

6-30-2016

# Strike-Slip

Amanda Mitchell  
*University of South Carolina*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Mitchell, A. (2016). *Strike-Slip*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3457>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu).

STRIKE-SLIP

by

Amanda Mitchell

Bachelor of Arts

Hollins University, 2013

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2016

Accepted by:

Samuel Amadon, Director of Thesis

Nikky Finney, Director of Thesis

Brian Glavey, Reader

Heidi Cooley, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

© Copyright by Amanda Mitchell, 2016

All Rights Reserved

## Abstract

*strike-slip* is a work of poetry in which a female speaker seeks answers for a violent past she is just beginning to unravel. By revisiting and reconsidering scenes from girlhood, including the broken objects and split bodies she encountered in the Appalachian wilderness she grew up in and around, she attempts to gain insight into a present state of selfhood that continues to elude her. The poems here come together to conduct an excavation—each memory is an old bone from which the speaker must carefully brush the dust away until she can figure out something about the larger thing it used to be. That is what this work is: an excavation, a piecing together parts of a life that have been scattered over years of trauma. Yet in another sense, this work is also interested in the act of dissection: slicing open the body of the past in order to discern some divine sign hiding beneath. The speaker of this work repeatedly takes on the role of haruspex: observing something by its broken pieces in order to learn something about its hidden nature. And by looking upon these broken-down objects and bodies, the speaker is able to discern something of her own wild nature. By placing her faith in these grotesque and deconstructed objects, she is able to interact with the divine, making a church of the wilderness.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
I.	
bitten girl.....	2
field over which the heavens rehearse rapture.....	4
black snake writhing after the head is removed.....	5
to love by tucking it away and running.....	6
a girl's first field journal.....	7
eight months before the split.....	11
if the woods could swallow what.....	12
spinning like this spider is speaking.....	13
when I rename the garden.....	14
I do not think to leave a mark.....	15
elegy for the field sparrow, unflinching.....	16
II.	
a dissection of the heart in which something has gone wrong.....	18
III.	
misremembering myself as the mountain.....	38
I am turning to you.....	45

but if there is nothing there .....	46
you say the quartz crystal is not a kaleidoscope .....	47
when the Lord says <i>I will destroy her</i> .....	48
when the Lord says <i>I will destroy her</i> .....	49
to Sarah, age five, already writhing .....	50
reinterpreting the scene beneath a kaleidoscopic lens .....	51

I.

## bitten girl

it was like holding onto fire that she  
couldn't smother she was just seven  
she was just doing what her father  
wanted when he pointed his shotgun  
off a bluff said go fetch every empty  
shell she could find on that steep hill  
it will be just like hunting easter eggs  
he said so she stacked each shell neat  
beside his crushed heap of beer cans  
disappeared once more into the woods  
proud girl so quick to spot the hollow  
plastic tucked bright in the dry leaves  
to predict where they'd land as shots  
cracked overhead and when one nuzzled  
in the underbrush with a nest of baby  
snakes tangled like a bundle of whips  
in the leaves no sign from her father  
that he would take her into his arms  
as she stumbled back to him no move  
to press his lips to her palm swollen  
but still so small only a slow truck ride  
home to her dark bedroom to a night  
writhing in her sheets began to rustle  
like a brush pile burning her body  
from the inside sent her snaking from  
her bed to the cool wood floor until  
dawn fell over her face like a light left  
on in the kitchen where her father still  
sleeps with his boot heels on the table  
if she doesn't seem real maybe she was  
just another story on the school bus  
from those girls who whisper about  
a bloody woman you see in the mirror  
when you turn three times in the dark



but sometimes I could swear she lived  
and I knew her she showed me scars  
dotting her hand think I even pressed  
my finger into the divots of her skin  
became my skin as I filled it with my  
fingertip felt fangs not just where fangs  
had been I always furrow over mis-  
remembering her is to feel those bites  
all over all over again I forget when  
all the striking started in this fever  
dream a bitten girl holds me under

