ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SOMETHING ABOUT ME

Olivia McClure, Master of Fine Arts Degree, 2025

Thesis directed by: Professor Joshua Weiner
Department of English

Something About Me explores the resurfacing of fragmented memories as the speaker of the poems reconciles with her past. The collection unfolds in a liminal space between past and present versions of the speaker as she converses with a former self as though through an existential mentoring. In a series of intimate recounts, she confronts her grief as a fatherless daughter, examines moments where the body became a vessel for punishment, and challenges her tumultuous relationships. As a collection, the poems work as a trajectory of catharsis; the speaker purges threats and revelations from adolescence, attempting to free herself from the rejection, shame, and fear that consumed her upbringing.

SOMETHING ABOUT ME

by

Olivia McClure

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2025

Advisory Committee:
Professor Joshua Weiner, Chair
Associate Professor Lillian-Yvonne Bertram
Associate Professor Rion Amilcar Scott

Acknowledgements

All my gratitude to the publications that have featured poems included in the collection:

Atticus Review (“Before Dad Leaves”)

Best New Poets 2024 (“Something About Me”)

Table of Contents

The Saddest Girl I Ever Met

When we were fourteen, it was a matter
of who could be the saddest. All of us
wearing outfits we orchestrated to separate
ourselves from *the happy ones*. You know

the kind. Oversized flannels, black low-rise
jeans with slits in their knees and a few cut
higher with craft scissors. Some left it at that.
Some wanted more. There's a moment

when the aesthetic becomes the truth,
like it did for the girls in therapy before
it was cool to be in therapy, or the ones who
hated their mothers because they couldn't

stand the image of themselves getting older.
I gravitated toward the saddest people I could
find. A therapist called it my desire to fix. I just
wanted to know how they got everyone

on their side. There was a girl in eighth grade.
We all knew she couldn't be beat. She told me
she went two weeks without eating
and woke up in a hospital. That hospital

sent her to another to be force fed meals
she wouldn't tell me about—their taste, still,
rotting her tongue. The girls there climbed
the outside gates just to get yanked down

and feel something. Little rag dolls scaling
the gates of heaven. I tried to stop eating.
I wanted someone to force feed me until
my spit had reason to be swallowed. I wanted

someone to want to keep me alive. I skipped out
on breakfasts and school lunches, but the minute
I got back home I was fingering through the pantry.
I'd eat half an ice cream pie in one go. *Two weeks…*

I could never be as sad as she was.
By the end of the year, she was allowed
to drop most classes and focus on the ones
that made her feel something good.

We sat across from each other in orchestra: me,
holding my mother's violin under my chin, her,
balancing a cello between her legs. Us
harmonizing the most beautiful instruments

we could find. Once, when the conductor
was busy conducting, she pulled a razor blade
from her pocket and sliced her thumb knuckle.
A red stream spilled over the face of her thumb

before she pushed it up against her thigh
to cover the bleeding. It was the same part
of the thumb that I used to rub against my lips
for comfort, and still do.

God the Father

God called a man to church camp
to talk about marriage and all us girls
spent the night in bunks fawning
over the way the microphone fit
in his hand and how his hair
stood like a wave about to crash
but not in a sticky slimy way.
The only other girl who
grew up like me quietly debated
if he would make a better husband
or father. He showed us pictures
of his wife who was as small
as we were and the ladder
from their wedding where
she stood on the third step
while his hands swallowed
the rails and he leaned her
and the ladder in for their first
pictured kiss. My bunkmate and I
scored our own picture with him.
I gloated when he touched
my shoulder instead of hers
and it was then I decided
I'd rather imagine a better husband
someone with big soft hands.
On the last night, I sat in bleachers
with girls who always felt touched
by one song or another, who loved god
so much they cried. I couldn't seem
to push out tears even though
I was sad, I was so sad.
They believed better than I ever could.
The counselors circled praying for god
the father to save them and no one would
save me if I sat there waiting
so I dug my fingernail into my wrist
and pinched my tendon as hard
as I could trying my best to
make something happen.

Mr. and Mrs.

