to know who the narrator was.

In a eureka moment, the thundering realization of the narrator’s identity shifted the whole collection into better focus. I knew who was telling the story, and why, and I knew how to tell the story better. Edits were much easier after that.
I chose to leave the narrator disembodied, featureless, and genderless—a ghost—because “Edible Decapod” is about the destabilization of identity caused by trauma. The ghost has no sensations of taste, touch, or smell, until Basimah enters the café. They have no memory of how they became the way that they are, a literalization of the symptoms of derealization and depersonalization so common in trauma victims. The ghost’s only hope is in Basimah’s recognition of it. So, the story explores that crucial moment of recognition between the woman and the ghost. It is a recognition of pain, death, and disconnection, and the beginning of healing, life, and reconnection. The beauty of the moment is sabotaged by the woman’s fear and ends on a somber note: the dead are still dead.

Notes: Fruit Pulp

This is a story about digestion, in other words “Fruit Pulp” is about pain, endurance, and inevitability.

Pain, like digestion, is a process. It happens within each individual; it happens almost daily; it’s difficult to describe. In “Fruit Pulp” what would traditionally be an object, a pear tart, rather than a traditional subject, the woman, becomes the center of the story. Following the tart’s journey and its reflection on the forces that brought it to the point of consumption echo the uncontrollable forces in our own lives, including time and pain. The pear reflects on the past, its growth, and the excitement it felt for what is now an awful and painful present. “Fruit Pulp” is suffused with a longing for childhood, when life consists of eating, sleeping, and playing, and a longing for relief from pain. The pear, though literally a pear, can also be a metaphor for the way we move through difficult times in our lives. We know how pain goes; it is tedious, almost monotonous. Pain is always the same. It’s awful, and long, and feels never-ending.
The crux of the story is the moment of respite when the pear feels the sunlight faintly through Basimah’s body, the moment where the infinite pain becomes finite, and the end comes into view. With the line “Basimah is outside, sun on her skin, like a pear ripening in an orchard,” Basimah and the pear are set equal; two creatures in pain, two creatures seeking relief.

As for the two human characters, I borrowed Dylan's appearance from a server at a restaurant where my writing group and I ate. As said in the opening of the story, Basimah means smiling. She smiles with her insides in turmoil.

Endurance, like digestion, requires time. In “Fruit Pulp” there is both a sense of time passing, but also a disconnect from time; that is the nature of endurance. Generally, when we eat, we know our food will digest and that we will need to defecate, but we don’t think about it. We don’t consider how long that food stays with us. We don’t consider the way food literally becomes part of us. Even when the remains have been left behind, part of what we ate is in us, broken down and used by our cells. Food is like trauma in this way. Trauma, even when we have processed and parsed, remains potent in our bodies, part of us. The pear in “Fruit Pulp” is also like a person, as they are traumatized by unimaginable, incomprehensible events, and overwhelming pain.

Integrating the research I conducted on the digestive system challenged me to transform something that could easily be clinical or disgusting into something artful. Working within the digestive system as a story structure was another interesting challenge, as it forced me to consider the emotional beats that a pear tart might experience while being digested. What was its emotional journey? What would a pear think about if it could? What does that mean for the person who eats it?
Inevitability, like digestion, will come to pass. In the final paragraph of “Fruit Pulp,” the Latin phrase “Sic Transit” (a shortened version of *sic transit gloria mundi* meaning “thus passes the worldly glory?”) summarizes the story as a meditation on the transience of life, but also the assurance that pain will happen, and pain will pass. A pear’s life and a person’s life, a pear’s pain and a person’s pain, neither are very long, both will pass away. In the end, I hope the “Fruit Pulp” feels hopeful, a reminder that pain will end.

*Notes: Shelters from Light*

“Shelters from Light” is the center of the collection both literally and emotionally. While each story stands independently, “Shelters from Light” explicitly contextualizes the character and conflicts of the other four stories. The pain of the woman’s recent traumatic experience and the resulting disintegration of her identity are juxtaposed with the serenity she finds within as she journeys to the ocean floor.

I envisioned the journey into the deepest part of the ocean and what the woman might find there and what that might mean. This story required very specific research into the location, Alki Beach, and into the geography of the ocean that surrounds it. The geographic elements, including the names of the different regions of the ocean, mapped a nebulous idea and emotion onto a physical journey. How does one talk about the incomprehensible? How does a woman understand the crime that has been done to her and the ways in which it was enacted on her body? How does she begin to live again after violence? For me, the answer was water. I knew that the woman and by extension the story, would keep moving until she reached that deepest point. That she must keep walking along the ocean floor deeper and deeper until she reached some kind of resolution. What that resolution would be, I didn’t know until I came to it. As the
writer, I only knew the process I needed to follow. Upon reading the story now, concluding with the woman cleaning her most private places feels almost inevitable.

The imagery of water also lends itself to images of sea goddesses and specifically of Aphrodite, who was born from the ocean. The darkest depths of the ocean as the cradle of life, the birthplace of beauty, love, sexuality, and womanhood contrasts with the intense pain that the woman experiences because of a traumatic experience, represented only by the invasiveness of sunlight. I hope to invoke a sense of majesty and respect for women as they continue despite the horror of trauma, without downplaying that horror and pain.

The story was difficult to write and difficult to revise, because the revisions brought the subject into clearer view. Yet, while I wrote it and revised it, the images, feelings, and words flowed. I know this story intimately, deeply. The details of what happened to the woman are not important and so they have been left deliberately vague. The woman represents every woman, both those who have experienced the specific violence of sexual assault or rape, and those who have experienced the kind of daily violence enacted on women by patriarchal institutions. The woman also represents me. This piece is a translation of my own experience; the details of when I was assaulted are not the same, but this piece is functionally the first time I tried to approach the topic as a survivor. Writing this piece helped me to find myself again, as an artist and as a woman.

