IN THE RED MOUTH

by

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Abstract

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Art Infects Life 25
Avant-Garde Dance Troupe 26
Chaos Speaks 27
Guernica 28
Kiss 29
Alice Neel, Self-portrait, 1980 30
What is Mortality 31
Mulkiber Builds Pandemonium 32
Boy on the Rocks 34
Money Lady 35
Excerpt 36
Observations on a Sail 37
Symbiosis on the Sidewalk 38
To the Committee for Exploration, a Proposal 39
Memento Mori 40
Walking Home 41
Sin Complains of Cramps 42
Continuation 43

Notes 44
Biographical Statement 45
Love Poem for a Planet

Before I met you, the allure of Earth was enough.
Now I see you in every round thing, and you have me
chugging rocket fuel. I would etch myself onto your surface,
breathe your vowels to the void

if you’d let me near you. But you never return
my calls, you drift without thinking,
polishing your moons—you are aloof.

Is it because your cosmic intuition
tells you I’m the kind of human
that makes our species hard to love?

You could show me how to be
more planetary: more silent and vast.
Teach me inscrutability and mold me

into a sphere. Bathe me in ammonia ice.
Tell me the method for imbibing light.
I’ll repair myself. I’ll be something

other than debris, flecks of space dust
in your red eye.
Hands

I.

Hans Castorp saw his hand
laid bare to bones in a machine.
An X-ray so-called, it showed
the future of decay. How it ate
the flesh and left the scaffolding
on display. His ring remained,
hanging loose and black along
a line of white.

II.

A round little hill, the body,
a mass of guts and stuff
unglamorous. I like the body
in art only where it can stay constant.

III.

I have a thing for the grotesque.
The gnarled, aching hand.
One lunatic has it wrapped
around another's neck. Sometimes
the edge of ugly dulls with age;
becomes soft and sought out: like babies
probing for a wrinkled neck
with fat, fat fingers on hands.

IV.

I'd like a deformed ghost
for a friend—maybe
Richard III, so rudely stamped.
Would the dogs still bark?
Would he walk with a halt?
Would his hands be heavy with rings?

We could compare our ugly:
I have a crooked bottom tooth,
and what's more I'm selfish,
petty and cruel. What about you?
A good game, but not as fun
as the one where I try to guess
what it’s like to be immaterial—
what it’s like to see your hands
but not feel them.

V.

El Greco painted a man
and showed the gold hilt of a sword
and the spread of a pale hand.
Everything elongated,
even his head. When I die,
paint me in his style. Every
wrinkle a rivulet in a face
like a satin cloak; every finger
gleaming with rings;
every angle exaggerated
and immortal.
Postcard From the Afterlife

Earth is the home of our corpses, of course, but you should also know: all things intangible will be carried by train cars to the place where lines of longitude fray.

There is no limbo but the delay of light wanly preceding the day.

You will notice a new music here: the sound of slow decay. Every thing that grows gives a hum as it wilts away, to remind us, I suppose, that it was not, and then was, now almost is not and does not care.
Dead bird.

Lying on its back,
beak pointed up, talons tucked
and curled, wings primly folded in.

Most likely it flew into the building
going to meet its black-
and-white-striped red-
throated reflection in the window.

Stately, somehow, resting
on this slick-stoned bench.
What kind of bird is this?
My grandmother would know.

She has an encyclopedia
of their colors and calls.
She has a hummingbird feeder
filled with sugar water.
They come quickly with wings beating
at unfathomable speeds.
I was there when a green one

slammed into her kitchen window
and bounced back only stunned,
we realized, when it flew away
after a few flicks of tap water,
a fast baptism.

I could send her a picture of this
horizontal winged-thing
with glassed black eyes.
She would know what kind of bird.
She would say have you tried tap water.
Something Like a Grin

With a drill my father filed wisps of enamel from my mother’s teeth one by one. He’s a pro.