I prefer homes with single parents but
I made an exception for a girl who had a
teacher for a mother and painter for a father.
We met when she started drawing
like her dad on anyone who'd ask
for a hand tattoo during lunch, stretching
her mandalas all across their fingers.
I asked my mom for pens like hers
though I never had a father that painted,
and I have no memories of him
in the home but still felt my friend's
arm twitch when we found her dad's
fleshlight while looking for a clean
washcloth. We knew he liked the body.
His paintings were all women but we weren't
supposed to look. He kept them locked
in a separate room. Once, we cracked
the door and stared at a purple woman
with ombre breasts and cantaloupe-colored
love handles. Her mother was thin
and freckled like my father's side
and had a habit of pacing the kitchen
when the house turned quiet, and she always
insisted they ate dinner as a family even if
something good was on TV, like that first time
I came over and we watched Grey's Anatomy
and the episode was about orgasms
and the woman couldn't stop cumming
and my friend couldn't stop laughing
and the whole time I was watching her
mother's face while her father was upstairs.
Just us and the tv and the woman
moaning into a pillow while men
crowded around her.

The Time We Got Caught

The only place to fuck when you're stuck
in suburbs are the parking lots off Scenic Highway
between the construction project by old U-Haul
units or the corner by Longhorn with busted
streetlights or, if you're clever, the backside

of a mega church. My girlfriend went down
on me for the first time in the backseat
of my twice-removed Nissan Versa
during our lunch breaks. It was our first
"real" time, whatever that means to you.

And I swear to God, a man came out
of nowhere. During our post-sex stroll
around the neighboring Chick-Fil-A—
him pacing around the church's gardening
shed. His shoes fat and brown, his steps small,

catching ants with his toes. His glasses slid
down the tip of a shiny nose, but worst of all,
his hair was thin as a dog's tail, grey and hanging
on for dear life. I saw him first, walking over

with eyes on our clasped hands. We were
used to *the look*—like from that guy who saw us
kiss in Dollar Tree and begged for a threesome.
I don't know. Something about the way

his feet competed with each other told me
this was different from *that*. The shed trotter
walked right up to us, in the middle of the lot
where God could see it. He asked what we

were up to. Just grabbing lunch. My fattest
fakest smile. He asked about my car.
Students looking for a quiet place to study.

Squinting that type of squint when you're trying
to see in the dark, he asked what we two friends
were studying. We walked around him.

I don't think y'all were studying,
C'mon, tell me about the car
gettin' steamy. I won't tell.

We ran to my car and prayed
the piece of shit would start.

Studying anatomy? I like anatomy
especially when it's with two girls.

Do you still think about us, shed trotter?
Do you touch your tools and imagine the O

of my face in your tulips? Do you maybe

sort of wish we were your daughters, waiting

to be given something to do with our hands?

Something About Me

Something about me reminds men of their daughters
and I say that because it's been said more than once
by more than one man on totally separate occasions
but I can only remember one instance well enough
it was the last year of middle school the same year
everything went to shit and by everything I mean all
my friends started cutting their legs and the first time
I saw it up close I gasped then apologized because I was
no stranger to watching someone punish themselves
but had never seen an entire leg beat up like that so sorry
for reacting I know it's rude to react but honestly when I
started hurting myself to fit in and because it's just
what you did when you were sad all I wanted was for
someone to react so I switched from my thigh to my wrist
and wore sleeves long enough to cover it when I was around
people I didn't care about but short enough to hike up
when I was around people I did and there were a few times
I let it show in homeroom because I saw this teacher
comfort a girl who stopped eating when she was sitting
outside the nurse's office and he looked like he really cared
and I wanted to be cared for too so I'd raise my hand
and let my sleeve fall and I know he must've seen it
I know other people did because one time a girl I hardly knew
and did not like told my best friend that she was letting me
kill myself and I called her a bitch because it wasn't
my best friend's fault and I didn't want to kill myself I just
wanted someone to tell me something nice and I'd hoped
it'd be a man because my father rarely called and when he did
it was never nice so I'd hoped my homeroom teacher would
step in but he didn't and when I stopped trying to get anyone's
attention and went back to my thighs he went off in the middle
of class and he was the type to get angry over nothing and
for some reason he didn't like me that day so when I laughed
at my best friend's doodle he stopped class and yelled in front
of everyone that I was a little brat and had a smartass look
on my face and I didn't know what to say except nothing
and sorry and no one knew what to say so class went back
to normal and a few days later he called me over to his desk
and told me he was sorry and said he was having a hard time
and reminded me that his kids lived in Florida with his ex-wife
and we were in Georgia and he missed his kids and rarely
got to see them and he was sorry for taking that out on me but
there was something about me that reminded him of his daughter.

The Cellist

As a thank you for not calling the counselor
when I caught her cutting, the cellist taught me
how to get out of chord practice. The trick
was to blow into an imaginary balloon,
forcing the chest before sucking all the air
back, over and over. The trick was to breathe
in rhythm with the cello until there was no
difference between the bow and the strings
and the air filling the throat. It was less of an act
than you'd think—I've heard that the mind
follows the body. She taught me how to breathe
until my lungs tried to fill themselves
one eighth note at a time.