field over which the heavens rehearse rapture

I'm not used to letting things lie  
there and show me how to take it  
dovelet through the eye of my  
breezy blouse your hands slip-  
stumble like earth under thunder  
clap just a little when I show you  
this trick I've been practicing  
with my eyelids downturned like  
a sleeping lamb don't you find it  
convincing don't you want to  
come at my throat with a glint  
I know who I'm fooling how  
when we're rolling downhill  
my head hits all these rocks that  
aren't real and when the sky turns  
this hue that says it's going to split  
I know I have a while before it drops  
what it's been threatening after all  
this time you're not going to make me  
lie down if I don't want to I'm not  
going to teach you any knot I can't slip

black snake writhing after the head is removed

I looked to the old man    axe-leaning    to the porch stairs    axe blade  
dusted with dirt    save the bright splatter    my hands wrapped my throat  
too late to choke my scream already lived    died    sent the rickety man  
running    sliced the snake in two    I was young then and did not know  
better I did not know    how many men would come from far off    show  
me how to be afraid    far better to be bitten    to feel thin spine whip my  
ankles    than to watch the headless thing    parting the grass to say    this  
dance will not be over

to love by tucking it away and running

after tripping with a coat pocket full  
of eggs a hen had been keeping secret  
in a tipped bucket suppose I should've  
known better than to covet a clutch  
and dash off with the click-clack of  
shell against shell snug inside my coat's  
silk lining so dreamy how neat it will be  
to unbutton my pocket show off that  
egg with speckles all over as if I had  
been the one to splatter it reminds me  
of the spring my mother took eggs from  
their carton drained them held them up  
one by one as I colored each with a brush  
in my small fist taken they were tucked  
inside a glass case for most of my young life  
still vivid like questions I cannot touch to  
crack apart didn't I know my hands could  
crush something like that or how it would  
feel to throw my body over something I  
wanted to keep what was seeping from  
my pocket it hurt to see that particular  
hue of yellow soak dark to my hip-  
bone still bruised from the fall

a girl's first field journal

tooth-gleam from rabbit skull  
no fur save a patch of thinning  
auburn on holey cheekbone like  
that worm wooly mostly ocher  
but look a spot of black now  
trees drop fire they cannot hold

\*

storm strings a thin branch with  
cold crystals to drip is to chime  
sweet clatter are those berries  
frosted with sugar bright red  
trail in the snow dear cardinal  
trickling from the barn cat's jaw

\*

might the tulip thrusting bright  
from the soil demand sunlight  
might cupping the spring in my  
palms make the water warmer  
or my skin colder why choose  
to hide my hands in pockets

\*

to think that papery nest is all  
wood-gnaw and bee spit how  
soft to brush my ear against  
the hot hum before breaking  
a blackberry under my tongue  
lick my sweet lips they are ripe



eight months before the split

in dreams I hunt the stink of rabbit head summer dropped on our  
doormat thin velvet sinking into skull a spell from which you cannot  
drag me maybe not all rabbit parts are good luck let's talk prescience  
slice to the marrow of the matter before something eats it from the inside  
what does it mean that it quivered like no dead thing I have ever seen  
even after you knocked it from the porch with a broom handle I kept it  
behind my eyes at night turned it over and over like some trick knot when  
I pulled its grey lips from the teeth it began spitting crimson  
unwinding like string I followed where it led you wouldn't believe  
how alive

if the woods could swallow what

rasp of the thicket tells it like    couldn't keep a secret if it had to    burrs  
nuzzle my ankles just so    I'll strip my socks and lose them    I admit I  
have been asking to be bitten this deep    in the woods to fall and wait  
for someone to hear it    though I have heard it    really doesn't work like  
that    there's no drawing the venom back out of the girl back out of the  
woods    no remedy pooling in petals to sip    meanwhile nothing will keep  
quiet    some gravel-mouthed bird grates an elegy    wood splits beneath  
stutter    a beak's grim cadence    as veins turn black    not blood but sap