He pasted over those ghosts with tiny porcelain mirrored swaths of white.

That shine—a floating dagger I cannot grasp.
A semblance of a sword.

A congregation of teeth flashing their lights on and off with parting lips mouthing good night.
Poem with Robot and Talking Dog

I found a robot and named it after you.
It was crumpled near the curb and had one foot
missing, a twisted nose, a steel block head and chest
convex—I took it home.

On the couch, splayed across the robot’s lap,
the dog chewed little grey robot fingers.
Robot, what’s your deal?
my dog said with a tinny mouth full
of springs and steel.

“Robot, where’s your mother?
What are you doing with your hair?
Don’t mind my gnawing; you’ll only need
one hand here. I’ll take the other one
and bury it in my bed. It’ll be in my blanket
next to bones and scraps of paper I’ve hoarded
to make a nest within my nest.
It’s almost like the holes I was bred to burrow in.
I hunt stuffed foxes and panda bears
and hold their throats between sharp teeth.

Hey, Robot, were you made to kill
or maim? It doesn’t matter.
The food is meted into bowls
and dry—no blood, no shreds
of flesh to thrash. I like it here.
It’s calm. I’m lazy, though I enjoy trips outside
to sniff squirrels, fat birds,
things that make my brain pulse fast
when I start toward them.

It’s like the wild I’ve never seen.
You’ll understand. The factory
will soon become a dream.”
Another Epic

—after Fuseli’s “Milton Dictating to His Daughter”

Undead Milton, stop stalking me.
I see you in the clouds and hear you
cough behind the trees. I know you want
to make me your pet; to feed me
poetry from your hands, blind.
You whisper words into me;
you want to try rhyme.
You’ve had a lot of time to think:
Paradise needs a trilogy.
She looked at the forms and said money.
A baby cried.
She said money
and typed on a calculator furiously.
(Dividends and interest and exclusions)
She said money
and gold coins foamed from her mouth.
She squinted at statements
and her tongue unrolled from her head
and licked MONEY onto the desk.
(Taxable amount tax withheld tax due)
She said money.
She would not stop saying
money.
(Please check this box and leave line 9 blank)
I said money back at her
and watched her head deflate.
I stood on the desk and yelled money
as birds descended from the ceiling
and squawked and chattered
money money money money.
Board Meeting

I lived for a time in a Beckett play,
   popping out from one trashcan, into another:

in one bin I watched floating heads
   yelp about budgets, about quorums and trusts;

I waited for someone
   to flip a table or swallow a pencil or strangle a bird

until it laid an egg; I waited
   for the screeching laughter.

I helped the untethered
   polish their plastic teeth. We listened to the clack

of words that weren’t words, or were
   barely words or were something like words.

Lukewarm coffee
   poured from our heads in an unceasing stream.

We waded neck-deep,
   waiting for the gavel to say mercy.
Notes on Magritte

Magritte painted two lovers kissing through faces veiled with fabric.

The kiss without flesh: the frustrated desire to know another person wholly.

Magritte’s mother drowned herself in the River Sambre.

Magritte was fourteen, and he saw his mother lifted from the water; he saw her nightgown slicked to her face like a veil.

I think of Magritte’s mother; I think of her river water-veil.

No face but an apple no face but a sky no face but hydrangeas no face but a dove—
Advice from the Exterminator

In the old days,  
worker ants would track  
poison into the hill  
unwittingly.  
To kill an ant  
colony, crucify  
the queen.  
You should see  
the legs dangle.  
This way,  
the slow death starts  
with a show.
Not by Bread Alone

Like Rimbaud, I await God
as a glutton, licking my lips.
With knife and fork I carve
into churches. I dig into scripture
with a spoon. It is not enough
to eat; I need proof. If I set the table,
my God, will you come down? I'll feed you
whatever you need: slices of pear,
flayed animals, my buttered hair.
(Then I will gorge on you and leave
the feast with divinity smeared
on my fingertips. I'll face my palms
toward my mother and tell her
she was right: there is a Being
out there, and if she looks closely,
she'll see something holy
left on the rim of my mouth.)
Raphael Interrupts Dinner

Six-winged he stood
and sun-like moved
in radiance. An angel
guest arrived to meet
Adam and Eve.