Eager to learn, I followed her around to discover
other habits she'd picked up from, what seemed
to be, a life's worth of treatment. *This is how*
I saw them do it. *This is how we survive*.
She directed which muscles to flex to suck
in the meaty bits around a collarbone and where
to pry tweezers to pop out a blade (carefully,
to avoid nicking the thumb). She was one of few
open to kissing girls in public. I saw it happen
with a girl who had a choppy pixie
and thick black liner. Together,

they informed all the ways I could bend
my body, positions possible for a girl like me.
The cellist must've known that I'd grown to love
everything about her. She must have known
after fainting in my arms on the way to rehearsal
after force feeding herself the tip of a barely yellow
banana that all I needed to hear was that I might be
her one true friend, but when the pixie girl
heard that I sat with the cellist during her attacks,

she considered us cheats. The pair loved each other
until they wanted to choke. I was a finger on the hand
squeezing hardest. The counselor overheard and
brought us all together to breathe. I sat while the pair
sobbed over who hurt who worse while the counselor
smiled, complimented my blue nail polish
and said she wished she'd had a girl of her own.
When the cellist got caught writing letters during

fifth period with me right next to her,
she was taken away for good.

I couldn’t see what she was writing but it took up
the whole page, and after she was gone the counselor
made sure to blame us girls. I gave up the violin after
the cellist gave up the cello, and there’s not much else
to say except that, while writing this, I’m listening
to recordings of strings as a reminder to breathe.

Curtain Room

I knew a girl whose mom let her hang
curtains in their unfinished basement
to call it a bedroom. I was jealous of her
red hair and way of knowing everything
like the real meaning of *eating out* and
what happens when sprite mixes with grape
cough syrup (the curtain-walls copied her
breathing). I thought I might've loved her
if she hadn't loved putting her mouth on
men in the woods behind the pond I grew
up around. When she missed school for
two weeks, I found her in the hall on her
first day back, said *I thought you died*!
She told me she *almost made it*, filling me
in on her stay in the ICU after swallowing
her mom's old prescriptions. The first time
I saw the curtain room, it was just like I
imagined—cement blocks painted with
chalk drawings in corners the curtains
couldn't reach, lacy bedding, a black
futon facing a square tv, and a fat metal
pole holding it all together, the one from
those pictures she took of herself and
forwarded around. Another girl helped
with the angles. They were friends but
kissed when bored and I wanted someone
to be close to like that. Everything was
purple. We watched movies that could
have been porn with women whose
nails were caked in dirt, and she
was kind enough to offer me her
crushed Xanax to make it feel 3D
but didn't mind that I turned it down.
When she started to fall asleep, she told me
I could lay next to her if I didn't mind her legs
touching mine or how her canopy smelled
like lake water sitting in your nose.
The thing about water is it smells
like nothing until it reminds you
of where you learned to swim.

Red Pink Clear

Sissy and I share the bathroom upstairs.
She locks it up when the shower's running,
but I have a way of tricking the lock
into unwinding itself. My thumb nail
is long and strong enough to fit
in the knob's little slot, and if I wiggle it
just right, it'll turn right open. Sometimes
I sneak in when the water's falling loud
enough to hide the lock's clicks and creaks.
I walk on my toes and pop right over
the shower door, singing whatever song
Sissy has stuck in her head that week.

Sissy doesn't care for cleaning like I do.
Her drawer is stuffed full
of squeezed toothpaste tubes
and stray earring backs and bunches of pink
disposable razor safety caps and dried up
tissues and Band-Aids folded in
on themselves. She tells me to leave it be.

Sissy locks the bathroom up
when the shower's running, and sometimes
for the faucet, too. I like to sit up against
the wall by the door and wait for her. I listen
and wait to jump out with my arms up
in the air and my tongue hanging out
like a big little wild animal.

Sometimes, sissy goes in at night
when we're supposed to be sleeping
and the faucet wakes me up. I lay my ear
on my door, counting the seconds
she leaves the water going. When it finally
shuts off and she shuffles back to her room,
locking herself back up, I tip-toe over
to find her mess before morning. She's not
too good at cleaning, but I don't mind wiping up
whatever she left behind and hiding it
at the bottom of the trash can. It doesn't
stain if you catch it early.