spinning like this spider is speaking

look I didn't tiptoe this high  
wire act didn't string myself up  
in glinting spit in this gusting  
sycamore to be considered any-  
thing but heavenliest of bodies  
when you look up to me oh my  
have you ever seen an abdomen  
like mine so golden am I not  
something of a lodestar for you  
haven't you come to measure  
each state of wonder by its  
relative distance to me there is  
no way to tell how fast the crow  
flies since he never comes near  
enough for me to know that  
he wouldn't dare swallow my  
wicked shade of yellow quite like  
you have yes I know entrapment  
when I see it I know you have  
come to find me more holy  
than sinister a saint crowned  
in light glowing impossibly from  
raw canvas or a halo spreading  
around a moon so divine you  
have to squint to see it though  
I know you see me aren't I  
miraculous enough to believe in  
holding firm to flimsy against  
the sharpest bites of wind aren't I  
the queen I the gleaming corona  
circling your heavenward thinking

when I rename the garden

backyard hydrangeas blooming sloppy watercolors I cannot call them  
anything but strip branches to the slick and green underneath call you  
to my side and you will not run I will wrench this spring from you all  
bruised petals and scatter your boyhood snatched in the woods as you  
tripped a corpse beneath your feet oh it was your first you  
shouldn't have told me isn't that the same gape my mouth opening to  
summer scorch crawling in your gut I will gnaw you breathless I am  
nothing you say I am

I do not think to leave a mark

though I never fail to find your forearm pale underside when our  
bodies bend to sleep when I miss the grimace you are quick to  
swallow when I have spent everything not my teeth if I tell you I have  
to say it sharp imagine a dense wood in that blank wall behind the bed  
frame something has been hiding inside what roused you too  
early circling your neck was it everything horrible you've ever  
dreamt most nights I am all hackles and sweat then I remember what  
my jaw can do I would not stand for anything else to carve into you

elegy for the field sparrow, unflinching

even as my father's eyes met yours  
across the pointed barrel nudging  
feathers aside to your pink breast  
pressing cold kiss to keel bone  
with such nearness of course he  
knew nothing would be left of you  
why didn't you when he was just  
a distant twig-snap but really  
you cannot know what you have  
come to mean for the daughter  
of the man before whose muzzle  
you broke into a bloodless cloud  
of feather confetti it's funny really  
because my father has never once  
told it without laughing I confess  
I have had my share of giggles at  
your expense but as a girl grows  
older she begins to see the gore  
behind the fairytale split open in  
the darkening woods oh yes once  
at his most introspective my father  
did say he was pained to think you  
might have been his father reincarnate  
I count this moment among a handful  
of moments I sensed a stillness in  
my father's bones like that shadow  
as his gun crept over your chest  
look it in the eye if you are brave  
my father showed me all there is to  
aim and fire but you taught me to look  
hard at the man who might hurt me

II.

a dissection of the heart in which something has gone wrong

I confess there has been no carcass I've ever stumbled upon whose gape did not portend some gaping in me, a maggot-crawl I feel in the palms of my hands that burrows deeper and carves along my bones until I am sure I will cave around it. That summer evening spent in the woods, when I found what was left of the stillborn fawn, I realized I was all that was missing of the stillborn fawn, and at once I could say I knew myself. I have learned the stink does not always follow the rot, some skins ask to be stripped, and there are creatures who are all but split and strung from the trees before they can drag the last wobbling knee from their mother.



The barn cat, who thought I was not eating, arranged animal parts on the doormat each morning after hunting all night. I made sure she was not around when I shook the mat clean off the porch to the bushes below: tawny fur, heaps of entrails, liver and lungs licked clean and gleaming. But then came the morning the cat left the small eye, it perhaps once belonged to a rabbit, a clouded jewel placed in the very center of the mat. This, I think, was the one thing I could not let drop from the railing, and though I did not touch it or carry it inside, it kept appearing in dreams, set in gold like a ring, so that I could not imagine it anywhere but around my finger.