What I mean to say is that “Shelters from Light” may be the most important piece I’ve ever written.

*Notes: Carnivorous bird, Such as the Eagle*
Though I wrote the initial draft of “Carnivorous Bird, Such as the Eagle” second, and chronologically it falls second in Basimah’s journey after “Shelters from Light,” I have placed it fourth in the collection. In “Carnivorous Bird, Such as the Eagle” the tension between who Basimah believes herself to be, and the desire to be someone else is at its peak. Taking the collection as a whole, “Carnivorous bird” is the final fight before the denouement of “Type of Makeup.” The closeness of the psychic distance in the narration—so close the reader can hardly tell the difference between themself and the narrator—simulates the trapped-ness of trauma. Basimah is trapped inside her pain and inside the desire to be someone other than who she is, someone who isn’t in pain. She fights against herself, until the appearance of the quail and her protectiveness of it. The quail, of course, represents herself.

The story wouldn’t exist without my influences: the poet, the fish, and the water. First, the poet. The “poet” is left ambiguous in the text to allow the reader to insert their own voice of wisdom. However, my poet, the poet who helped me through, isn’t considered a poet at all, but is rather Uruguayan essayist Eduardo Galeano. His work, originally in Spanish, dances between poetry and prose, non-fiction that feels like fantasy. In his books, “Days and Nights of Love and War” and “The Book of Embraces,” he writes about the tender and the traumatic with a gentle but intelligent touch, engaging with so much even in his shortest works.

Second, the same semester I encountered Galeano, I also encountered evolutionary biology in an Honors Unexpected Connections course team-taught by Professor Clint Whipple and my future thesis advisor, Professor George Handley. Ideas about fish, scales, change, design, and chance floated around my head until they coalesced in “Carnivorous Bird.”

Third, I have always loved water, and the imagery of water permeates the stories in this collection. In “Edible Decapod” and “Type of Makeup” it is the rain outside that pushes the
woman into the cafe and the confrontation with the ghost. In “Fruit Pulp” water provides a moment of relief, and rain is one of the pear’s longing recollections. “In Shelters from Light” water covers, protects, and cleanses. In “Carnivorous Bird” the character searches without success for the death and rebirth promised by baptism in poetry.

The desire to escape oneself through literature that Basimah expresses is my expression of the same feelings. After experiencing a traumatic event, I wanted nothing more than for things to be as they were. I wanted to continue reading as if the book was still intact. I didn’t miss a single class the week after I was assaulted, because if I missed class, it meant something was different, that I was different. Like Basimah, I tried to drown myself in words, in my classes, in my work, and like Basimah, the words refused to drown me.

Finally, this story is for Joshua, who gave me the word “cute.”

*Story Notes: Type of Makeup*

While choosing the stories I wanted to include, I color-coded my list of short story titles by character groupings. I found three main groups, plus a few transitional stories that didn’t belong obviously in any camp. I also got a colorful insight into my writing process and how the ideas and characters contained in the collection had grouped and developed over time, because my list of titles is in the order that they were written rather than alphabetically or chronologically. The stories I chose for this collection had an interesting spread; chronologically they were stories one, two, three, five, and twenty-six. The first four stories in the collection were written in a five-month period, while the gap between story five “Shelters from Light” and story twenty-six “Type of Makeup” was more than a year. Two main factors influenced that fact. The first was that I wanted the final story to take place in the same location as the first story, the
second was that I had no idea how a fitting conclusion to this kind of story would look. I was writing blind, unsure what I was trying to say, fighting to find meaning, healing, and identity, just like my characters were.

As wrote ever closer to story twenty-six, I realized that the key to the collection lay in the identity of the narrator of “Edible Decapod,” the very first story I wrote (see story notes for Edible Decapod). Until I knew who that character was, I couldn’t write the ending to their story. I chewed on that thought for days, wondering, trying out different possibilities. And then it clicked. The narrator is me and not-me. The narrator is Basimah, always. In her brokenness and in her totality. The stories aren’t autobiographical, nor is my name Basimah, nor is her life mine. Yet the feelings are mine. The story is mine. “Type of Makeup” became the resolution of years of writing and years of emotional work, an ending that I pray brings hope to the reader, as it brings hope to me.

Works Cited


Appendix 1: Reading List

Below follows an abridged list of the books and articles that informed my writing process.

*On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin
*The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk
*The Holy Bible*
*Days and Nights of Love and War*, Eduardo Galeano
*The Book of Embraces*, Eduardo Galeano
*The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros
*The Passion According to G.H.*, Clarice Lispector
“Love,” Clarice Lispector
“El Aleph,” Jorge Luis Borges
“La Biblioteca de Babel,” Jorge Luis Borges
*Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler
“Thing Theory,” Bill Brown
*What the Body Knows*, Lance Larsen
“Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Keats

Appendix 2: Crossword Answers

Though I hope you found them on your own, I’ve included the answers to the crossword. Bolded answers correspond to stories in this collection.

1A: Shrimp
7A: Upstream  1D: Shades
8A: Asp  2D: Raptor
9A: Threat  3D: Puree
10A: Slap  4D: Ashtray
11A: Skree  5D: Pristine
13A: Cabinet  6D: Manage
15A: Covered  12D: Eyeliner
17A: Herbs  14D: Set Sail
21A: HI-FI  16D: Origin
22A: Sienna  18D: Realty
23A: Lit  19D: Syntax
24A: Fireside  26D: Bevel
25A: Larynx