Slapped by the Sun

The first time I watched mom hold E's arm
under the kitchen faucet, around the year
we stopped taking the same bus to school
(E's to the middle, mine still around the corner
with the shiny blue-yellow playground set),
I watched the water fall pink but stayed back
to keep it from catching on my white Build-A-Bear
(named Fluffy because it was). The whole scene
reminded me of jelly—that kind that spreads
a little runny and oozes out the sides
of plump white bread.

And later, when everyone started
doing it, when it seemed like the thing to do,
I looked up pictures to see how far it could go.
Some girl's Instagram was dedicated to documenting
the ones she let heal unstitched. A friend caught me
looking and declared it *the work of an exacto.*
She was known for doodling all up her arms.

That time our theatre group shared a closet
for changing, I snuck a peek at the girl
who was rumored to be the worst case in
the eighth grade. You would've thought the sun
slapped her legs with how puffy red they were.

The real surprise: the first boy to talk about kissing
flashed the pocketknife he used on himself
in between carpentry projects with his father.

My friend held her fattest scar up against his.
I have one that looks just like it—almost like
a drop of spilled milk trickling to the left.

Clean Teeth

Gabby says I have the ‘real kind’ of trauma
the same way an old therapist called
my childhood ‘the worst’
after I told her I had no
reason to complain

she also called it intense, violent, sad

I wasn’t allowed to say
sucks or *fine* during therapy
she wanted me to name
each feeling give it
a place in the body
for me it was always
I don’t know and *lonely* and
shoulders
shoulders
shoulders

there were so many trees
outside her office window
the kind a painter could spend hours on
outlining leaf after leaf
gifting them little lives
of their own and all
I could do was stare

I have trouble remembering
I have trouble writing about the now
It’s a symptom of it all
lying in bed
chewing apple skins to clean teeth
waiting for the next bad thing

deciding

if someone’s unhappy
is there something I can do differently

Even now
I can’t remember
what I meant to say back there
about the present
the thing is

I don’t let myself think much
unless I’m writing a poem
like I was trained to do

I used to talk to myself
when things got bad
I would say *everything is okay*
you know how to take care of yourself

I could show you a picture of my bed
when it was all happening
how it was covered in stuffed animals
how I’d try to hold them all
at once I’d look each one
in the eye and say
you are safe
you are safe
you are safe

Clementine

I shared a desk with a girl I knew
from preschool during our last year of middle.

We were closer when she wore an eye patch
and I had a lisp, but she was nice to be around

in the sense that she smiled at everyone.
When I stopped eating lunch, she let me

sit with her group and a tray full of food
to pretend I was just like them, and

even though they noticed that I talked
more than chewed they let me be

and only squirmed slightly when I poured
chocolate milk over chicken nuggets

to keep myself *honest*. The boy who
was my first peck of a kiss usually held

the attention by handing one of us
a plastic fork and asking that person

to stab the fork into his hand as hard
as they could until it snapped and sprayed

the tongs across the table like confetti. One of us
always did. How else would we entertain ourselves?

Our favorite teacher was known for his name
which sounded awfully close to clementine.

On pi day, he brought in donuts cakes and
cookies to occupy our chattering

teeth in the name of *pie*. I plucked a single Oreo
from the tray to make it look like I ate

so much I couldn't finish that last bite.
Clementine walked over, said *all that talk*

and only one cookie? The girl with the ghost
of a Hello Kitty eye patch blurted out

I hadn’t eaten in five days. I froze and
Clementine froze and his face looked

like he found the class bird
at the bottom of a lake. I panicked

and shoved the whole Oreo in my mouth.
His mouth stayed slightly open

holding something there, too.
For the rest of the term, he left

little baggies of chips and apple slices
on my side of the table, the same way

a cardinal drops food
into his nestling’s mouth.

Visitation

My father left slowly,
kept his things around
and visited from time to time
to nap in my bed and sneak
Honeycrisps from the fridge
while mom ran errands.
I'd chase her car down the driveway
with hands on the door handle
while she reversed carefully
to avoid pulling me
out from under my feet.
She gave my father the grace
of leaving on his own time.
I told him to leave me
out of visitations. He moved
in with his brother who was always
traveling but had an exercise bike
and hot tub and more penis statues
than I could count. Okay they were
statues of nude men but this was before
I saw a naked body that wasn't my own.
I gave each statue a name and called them
lucky. My father moved houses until
I was grown enough to leave one
for good. I tried to tell him
to make it quick, cut the cord
before it tears. He called me *child*
and said I couldn't understand.
Our last fight, he said *bitch*
then something then *petulant,*
the same thing an ex called me
when I wouldn't talk about how it felt
to be left. I told him he can't say that
anymore. I'm grown now. I know
how to love. I could never
watch someone that small
throw herself into a rolling car
and say anything other than
love and forgive me.