As we walked the property's edge, where the woods opened to sloped pasture, my father urged me to walk quickly by the brown calf on its side whose abdomen had been gnawed away. I told him it did not matter how broken it looked or how quickly we passed by because the stink spun the story of the day the calf fell to the ground with sickness and could not answer its mother when she called at dusk until night brought a sharpness the calf could not see. My father walked far ahead the rest of the way down the mountain, and I lost sight of him as it grew dark. As if it would be enough to say: the woods swallowed the girl without bothering to turn up the dirt.

As a girl, I walked into the morning after the coyote tore through the chicken coop, when the ground seemed hallowed with hen fluff and the dew anointing the grass had yet to dry. I remember thinking this was how prayer must feel except I wanted less to shut my eyes or drop to my knees than to follow this strewn path of feathers wherever it might lead. And though I never found even one bloodied bird, I did find that I was less interested in heaven or hell than this space in the middle where I could slip inside the cloaks of ghosts or try on the jowls of the killer to know which one fit best.

I grew to know my mother as a woman whose panic could conjure danger before it ever was, as if by fearing it she created it: wolf spider perched on her arm when she woke to check her wristwatch, hawk whose neck snapped against her bedroom window and left a spreading crack, rattlesnake poised to strike her ankle one of the few times she walked in the backyard. When my mother left, my father revealed that she felt a deep sadness when I was born and began having visions she confused with what was real. When my father confronted my mother about having found a kitchen knife in my nursery, she sobbed and said lately the changing table has seemed so much like the cutting board.

I felt most drawn to what I can only think to call *the dark* during summers spent at home with my brother, who followed me into the woods if I told him to, with eyes as blue as mine, but warmer somehow. We once came upon a fallen doe, all that was left of what the hunter had stripped away. I pulled my brother down to kneel beside me, beside her, and reckon with the insides, memorize them, watch the squirm of them. And when he said he wanted to run away, I pinned his wrists to the ground. Though I'd like to think I made him look because it was the realest thing he could ever see, and I was beside him and could tell him not to be afraid, I really did it because I liked to watch something of him break down.

The baby rabbit was still alive when the barn cat brought her into the basement. The cat pinned the rabbit to the stone floor gingerly, with no indication she had stuck its fur with the claws I knew were plunged deep. They might have been two stuffed-animals tumbling together in a child's room: no sound but the soft thrusts of the rabbit's back legs against the cat's jaw. Then the bite, a single pop of the rabbit's neck, and in minutes the cat had swallowed it whole, along with every bone, and retreated into shadow. I saw the cat had left something when I walked closer to the spot. She had somehow managed, in the frenzy of killing, to leave a single eye.

Soon it was no longer a coincidence that when the man came over the hills to visit, animal carcasses lined the only road by which he could reach me. He took its sharp turns at high speeds, tires screaming black lines on the road. I never thought to tell him to slow down, to give the curves their full berth rather than cut them down the middle. If I had, I might have thought to turn from the man in the driver's seat. To look out from the passenger window, beyond the blur of branches, to the bodies the wilderness had opened for me, asking me to mind the entrails, to consider what might be nudging inside them, to be honest when it felt familiar.

The deer, ribcage yawning the evening dark, looked to have been scraped across the asphalt since dawn, over hours of cars streaking in both directions, and whatever might have spilled from her when she was first hit had been sipped dry by the heat. I did not tell the man driving to stop, though I thought only of the deer for the rest of the night, how the day might have scattered her pieces. I wondered at her heart, how many hoods she met before she felt the beating stop, and her hind legs, bounding to the last pulse, as if to run on without her.



*You need something underneath it*, his mother had said. When I stepped into the hallway wearing the white skirt, when I placed my glass on the wooden side table, when my makeup could not hide how sallow my face had become. *Something underneath it*: the ways she would deny who I was before I met her son, pulling him aside to say my hem should hit my knee and no woman worth having should show the skin above it. *Something underneath* dreamt of running through the briars and leaving my skirt behind when it snagged, dripping from the prod of branches to prove I was not porcelain and there was something underneath.

