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BETWEEN BREATHS

by

Kristin Entler

Adam Vines, CHAIR
Kerry Madden-Lunsford
Lauren Slaughter

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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2020

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2020

BETWEEN BREATH
KRISTIN ENTLER
ENGLISH
ABSTRACT

This collection evaluates, primarily, the nature of absence through a study of negative space, which acts as the common thread that stitches this collection together into a cohesive whole. Through evaluation of relationships, both familial and romantic, with the external world and with the self, I've worked to evaluate the space that's left behind.

Each poem features the absence of something or someone that then acts as a mirror to reflect the self, the emotional state that remains. In many, the loss of a close friend is in the fore, where that absence is taken up by grief, longing, and pain. In others, the presence of someone, like a child, leaves an empty space a relationship struggles to amend—a longing for a life that no longer exists in its same form. Many pieces also aim to study the life of living with a chronic illness, where the absence of health equals disease.

Many of the pieces ground themselves in form in an effort to explore emotions in a controlled environment. The chaos that exists in grief and sickness finds space to open up inside dedicated forms such as the sonnet, triolet, heroic couplet, etc. In others, their shape aims to explore the relationship between the speaker and the emotion or topic.

This collection concerns itself, primarily, with the quieter moments that exist between the everyday commotion that often too easily overwhelms and disarms. It wants to evaluate the importance of the spaces between that hustle: the moment before lovers kiss, the moment after putting a baby in her crib, the stills that we often create meaning from without consciously meaning to. By zooming in and slowing down, this collection attempts to meditate on things often looked over. It exists in the moment before an inhale.

Keywords: poetry, absence, negative space, illness, relationship, family

Dedication

To Margot James, whose naps have sparked inspiration for several early drafts and without whom this thesis would not exist in its current form.

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“...and, if sometimes the emptiness touches
us where we’d rather not be touched, we can always call it
something else...”
—Cheyenne Taylor

Morning Meds in the Nursery Before Leaving for Work

Already, her blonde hazes
in wisps. At three months,
we wonder whose genes

will curl her hair: my waves,
her dad's flyaway twirls
that spin an *S* below his ear.

Or if it's just his eyes,
another recessive mutation
on the list. Last week, when the doctor

wrapped the band around her thigh
to test her sweat, I chewed my lip,
and she babbled and tugged the strip.

Now, in her nursery, medicine
mists her face, and I hope
she breathes enough

to last her through lunch.
The ceiling fan tick, tick, ticks
her into a trance. I slick

a cowlick down, only
for it to alfalfa back,
translucent in the slanting

windowlight of an early rise.
She shakes the albuterol
off, flails her hand at mine

until her left hand finds me,
baby-grips my finger. Her nails
are long again. Reaching

for the clippers,
I notice the tulips
I could hardly bend

to plant last year are sprouting,
luminescent, their eyes squinting
as if it's all too soon for them, too.

Putting the Baby to Bed

Three houses, an accidental kid,
and two broken bones later, their hands
still honeycomb at the knuckles. With sips of wine,
he whispers, because he thinks he's supposed to,
about growing up, back when he was a cornfield
of black suits, unsettled in his dreams of leaving home,
of never wanting kids. Before her maple ponytail
that bounces to her hip's circle-sway reminded
him that he's in love and needs to buy a belt
for their friend's wedding. *Don't let me forget*, he slips. She promises
and pours another glass, the white perspiring in April's
mugginess. She swipes her palm across the tops of her thighs,
watches their six month old sleep-kick
on the baby monitor. *She was grumpy today*, he says,
and they agree: *isn't there always something?*
a leaky dishwasher, a lost wallet, a bed
for one more kiss or, if they time it right,
a quick fuck before it's his turn to make coffee.

Before Watching the Lunar Eclipse

I pick at stitches jaggging your front seat
and circle strands that fray. They unleather,
a nervous tick you always twist away,
pretend you do not see. Outside the car,
we shiver against the wind that splays our hair.
*Why did we think this was a good idea
again?* you asked, searching for the blanket
you used to keep, a grandmothered gift trunked
just in case, she'd say, always handing something
new for you to stow away: an umbrella,
her coat you've grown into. Now, the blanket,
holed in spots and hardly big enough for two,
wrap around our shoulders, after years
of hatchbacked use. We huddle while we wait
to watch as the moon almonds out to day.

On the Edge of the Dock,

you cuss my ceiling fan, rust flaking
from our conversation where her voice once bloomed
velvet, benigned in overtures.

We exchange our boundaries
for boardwalks,
hunger for darkness.

My shadow reaches
for yours, and even though your fingers
pirouette over the scar on my thigh
and worry the waistband

of my suit, I can tell you wish
this afterglow would fade into moonlight,
back when we would trace
Orion's Belt with our fingertips.