Self-Portrait

What if I never made it out of Lilburn
if I was never supposed to
become a writer what if
E was born on a different day
to a different mother what if she
never learned how to make herself bleed
what if I didn't watch her try to die
over and over what if I was old enough
to know that she didn't want to die
she wanted us afraid what if my father
was a happy man if he stopped drinking
when he said he would
what if he had a son what
if I didn't try to make him stay
if I didn't tell him to hurry up and leave
what if I went to a different school
if I never played the violin if I didn't check
everyone's arms for scars like E's
if I didn't meet the girl whose cuts
went deeper if she didn't meet the girl
who stopped eating what if I didn't
want to help them what if someone
gave me the attention I needed
what if my father came back
when I asked him to what if I didn't
learn how many calories are in a bagel
if I didn't spend a year cutting my legs
if I didn't know how to hide it
what if I didn't fall in love
with the loudest girl in the room
if she didn't stack bracelets on her wrist
if I didn't ask what she was hiding
if she didn't love me back
if we weren't called dykes
what if I never told anyone about her
if they never had the chance to call it a phase
what if that teacher never asked why I looked
so sad if he never said I have what it takes
to do something great what if my father
never shook my boyfriend's hand
if his grip was looser
what if I grew up around men
if I had one good memory of a man
if anyone knew how badly I needed that

what if my mom had more time
if we had more money
if our home wasn't exhausting
what if E was diagnosed sooner
if she learned to cry
a little quieter what if we didn't
share a bathroom if I didn't read her journals
what if we disconnected the landline
sooner if my father never had my number
what if I cut him off when I wanted to
what if I paid more attention
to the women in my life
if I struck up a conversation
with a stranger what if I didn't start smoking
if I didn't have lockdown as an excuse
if I wasn't scared of drinking
what if I never wrote a poem
that anyone called good
what if I liked numbers
if I got really good with numbers
what if I chose something different for myself
if I was someone who could sit in the grass
for hours picking at the ground
until there was nothing left
but dirt and worms
and loose blades of grass
what if I could call that
a perfect day
because it really was.

Keeping Tempo

I take up violin because
mom used to play it and we still
had the one she played years ago
in the guest room closet even

though she ends up renting me my
own after hers is too wide for
my chin when I start taking less-
ons in second grade to see if

I am secretly a child
prodigy and even though I
quit after a year of learning
chords from a warmup book in a

real violinist's house's spare
room every Monday I take it
back up when all middle schoolers
have to choose a creative course

to take and because I am not
any good at drawing and wind
instruments involve too much spit
and breathing I get three years out

of it. I bounce my knee to keep
tempo, the only one in my
section with movement. *Tapping your
toe is okay*, the conductor

says. *The leg, too much*. I never
break the habit but I'm first chair
most months. Some opt out of playing
for worksheets on sight reading. I

never do. In my last year, I
find one of their portable sharp-
eners and take it. I had read
about tricks like unwinding a

sharpener's front screw until the
blade pops out and keeping it close
just in case. I never figure
out how to sanitize it. I

never use it. I keep it in
an old Altoid tin (bought for that
purpose) with all the others. My
portable garden. I love the

violin because it’s something
beautiful. Because, unlike the
cello which I find equally
beautiful, it fits in one hand.

Small Little Thing

it’s just a father we all have ‘em maybe
some are different mine barks like a dog
does yours have brown or black shoes
can yours balance an apple on top of his head
how many shadow puppets can he make
with his fingers the right answer is as many
as you want the right answer is more than one
less than three the right answer is he has no fingers
he was the apple all along see it’s just a father
in a poem something you can bite that can’t
bite you back have you ever thrown an apple
at a wall I mean really throw that shit into something
and watch it burst into flames it’ll look
something like a party popper something like
apple sauce in the making something like
a father begging for mercy hey tell me about
that damn dog again is he shedding like crazy
how many times a day do you brush his hair
don’t tell me he’s hypoallergenic how could you
be allergic to your father okay what about
the color of his eyes do they match
his shoes brown eyes brown eyes they used to call us
he used to call me peanut as in small little thing
as in something you can carry he used to call me
what your father calls you when you’re hungry
and tired and scared of what’s coming next

Watching Her Watching Him

When I was eight, I asked the easter bunny
for the third Star Wars movie on DVD.

I drew up a fat-eared-blue-short-wearing bunny
(double the size of little stick figure me)

handing over the disc and attached a note
that said something along the lines of
Santa can help you get this to me.