I think of my mother when I turn into the gravel drive of the house where she and I no longer live. Where my father lives alone, where brush and briar have overtaken the hill so that each time I visit, the house becomes less visible from the road. My mother and I turned into the same driveway fifteen years before, and as our car crept up the gravel slope, we surprised a grazing doe and her two fawns. *Look at her tail*, my mother had said, and it flickered to reveal a shock of white that sent the fawns hobbling over to gather behind the doe's back legs. I do not remember seeing a signal from my mother before she bounded away somewhere I could not follow.

During sacrament service, I watched women cover little girls' shoulders when they wriggled from the sleeves of their cardigans and pin their knees together when their small legs splayed. When the tray of broken bread was passed down the row, the well-behaved girls barely opened their lips to place a piece on their tongues, chewed slowly with downturned eyes as if counting the ways they had sinned. Once, I saw a girl fill both of her small fists with bread and refuse to release her grip when her mother tried to pry the pieces into her lap. I could still hear her screaming from the hallway outside of the chapel, telling her mother again and again that she was hungry and wanted to be let go.

I should say that when the man slid the ring on my finger for the first time, I sensed something about it didn't quite fit, and later when I twirled it off and on to examine what about it seemed wrong, I could only think of how unlike that diamond was to the rabbit eye. I wondered what of the eye belonged to me, what of me belonged to the eye, if it was the part that seemed to spread like ink in the water when the man had tipped me backwards to baptize me, if it was still resting by the drain in the bottom of the font, and if I had stepped from the water without it, had I stepped away without sin?

It was the third time the man had strung me to the bedposts, and by then I had taught myself to follow a trail I kept behind my eyes which led to a dappled clearing in the woods I knew as a girl. My spine had relearned the mattress as a patch of moss, my arms and legs had slipped the restraints and stretched wide in the spots of sun, mirroring the trees that held their limbs above my body, not reaching to touch me but to shield me from sight. Something broke the spell that third time, and I knew it when I opened my eyes and did not see the bedroom or the ropes or the man, but could not stop seeing a deer above me dangling from its hindquarters in the trees, stomach split, something dark dripping from its hooves.

I was only a few years older than the young women in the church class I had been given to teach. I had been placed there for the girls to imagine someone like myself when they thought of who they would grow to be. I never told them how different I was at their age, when I was in the habit of kneeling in the woods at night and learning the language of birds whose wings I imagined when it grew too dark to see. I thought they should never know that girl, would find nothing to admire in her, and so I told them to seek only the light and make temples of their bodies and not to speak loudly else they cannot hear their Lord when he whispers.

In our sixth and last summer together, the man and I walked out onto the porch one Sunday on our way to church and found a rabbit's head resting at the top of the stairs. Whatever had removed the head from the body had torn it away cleanly: its ears were soft and groomed to rich velvet and its eyes, glossy and deep brown, had yet to be eaten from their sockets. I did not realize I had kneeled next to it in my dress and was reaching to stroke its ears with my fingertips until I felt the man grab me by the elbows and pull me to my feet. He knocked the head into the bushes, called it *filthy*. I never wanted to follow something into the dirt as badly as I did then.

The afternoon following my baptism, and I would soon be pinned with the diamond. I stretched out alone in a hammock and convinced myself that the branches overhead stood crisper against the sky than I had ever seen them. But there was no denying that this sun was an unfamiliar sun, could be said to own very little of its former brightness. I began to think it was withholding its fire from me, terrified that I could no longer feel my shoulders bronze beneath it or hear the rustle of heat that made late June recognizable. His mother had said that to be *in possession of the Spirit* would be like nestling into a soft blanket. I only felt weak, wrapped in gauze like something had been severed from me, and I could not account for what.



When I finally woke, it was a slow waking over years of fever dream, and for a while it ached to look anywhere beyond the scriptures in my lap, the measures in the hymnal, the hands reaching through white curtains in the temple. On the highway back home one evening, the driver of a chicken truck ahead had forgotten to latch one of the cage doors. I followed clumps of white feathers in my car for nearly an hour before I saw something on the side of the road so broken it could not be called a bird. But when I looked closer I saw it had spread a single wing, lifting in the gusts of cars as they sped by.