Eve, you are your womb. Mother
of Mankind. You will have sons and sons and sons
heaped like the fruit on this table. Speaking of,
I will take some. I eat, as you do. I taste. I digest.
God gave you new food—things I have never seen in Heaven.
I do not mean to abstain from this feast, or pick
tidily at it. This strange-colored globe I eat; this glowing
nectar I drink; these leather seeds I chew; and I lap
this dimpled melon with my tongue. I consume. And yes,
I shit, as humans do. I will not burden you
with knowledge of my physiology; just know
that what I eat passes through with ease.
Reading Calypso

Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read....

—Ulysses, James Joyce

He walked the aisles, said “Excuse my ankles,” and read aloud Bloom’s movements in the outhouse—to talk of the vulgar bowel, small study of the delight of in and out. He said, “Explicit, but it’s the body as it is.”

Twenty-four in a room, now aware of every reluctant pound and motion, learned to hide what we despise.

Spines twisting in chairs, crackling joints—a swivel to study the others, seeing them in the outhouse seeing you in the outhouse: a desire then to splinter each thing from the other: untwine intestines, grind knobs of knees past nubs, unlatch ball from socket. Take the body to oblivion.
There is proof of cannibalism, of the dead dismembered for food.

Researchers found the remains of a girl, fourteen, her brain picked and her shins split apart to reach the meat.

Cut marks along her skull show trial, error, tentative hands. A dire winter and no more horse bones to chew, no rats.

Her brain would have spoiled quickly after death. It was likely eaten first.
Little skull little bones
little brain cage
how long will you stow
my unformed shape here, snug
among marrow
before I am forced to go
To a Philologist

You deconstruct
  the origins of awe.
You pry the mystery
  from every letter
and shrink a god
  to something written.

You say astronomers
  are different: their world
expands with progress;
  their language grows.
Their book is nothing less
  than the wild infinite.
My friend works for a company that makes dummies shaped like humans with fully working parts—a heart that bleeds when you slash it, a lung that can collapse if you ask it to.

Just try the buttons. One cues a cry. Another induces birth. Some models convulse on command. You can program bleeding and cause a hemorrhage. The operating dolls have realistic skin, dilating pupils. They have names: Natalie with newborn baby Dean, Surgical Chloe, Nearly-Dead Susie.

Where do they sew the souls? Under the eyelid, or behind the ribs, or in the skull? My friend says their best engineers are still working on it—

how to build a thing without form, without substance? One scientist tried to cast a mold of his own soul and went crazy. It set the project back.
Worm

No skeleton. Just a cylinder of muscle: the house that holds the organs of each sex.

How it moves on the hook to lure the brim and bass. They delight in the writhing; the movement is half of what catches them.

(At nine, I know what I am called: tomboy, not-girl. I know the proper way to pluck and spear. I know the drag and reel. I know their names and taste. I gut them with my pocket knife.)

Wormhole: the O your mouth makes when you say it. Or, the widening of the eyes. A shortcut between two places in time—to me at twenty-five. I can’t say what left or how; only that somewhere along the bridge I accepted both x’s and left alone the want of y.
What Happens on Earth

Where the stars form a constellation of rats.
Where the Aurora Borealis hides under the bed.

Where we usher the bears back to their dens
and melt away igloos with the wave of a hand.

Where I pluck spots from salamanders dappled in black.
Where I build kayaks from antlers and carve wings for the bats.

Where the mountains and pine trees have mechanical spines.
Where fjords design churches to praise the sublime.