I believed in magic so much I thought
I was testing Easter's spirit, testing

if Santa and Bunny knew me well enough
to know that I just *had to* watch the 'Revenge one'

after dad let me binge the original trilogy
when I was home for a week with a bad cough.

When I learned Darth Vader was all burnt up
under his suit, I sucked down a juice box
to choke back a little sob.

When I saw Obi Wan's face after he lost
a good friend in Anakin, someone like
a little brother or son or boy

who never stood a chance, I wished
I could un-watch the whole thing.

E watched the movies after me
but she loved them more than anything.

She watched and watched them any chance
she could get, and every time she watched

Anakin turn to the dark side, she wailed
like a blow horn was burning itself out

in her chest. She went on and on until neighbors
stopped by our driveway to listen in

for signs of struggle. Mom would have to
run out to explain no one died, no one

was hurting, my daughter just …

E chose blue stickers at the dentist.
E wrote in blue pen.

We had a portable DVD player for long car rides
since mom's van was too old for any
fancy build-ins like that.

E and I watched Pink Panther back-to-back
on the way to dad's house that winter we spent
Christmas Eve in North Carolina.

E started hiding the player under her bed
with *Revenge of the Sith* cemented in
always watching watching watching.

E was on the blue team in Mario Kart.
E liked blue raspberry not cherry.

Mom tried hiding the thing but E always found a way.

Once I claimed the blue team before E could
and she screamed and quit and screamed.

Blue is for Jedis.
Red is for Sith lords.

Nothing was like the third movie.
Something about watching Anakin turn bad…

E found or stole a poster of Anakin's face
and hung it in her room. She talked
and talked and talked to him.

Every time she watched the movie,
she'd have the scary kind of meltdowns.

Mom and I have names for the worst ones.
They're all named after food because it usually
happened around dinner. Sloppy Joe and spaghetti—

the worst of the worst. Something or nothing
was happening that day and Anakin was the trigger.

She couldn't handle the scene where Anakin turned dark

or, in the last movie, when Darth Vader takes off his helmet
and dies. That moment you see his eyes soften

behind all the wrinkly scarred skin. She couldn't handle it.

She'd lock herself in her room screaming
and crying into the poster for hours.

Now that I think about it, I bought her the poster
that Christmas.

I was trying to let her love the things that she loves.

Mom tried to help with ice cream.
I stood in her doorway telling knock-knock jokes.
Sometimes it lasted until the morning.

Mom tried talking to her about Anakin.

A therapist said he might be E's way of talking to God.

This was after years of testing the voices
to get to the bottom of where they were coming from.

Not schizophrenia

something like depression

you could call it a hallucination

but we never knew

if she actually heard him or if she just wanted to

believe in something.

How can I explain a kid whose best friend lives in her head
without making it sound like a cute normal kid thing to do?

The poster only seemed to make things worse.

I don't remember when E started talking to Anakin.

It was before dad left but it got real bad
when it was just mom and I.

E snuck downstairs in the middle of most nights
to watch Star Wars on late night TV.

I'd tip-toe after her to listen for signs of the third movie.
Sometimes I'd pretend to need a glass of water.

We grew up going to the church
by the preschool where mom used to work.
E loved to sing in the choir on Sundays.

I started to hate the poster more than anything.

I couldn't understand why mom let her keep it
when all it did was cause trouble.

I snuck into E's room before she got home from school
and scribbled black sharpie all over Anakin's face.

Mom was more mad than I'd ever seen.
E was less mad than I expected.
The poster stayed up scribbles and all.

E calmed down when Anakin told her to.

E calmed herself down by poking at her skin.

E liked to be feel close to Anakin.

E used one of mom's razors to cut his scar into her face.

That Sunday she walked with the choir
in between church pews
and mom had to turn away.

If she's talking to God maybe she knows something we don't.
If she's talking to God maybe it's not so bad after all.
If she's talking to God maybe it's her way of coping

and we need to honor that.

It's hard to explain an addiction that isn't to pills or beer.

I really did try to understand.
I asked her questions about Anakin
like he was a friend from school.

It’s hard to explain to the girls in the neighborhood
what a non-schizophrenic-voices-hearing sister
sounds like when she starts screaming.

I can’t remember what I’d say about him
but I know we were supposed to
treat him like a real person.

It’s hard to explain why I leave the room
when people start talking about Star Wars.

I used to signal to people when they were egging her on.

I’d open my eyes real big, and when she’d turn
away for a second, I’d give my head a quick shake.

A head shake can only explain so much.

How can I explain this in a way that makes sense?