A few nights I have dreamt I am looking down from the pulpit where the bishop might stand, preparing to address the congregation, but when I open my mouth, I do not share a message from the scriptures and instead begin to tell the girls that they should no longer think of themselves as fawns mute and creeping in the wood, and the mothers should know what they are afraid of before flicking the white of their tails, and above all, the men should remove the knives I knew were hidden within their blazer pockets. But as I speak to those gathered in the pews, their smiles begin to fall and their faces droop until the skin pulls from their cheekbones. Then it is not a chapel at all but a gaping summer wood.

III.

misremembering myself as the mountain

does it seem real when I say it does it  
the valley shadowed beneath my eyes  
I have worn since I first opened them  
to black and blue ridge jagged cradle  
from which I pried my spine to begin  
walking the way I do always on my toes  
on the way down I don't know which  
part of the foot I might use for the way  
back up it seems I cannot find the point  
from which I first lost sure footing but  
I find myself drawn to the murky broth  
of a pond in which ridges above float  
flattened beneath my feet so I can stir  
the sky to pieces with a branch I break

I break my own heart like I used to  
when I snuck from my house down  
hill to a boy a car parked lights out  
he drove too fast like they all do fast  
through the valley even faster up this  
mountain road wound around each  
thrill my heart was after each hairpin  
left me jilted just the way I liked it  
tossed me this way that way my hips  
hit against hard plastic of the car door  
I still remember the time we spun out  
our back wheels kissed the edge I still  
kiss an edge I say I don't want to slip  
then I don't know if I believe it or not

believe it or not I've found a groove  
since I was a girl a rocky place on top  
of every slope to fit my foot just so  
I always knew this meant I had fallen  
in love or had been fallen in love with  
would stay there ever after as hunched  
birds stripped blushing ribbon from bones  
still remember the first time I lost my shoe  
my foot made a slipper of that craggy peak  
it was then I became part of the mountain  
could feel a thrumming at the heart of it  
oh my heart my skin purpling in the gusts  
of wind carried a sharp cry when I tried  
to free my foot the rock held me with a bite

a bite may not require teeth but should  
feel deliberate to be felt deep though  
I have stumbled over many serpents  
with patterns of all kinds whose only  
deliberate act has been to dart away  
brings to mind that joke about hiking  
to a mountaintop with someone to ask  
something important they can't avoid  
where would they go will they jump no  
I have to live by pushing everything to  
the edge I can't go another step without  
knowing how it's going to hurt I want  
to believe it like fangs sinking in I want  
to know how it feels to be afraid of me

afraid of me or afraid of what steep  
seem to rise from my skin can a body  
be disguised as a mountain can it be  
that I bear footpaths of another's desire  
that I stood still as someone slipped from  
the very top of me I didn't see it until  
that day I drove away I emerged from  
the gap going south in my rearview I  
saw that last blue ridge slide from sight  
I didn't turn my head it was mirrored  
it was like looking in the mirror for  
the first time I knew those ridges were  
bones my body grew around forever far  
behind me too deep to reach to touch



to touch upon timelessness in trails  
of my youth I suppose it is possible  
to retrace my footsteps with longer  
legs and keener eyes but who's to say  
I could ever find the root that looped  
my ankle or the dip in the rock by my  
temple that collected a sip of my blood  
the problem is more than coming too  
near to see a hue reserved for distance  
it is the kaleidoscope girlhood twists  
before my eyes the red trail markers  
remain the same but lead me to pieces  
of a beloved mountaintop arrayed just so  
I can't be sure if I've been here before

if I've been here before now then I must  
have used this branch to carve an x  
in the dirt and this spot I have marked  
must betray what I dropped there when  
my body was split on the ridge when I  
stood up again could I call my limbs my  
own did the mountain teach me to walk  
away in exchange for swallowing what  
I spilled in soil rocks peek through as if  
to snag what of my cry still echoes is it  
possible to trace an outline of a body  
that has since slipped inside a mountain  
tumbling endlessly under my skin why  
does it seem real when I say it does