Where schools of dead salmon wash up onshore,
I trace your name in the sand with a pinkish-orange corpse.
He’s doing me a favor, I know.
He’s probing to find out what, precisely,
causes deficiencies in my personality.
He clicks his scissors
as he draws an X
on my forehead.
After a pause
he daubs a cotton ball into a glass
of viscous yellow.

He drags his knife
from sternum to pelvis. He digs around,
his arm a writhing animal.
“Here,” he says, holding up a spleen
dappled with orange mold, “is the source of your self-loathing.
And have you seen the shape of these lungs?
No wonder you’ve done the things you’ve done.”
He sucks air through his teeth and runs a sticky hand
through his hair. He picks up another tool and pries
apart my mouth.
Song for Charon

Ferryman, come closer.
Steer your boat near me.
Take my coin. Poise your oar.

There's someone I need
to see. Row me
to Judas,

who betrayed his friend
and hanged him
with a kiss.

He's in the red mouth,
his head cased in a jaw.

He's massaged
by fangs and flayed
with claws.

Could a thing
done on Earth give
consent to this?

He repented
with a rope, lighter
less the silver.
Let me go to him.

I'd like to say hello,
Judas. I pity you. Though,
his ears, now, are nothing.
Uriel is Fooled by Subterfuge

The way he spoke—I would do anything.
If he asked me, I’d rip off my wings
and quilt a cape for his deceiving shoulders.

I was being diligent, doing my job, hovering
near the sun, raking my eyes over Eden, guarding Paradise
when that little cherub flew sweetly by.

He said he wanted to behold the rotund fruit
and stately trees of Eden, and the thing called Man
for whom they were made, so he could better praise
the Creator and his works.

He seduced me with his gilded words
and ruby face:

I would kneel and kiss
the perfect plot where God
wrought his glory with soil
and planted Man. Emblazoned angel,
show me where to fly.
Art Infects Life

After I read *Oedipus Rex*
I went looking for gold pins
and found a shiny pair.
In order to experience empathy,
I stuck them in my eyes. The dull
ends wobbled from the sockets,
my personal quivering compass needles.

I followed where they pulled
and found myself on a mountaintop.
I lay supine as if the peak were a fulcrum
to the lever of my spine. I tottered
in the wind. The rock rasped and squeaked.
I spun thin air into gauze and hung a scrim
near the sun; I licked heat from the sky.
The atmosphere swallowed sound
when I called out for a shepherd to lead me home.
Avant-Garde Dance Troupe

The dancers said nothing
definitive with their bodies.

They twisted in the wincing yellow
strobe. They reached

and retreated. Legs split
and balanced on air: There is the sun

crunching glass, giving birth to a cliff.
    In a corner, a chimp

swigs beer. How do I wrench consequence
    from the dance? On stage left,

a woman bows and sways
    into the arms of an indifferent man.
Chaos Speaks

I am the thing and I am the place
I am abyss
a lack of left    absence of down
there is only tumult wrapped with ruin
and sound    I am the true womb
    varied    I am materials
wild    am not even
an I at times    ...is din and clamor
    frenzy    and
Guernica

Splay-toothed horse Mouth agape
bull eyes watch Mother wails
startled by white Starkly
to see Horror happen
in grey The flames are saws
her baby Unbreathing
soldier Dismembered Half-
armed and reaching Split sword
sprouting Faintly a flower
Kiss

As a child, I pressed my tongue to every attractive thing:
lacquered window panes framed by light,
antique tables, barn owls; and when I had my fill,
I would shriek and flail.

But I became an expert
at brushing my hair, poising my hands on my lap.
I keep my voice to a whisper. Mothers hold me up
to their daughters as an exemplar.

So when you reached across the table
and cupped my chin in your hand,
I knew exactly what I wanted to do,

but instead chewed my little lip to shreds
and looked through my empty glass,
away from you.
Alice Neel, Self-portrait, 1980

Flat and drooping breasts drape her stomach. She is 80. She wears glasses only. In an armchair, slightly hunched over, she holds a paintbrush and a rag.