Listen—

he’d tell her to stop screaming
when mom started crying.

He’d get angry when I started crying
because that’s not the response he was looking for.

He wanted us to listen and watch
and I can’t tell you what else
but there were few things

that could convince her to stop.

A diagnosis didn’t matter then
and maybe it doesn’t now.

On the worst nights, I sat in her doorway
and talked over her wailing.

I came up with little skits and all
these different characters that were so ridiculous
it forced her to listen.

Nose Goes the giant nose that delivered pizza.
A mailman who never ran out of mail.

Steve the gameshow host who could never get anything right.

Like those sketch comedies she'd watch
in between Star Wars marathons.

We called it our "show."

I imagined a world we could both live in.
Sometimes, it helped her fall asleep.

Before Dad Leaves

he takes me to the river every chance he gets.
We walk the same path each time, always
the one that gets us to the water the quickest—it's hidden
now, after years of busy feet knocking around
the rocks that lined the path. We knew we were getting close
when the rocks broke off and the dirt faded
into sand, just past the dead trunk lying
in the middle of it all. Then we'd start to hear it.
The short drop-off that I'd hardly call a waterfall
spilling water over stones. We tried to go
right after it rained, when the spillage and stones clapped
loud enough to block out everything else. It never mattered
how cold the water was. Dad liked to see how far across
he could get, me burying my socks in my shoes,
rolling up my jeans as far as they'd go, scrambling
to catch up. Dad tested the sturdiness of the rocks
before I jumped from one to the next, using my toes
to grip the edges like he taught me.
We walked around like that, cold water biting at our ankles,
until we got to the wide flat stone that stuck out
smack in the middle of the river, almost as if
someone put it there to give us a place to dry off.
I'd set up on the rock—knees to my chest,
watching fish pick leaves off river weeds.
I turn back to dad, but he's already
gone further, knee deep in the second drop-off
holding his hands under the cascade
trying to drink the water through his palms.

Our Keep

wake up! your sister is naked
and crying remember to
keep her out to forget
how small you used to be

dig your feet into the ground grip
the carpet with your toes
to keep her out press
your hands your forehead

maybe your chest up
against the door your body
a 45-degree angle to keep
her out now remember

to write a poem to
talk to a therapist tell
a therapist about the color
of the scarf she wrapped

around her neck
to keep her out remember
the shades of blue
how many shades of blue

can live in a poem
before it drowns
remember the butterfly print
that rested on her chest

how the monarch swam
in all the blue
to keep her out
tell a therapist

it was one of those
infinity scarfs that wrapped
around her neck forever
and forever and forever

Daddy

I tell them about my legs.
They ask about my head
to toe everything and I tell them

my skin is smooth like a fawn's back
but they'll have to mind my marks.
I can't help but tell the truth. I want to

hear the word beautiful. I want to hear
it's an ugly habit. The truth is
nobody asks why I have them, daddy.

They want to hear about my face
when I did it. They want me to say
I bit my lip and closed my eyes.

A body with a backstory is
a pleasure to picture.

Daddy, do you believe in fate?
This one says God put me in his life
for a reason. He comes from struggle, too.

He likes my smile and the curve
of my spine, says he can tell
I'm a good girl by my posture.

He wants to know me, daddy, wants me
to know a showerhead on skin
feels like dancing. He asks for pictures

pictures pictures of my everything
but I won't give it all away.

We have the same favorite movie.
He even bought me a ticket to the
midnight showing and offered

to pick me up in his skinny red car.
I wanted to see what would happen,
daddy. Do you remember

the sound of my voice?
He misses it so bad
he shows up to my shifts for a taste,

says he drives by the school
to picture it soften for the choir.
He loves asking questions

questions questions but only
if I ask him good ones, too.

Daddy, do you miss the rain?
I swear it used to rain so hard
the whole block smelled like a pond.

Daddy, what does it feel like
to walk on the moon? Is it something
like jumping on the bed?

Daddy, how old was I when we met?
I want to say twelve. I want to say sixteen.
I want to say the age I learned to talk.

He stays up late just to talk to me.
He wants to know what I think
about when everything else goes quiet.

We talk about the weather.
We talk about college applications.
We talk about the heaviest thing

I can lift and how much liquor I can sneak
before puking. He wants me to say
three things I like about him.

He's lonely, daddy. It's hard being alone.
He says if it weren't for me,
he wouldn't make it through each day.

Daddy, he keeps asking where you are.
He wants me to open up up and up
until there's no secrets between us.

Daddy, can you spare a dollar?
He still shows up to work but leaves quick
if I slip him something for free.