I am turning to you

the cicadas are whirring the way it felt to prick my fingers on their  
amber shells and know them like a season that left me damp under the  
hem I am turning it over if one can figure a creature from its husk then  
your palms conjured this rasping song in me the knots at my throat  
unravel it is my turn to name the garden what to call years spent  
writhing what to call flesh beneath the rope you gleam with firelight  
it does not lick to blacken there is gold with each singe of your tongue  
I am turning this evening is the lake I was afraid to drop inside you  
are moon mirrored murk I am folding under as you press upon my  
forehead my lungs fill with glimmer I lift

but if there is nothing there

I don't want to stop imagining  
our dry tumble at dusk under  
that sky a smear of pastel as if  
filtered through the cool eye of  
my favorite gemstone I told you  
once amethyst was nothing to me  
if not jagged it breaks me to touch  
a thing so smoothed away so I  
looked through you I held you up  
close to consider the crags that  
come between what I see and how  
do I look I have to ask if nothing  
has been held before my eyes why  
has this evening turned a shade  
that insists you are not really where  
I think you are glowing violet too  
far away why can't I shudder just  
a sliver of you between the prongs  
of this glimmering girl in me  
what would it mean for you to be  
rooted where a tumble had been  
though I think I know you are not  
the kind to be witched into gold and I  
admit loving has led me to see you cut  
to the glint though I want to say I do  
not need to see how much light you  
can catch as much as I need to keep  
touching what's rough of you I need to  
stay tumbling in the vague violet of you

you say the quartz crystal is not a kaleidoscope

you're right it's more like a telescope when I look through to the  
candle burning on the nightstand I curl into the carnelian haze of some  
galaxy you should know what orbits near what edges farther from you  
every second I can feel my ends stretching so far into space I've  
become thin in the middle I just moon circle drag shadow across my  
eyes rush of high tide pulling from inside a crystal I know that may  
seem far out but that's where I'm coming from lately I can't look at  
anything without wanting to smash it turn it sideways watch it wind  
round and recenter

when the Lord says *I will destroy her*

it is not always perched on a beige loveseat or above a scattering of finches or sky too bright to squint against when the swallowing begins her lips like a hymn her mouth opens like it would if he were listening but I am waiting for a crumb to drop her still hands her neat lap say something messy even her feet uninvolved with the soil even the birds dip and dot the ground before lifting no matter what she says or how high it warbles I hear a life paved over a quiver

when the Lord says *I will destroy her*

I stumbled upon this gouache portrait  
once when no one was around just  
this turned away woman in the frame  
I thought she wore an amber crown  
at first but they were tongues of fire  
she was all flame beneath her scalp  
it seemed to mirror for a moment  
when I looked at her I swore I saw  
the back of my own head from a pew  
nearby all those who see it will not  
smother such a glimmering burn if  
she was me remember her feverish  
don't say fair please don't leave out  
the laying on of hands tying up her  
sucking in the drinking down don't  
soften her edges she is not a queen  
she writhes in a hot kind of heaven

to Sarah, age five, already writhing

from the sleeve of a sweater  
your mother must struggle to  
pull over your shoulders you  
are not the kind who needs  
a gown to be royal as mother  
falls at your feet each Sunday  
before church as you squirm  
from the straps of a dress  
buttoned under that sweater  
hiding freckles spilling over  
your collarbone will not stay  
hidden for long I remember  
the last time we spoke Sarah  
you told me that was no longer  
your name you are Sophie now  
*I am Queen Sophie* and Sophie  
I do agree you are wiser than  
those women that long line  
of women waiting to wrest  
your arms into so many sleeves  
you wouldn't believe how tight  
silk can be or how they will  
slather the spots on your skin  
know this Sophie I was not  
like them either I want to give  
you a field of queen anne's  
lace that will always just be lace  
never a sleeve you can wear sun-  
spots for all I care Queen Sophie  
I wish you would follow me there