She looks out at me, considering my astonishment.

She had a body, so she painted it.

I am younger by half a century but still glad to hide my grotesqueries: silvered scars and jagged elbows, protruding veins. I am weak, Alice.

She feels no sympathy. She stares directly into me.
What is Mortality

Currant-red
once, but forgotten

on the counter,
the meat starts

its slow greening

it putrefies
and sends out

ammonia, sulfur
and sticks

to the touch
of my prodding finger

it has been
too long

in the room-
temperature air:

I am half-rancid
and one step left

of turning foul
Mulciber Builds Pandemonium

So this is Hell, he says. I'll make it mine to mold.

I'll build a capital, a house for anarchy.

I was the architect of Paradise before the fall—the palaces, temples, towers and courts were made first in my mind.

He calls a crew. They tear a wound into the earth and find a hill with ribs of gold. The metal writhes inside the soil.

Devils, dig it up and build! Give me a gate, a porch, a throne, a neon sign.

Weld starry lamps that shine an eerie light and string them up in rows and rows.

Then filigree the roof with wanton, winding swirls.

His workers build with force and fury. Huffs and grunts and clangs resound. An hour later, the thing is done. Mulciber thrusts a gnarled hand up high:

This place is where I reign; here's the Heaven I have made. Call me Creator now, and praise me for my works.

A trumpet beckons all the demons to assembly.
Screeching, beating their wings, 
they stomp in rowdy thousands 
to Pandemonium.
Boy on the Rocks

Say hello to the boy on the rocks,  
the buoy atop mountains,  
our god of subtle undulations.

Tell him:  
it's fine down here  
among the dry bones, though  
could he send a little rain?

The shadows languish and spit  
dust and dead teeth.

If nothing else,  
send the smell:  
petrichor.

Open a few veins  
to goad the dusty road  
into springing up  
anything green.
Money Lady

The cash register thrusts
its jaw toward me,
showing green tongues,
round teeth.

I give it my hand,
up to the wrist,
and execute the lift and pull,
the scrape and clink.

I rearrange the contents
of its face
and rejoin mandible
to skull.

We perform our movements
until my fingertips go numb.
We perform our movements
until commerce becomes
a leaden, jangled song.

I leave the register,
and its music sticks to me.
I hear the punching of buttons
in the syllables of speech.
Excuse me, excuse me,
says a girl,

and her breath
smells like copper and zinc.
I want to reach into her mouth
and shut her metal drawer.
I have a Gordon-Matta-Clark-sized hole in the side of my head through which you can see a sloping staircase:

cracked steps fissured into light unsettled into meaning

—a calculated cut to show the edge of things—

the structure is dissected a little rebirth a little decomposition and someone takes a polaroid for posterity
Observations on a Sail

—after Gainsborough’s “Coastal Scene with Shipping and Cattle”

The outline of a sail is mountain-esque
against the clouds. There is no god

we can see atop the peak, no infant
with pinned ankles, no Italian poet ascending

with Augustine. We know what’s left
after the labor of sailing: a cradle of damp wood.

The massive cloth is just a cloth,
unless a wisp of something sublime

lingers behind its back. A clinging thread
of the divine, or a golden slip of light.

A cow stretches its neck over a precipice
to scrutinize this meeting of edges and vertices;

and two men on the coast wet their ankles, then stare
at the pointed rock that seems to tremble in the wind.
Symbiosis on the Sidewalk

The gutted cricket,
rich with red ants,
is a meeting space—
a table bursting
with nectar and dew.
Each gives to each;
the cricket a feast,
the ants, a moving tomb.
To the Committee for Exploration, a Proposal

Space is passé,
and Heaven is for braggarts.

Where’s our fund for Hell exploration?
We need academics and flame-retardant suits.