Daddy, can you count to ten?
The thunder's getting closer
but it'll stop if we count it away.

Daddy, what color do you see
when you close your eyes? For me
it's usually greenish blackish blue

like bad water. Daddy, he cares
about you because he's part of you.
A creek feeds a river feeds a lake.

Dear Sylvia,

Daddy is your father's foot like Daddy is my father's hand.

Tell me about the moment you realized Daddy.
I think you'd understand when I say Daddy

is father is any man who smiles when he's angry.
Tell me about the brute. Show me the blackboard.
My Daddy's remembered by the Atlantic—

wide hands holding my two feet, pushing them up
out of the water until I could walk on waves.

You seem to have a fondness for Daddy
that I can't bear. I won't say I know what it means
to marry Daddy but I know how his breath feels when he's lying.

I'm sorry Daddy did this to you.
Daddy made us this way. I had to learn that

Daddy created Daddy long before I
understood who he was. Who is he to you?

More than a model. He's Daddy the tongue,
Daddy the war, Daddy the root. Are you the jaw,
the tank, the stake or am I missing the point of it all?

I won't make this about me. I'm trying to understand
where Daddy came from, why he loves those who lost
Daddy before we could imagine replacing him.

What scares you the most?
Where do you hear Daddy?

How much of your father is in Daddy and how much
of Daddy is in you? I won't say they are the same.

Would you believe me if I said I dreamt up Daddy
before I heard about yours?

I don't want to kill Daddy. I don't think we'll ever
be through. I want to show Daddy off.

I want to prove that Daddy is obsessed.
Daddy is everywhere. Daddy was created

for us, not by us.

The condition not the symptom.
The reason not the cause.
The figure not the man.

Let me take your Daddy and put him
in mine. Let Daddy contain all Daddys
contain the breaths the obscenities the true.

Let me take Daddy on and pretend to understand you.

The Poem Game

Tell me about your father.

Don’t say abandoned
unless you can say you’ve never left
anything behind. You are not
a buried hobby. Be precise.

This was no divorced dad’s
deserved second act. This was
an out of the blue *fuck you*
with emphasis on *you*,

the daughter with a mouth
like her mother’s. Now,
surprise me—

describe that blade, baby!
Let’s hear about
the beaute’s brute force.

Make it seductive. Keep me
on the line. Did you get caught
prying yourself open?

Bring it back to your father.

Should we call him a pawn?
Should we call him the king?

Let me have a turn.

Make me hold the blade.
Convince me all connections
happen through blood.

Make me wonder what your arms
look like but keep them covered
to keep me guessing.

It’s time to see you win.
This is about you, after all.

Should I call you the board?
Should I call you the trophy?

Let’s hear about you cornering
your father. Where does he go
when there are no moves left?

What happens to the blade
when I put it down? Go on,

tell me what happens
when we get to the end.

When I Asked E if She Wanted to Die

we were standing around the kitchen table,
doing one of the projects mom liked us to do

in hopes that we'd learn
to get along. I knew to ask

when she was in a good mood.
Sometimes, she tried

to act like a wise older sister.
She wanted to be the one to teach me

all the things I didn't understand.
It worked best when I was little.

She made up all these scenarios
where I was a patient or a kid

at school or, my favorite,
a drowning victim at the pool.

E always liked to play the person
saving the day. When I was real little,

I used to climb into her bed
begging for a sleepover.

I'd cuddle up under her covers and try
to force my eyes asleep before she could

kick me out. I could never fall asleep
fast enough. We called those nights "Sissy Time,"

just me and 'sissy' when that's all E was
to me. When I asked her why

she took all those pills
that one time it was enough

to get her sent away, if she was really
trying to leave for good,

I stood behind the back of a kitchen chair
and leaned up against it, resting

my chin in the dip of the chair's back,
hiding from her answer.

She shook her head no, explained
she knew which ones to take

and how many.
I couldn't understand it.

It was never about drowning.
E wanted someone to see her

holding my head above the water. She wanted
everyone to know that she was capable

of doing something good.

Take My Hand

let me show you
something
let me think
about the old house
the one between every other house
with the same mean family
see your hand as a child
believe she will leave
now give my hand a turn

hear this part, child
the first man to leave
will not be the last
all mean men
know something
about you
take something from them
take their country
take their life

take my hand
one more time
give it something new
call it woman
call it child
call it you

I am every mean man
the house they leave
I leave first
because I can
I leave last because
I need you to hear me

the men in you have a place there
you have to look back
at your mean life
and tell me
about your first good day.