reinterpreting the scene beneath a kaleidoscopic lens

I have been thinking lately of an object  
it has been crushed on one side

and if I am to lay it sideways in my palm it does not cease being

crushed  
on one side

and if I am to place it in a chamber with mirrored walls

a crushing comes  
from all sides

I want to propose a past that has gone kaleidoscopic

can no longer be violent what is violent disappears in the

seams between  
mirrors

in which small pieces of girlhood seem to shrink just before

the edges grow all

the brighter they are the less jagged they

I want to propose a past that rattles at the end

of a scope I twist slow isn't something I want to take apart

I only want to  
watch this part

what happens if taking it apart is trying to remember how it

only happens when I close my eyes to

this twirling chamber fills with

a hue spreading as if

it is a bruise it has been growing bright edges since

memory is distance  
is distortion perhaps  
pressing my own eye  
to that jagged rock

since no one else could be said to have been there

eye squinting against  
shatter twinned across mirrored  
edges like jaws opening  
upon small bright

since it is entirely possible someone had been

standing behind me eying  
how best to shatter me in  
a moment my eyes were fixed

upon a shattering elsewhere upon a seam a facet a glint

these girlhood tricks

never here not really there

look how small  
and bright how they split  
the dark thrust your eyes  
down this tunnel this  
twisting chamber

these tricks of the light

they have been cut away to show their bright

insides try to look anywhere but

it was entirely possible what could have been

the brightest part of the scene  
wasn't just a stone fixed in  
a gold band it was a whole  
fistful of rock it wasn't  
clear what color

dripped from the jagged side felt less like teeth than soft mouth lifting  
yes it was entirely possible what once had been  
a dull color before broken  
in two a rock rather plain  
on the outside opened upon  
what seemed like gleaming

rows of violet teeth what was inside the dark rubbed  
raw sugar to the lips

this is how it seems to me  
what has broken has broken  
sweetly

I want to propose this is not my first proposal

waking and opening the door to the house perched on a wooded hill  
what rushed in from out was brisk what lay  
at my feet was a small splatter  
a trinket left by the barn cat

unwrapped from the flesh of a fox a gory trinket  
just a little something

I think it sprang from someplace near the heart  
the inexplicable desire  
to watch a thing  
unwrapped slowly

to memorize what it is to see what was once kept from sight  
what has been seen that should not have been seen isn't that how it goes

let alone placed  
among mirrors in a  
chamber a mind mirroring

what should not have  
been seen is seen  
over again

but if I am to lay it sideways in my palm it's as if it had never been

crushed  
on one side

just as it is

easy to overlook the teeth of such an affectionate creature

for whom leaving bloody pieces

on the doormat the nearest expression of

what has been seen that should not have been seen that it wanted me to

look at all these small bright pieces inside

once it is split how could it have been once composed

of these bright  
pieces after all  
how small

just as it is

difficult to think of that hand

as it was that day it was a fist with a rock

for whom affection was possible only after a forceful expression of

I want to propose a past that shatters

an object so brightly lit I want to say translucent

a glass prism slick  
in my palm edges not  
so sharp as to suggest  
how it will slice the pale

colorless ray breaks open as my

hand is filled with small bright pieces

and if I am to make a fist the colors only scatter across my fingernails

an object composed just so anything that comes against it will shatter

look how  
it drips from  
the jagged side glistens  
like sugar spun like  
something to lick

tricks of the light

if memory is distance is distortion it has been cut to catch

if I close my  
eyes to these  
small pieces

cannot gleam in the dark cannot rattle so brightly

in a chamber without mirrored walls what can stay hidden

what of the seams

tricks of the dark

a past that rattles at the end of a scope I break open

what seems to skitter  
like many bright gems

only this sharp heap of mirrored pieces

I want to propose a past the dark uncoils around

a rattle I might have known would fill my palm

with teeth