We could take cameras, a rover;
we could plant a flag. I volunteer
to conduct interviews:

Tell me, damned ones,
about the fire without light.
Was it novel at first,
that paradox? A distraction
from the heat? Did you grow bored
with torture when it became routine?

I volunteer to lead the expedition—I’ll bring a scholar,
a geologist, and a television crew.
We’ll take sulfur samples, and dip our bottles
into the burning lake. We’ll film hours
of gnashing teeth and when we come back,
we’ll play them on a loop.
Let’s ease the minds of the uncertain
and the slightly bad.

I propose we start a lab for Hell studies,
create a piece of Hell on Earth:
a practice Hell, a triple-dog dare.
In a dark room, we watched an alien strip a man and pluck out his bones for food. Though we are jaded, we didn’t see that coming. We took notes with our mouths still open and sketched the scene. We said a prayer and promised to always remember. After the fact, we sat and ate little orange cakes. It was hard to gasp with crumbs in our mouths, so we forgot our disgust. Our diagrams of death wrinkled in the bottoms of our pockets. Dogs whined. Our tea was too sweet. We began to think of other things: your new guitar, my unraveling scarf.
Walking Home

In the increasingly freezing dark,  
I take inventory of my existence.  
I have mass; I am sure of it.  
I take up space and air.  
My vocal cords, plucked, release sound.  
Train conductors take my tickets.  
Doctors have confirmed I have all requisite  
human parts. In sum, there is evidence  
I am present. But tonight, I fear  
I am nothing more than an unfed lamb  
wandering on concrete. Because I have  
an animalistic sickness that feels like longing,  
that feels like being sheared to the skin  
and thrown back into a pen.

I am small alongside skyscrapers,  
with four blocks to go.  
I am coming to admire the muted shine  
of building windows in the dark.
Sin Complains of Cramps

Hourly, three hellhounds burst
through my abdomen. Being half
woman, half serpent isn’t all glamour
and confetti. There are the labor pains, for one,
and I stand on my feet all day
guarding this gate to Hell. Sometimes the little dogs
turn and kennel into me, gnawing my guts.
Even with their mouths full, they never
stop wailing. Today, they met Satan,
my maker and my lover. I sprung fully-formed
from his head in Heaven, and he was enamored.
But does that slime recognize me now?
Oh, no. He calls me hideous and foul—
and right in front of the hounds!
I didn’t ask to be born, and what consolation
is love? Look where that got me: Here, for eternity.
Continuation

A trend of weather emerges: decomposition. The lake is frozen now,

the fish strangled. Any weeds, any green there was, flattened

by a cap of glass. The fallen sun stays down. Sitting against a tree

I try to think of a name for the feeling of being a story

that's over, that's been over, that still goes on.
Notes

“Art Infects Life”:  
The title is suggested by a phrase in Harold Brodsky’s essay on Robert Frost, “On Grief and Reason.”

“Boy on the Rocks” 
The title and opening imagery of this poem is based on Henri Rousseau's painting of the same name.

“Continuation”:  
The last two stanzas are a reference to Samuel Beckett’s novel, Molloy: “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?”

“Jamestown: A History”:  
This poem is based on an article published by Smithsonian.com on April 30, 2013.

“Not by Bread Alone”:  
Line 9 is suggested by a translation of Rimbaud in A Season in Hell: “I've got my Gallic ancestors’ light-blue eyes, their narrow skull, and their clumsiness in combat. I consider my clothes as barbaric as theirs. Only, I don't butter my hair.”

“Postcard from the Afterlife”:  
The last stanza is suggested by the Latin phrase Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo (“I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care”).
Biographical Statement

Lauren Winchester was born on March 5, 1989 in Houston, Texas. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Texas at Austin in 2011. She lives in Washington, D.C. and teaches at Johns Hopkins University, where she is an M.F.A. candidate in The Writing Seminars and an editorial assistant at *The Hopkins Review*. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Passages North, The Philadelphia Review of Books, Nat. Brut.* and elsewhere.