Remembering Publix

Inside the store, I reach for silly carts,
the ones with eyes and steering wheels. I climb,

or try to climb, into the one I want,
grappling my hands at plastic. Fixed and

not noticing my mom had held it still,
I key my legs through holes and spin the wheel

in dizzying circles so fast it axles
while Mom peruses up and down the aisles,

dodging the cookies, ice cream, candies, cakes
and milk that inks the floor in aisle eight

beside umbrella signs that caution *Wet*.
Uh-oh, I say, then quiet, *what a mess*.

My mother nods to me, half-listening,
then swerves around the spill to grab more wine—

two bottles placed into the cart. The white
I knew she'd stash with Dad later that night.

Does the Penguin Wonder Why He Hoards Rocks?

His feet web-slap, walking in zigs and zags,
sipping the slender reds he finds like fags

and once he's asked her into silhouettes
of rubble like a charcoal-dust Seurat,

bow tie off kilter by a few degrees, tight-lines
the dorsal fin design above her eye,

beak etching to perfect his canvas, and looks around.
Down by the waves, she bends to take a vow.

I'd Like to Say

the salmon was fresh, blushing
and flaky, the rice salted.
The candles didn't ooze onto the wood.

I folded myself into the sheets
before 9:00. The syllables slipped
through tines, paused behind our teeth

before backing down our throats
or they volleyed from lemongrass
to lavender, fell, and fossilized in wax.

The Summer I Wanted to Be a Chef

Deciding I was too young for can edges,
Mom tasked me with peeling the Vidalias,

but, envious, my attention slipped
to her hands, moisture-sucked

and cracked from molding clay,
as they nutcracked

the legs of the can opener
while I was stuck peeling

off produce stickers, pulling on
the grimed, cracked wrapping.

The opener hissed
my attention; I memorized

the grind of metal on metal,
the pop at the end,

the un-suctioning of its mouth
before my mother's knuckles,

bulbous, glug the whole, peeled
tomatoes into the chili pot.

Still holding the onion,
I crane-pinched its skin

and practiced pivoting my wrist,
turning out my thumb just like hers.

Your Jewelry Box

has painted petals—maroon
brushstroked on black, an outlet
at night to honeydew-
quiet your mind, uncloud it.

Opening the box, I lust
your past that stairsteps velvet
hues layered in dust.
On top, your halved index

cards catalogue baubles:
laminated clovers
and dice on hooks that awl
bobby pins, hook over

crooks and, trying to bull
apart the ends, I flip
at tips. My fingers cull
through forgottens to nip

your pair that genotypes
yellow within the bulb
that bottlenecks to lobes—
your heritage transcribed.

Supplies (A Battle Poem)

I rolled the heparin on a cookie sheet
before my parents could wake up and played
a game, wanted to see if I could taste it grey
into my veins again, the way the saline
salts my throat, antibiotics tang. I tore
at pleats to pop the seal and prime
the final flush to clear the IV line, ashtrayed
leftover medicine into the sink.

Later, I stole a canvas from Mom's studio,
took it outside and filled up syringes
with varying CCs. I blued my wrist
and purpled knuckles with my pallet, ploughed
reds and whites to pink and unscarred lung, hinged
the trachea with colored light, uncysted.

Behind Closed Doors

Once, when you repeated your father's sermon,
I felt my throat sting with whiskey
at his words: *them gays*

on the same night rose-petal secrets
silked off each other's tongues. I knew we couldn't,
but I wanted you to tell me: Where do we go?

What would happen if I kissed you? He says
it would be the final sin
that shifts his God

out of hiding to confront us. I vote
we find out. What do your A-line pleats
feel like between my fingertips?

Are your panties cotton or silk?
When is the last time you shaved?
And son of a bitch.

How do you not get lost
beneath all that fabric?

Folding

She corners edges of their origami house
until it's unrecognizable

as a house, becomes a tree, giraffe,
mandala. Colors

it in instead, starting with primaries.
First on gutters, penciling

red like the front door before it faded,
turning into spots

that wrap around knees, hips. Then eaves,
a pop of blue she slings

too hard, specks of leaves on brick. Watercolors
seeping. She folds again, diagonal,

trying to buttress the roof somehow, but it spirals. Without
hinges, the front door crumples.

Children's Hospital, 2007

I sit, trapped at twelve. And Christmas week
is halfway through. The trash cans overflow
with blue gloves stretched or torn on wedding rings
and balled-up cotton gowns, worn once, dispose.

The doctors make their morning rounds to check
the charts and see how things progressed overnight,
and I work to dodge my hands that grab at pens and try
to ignore the stethoscope again. Again,

I count the tile squares. Again, binge *Gilmore Girls*.
Again, try to knit a scarf. Again, give up. I ledge
the windowsill and watch the rush of traffic's stall,
with taillights glowing up the winter-dark,

a sign some wreck ahead now keeps them here.

The Cardigan You Left

The third button down auricles,
 an unraveling

DNA strand twisting loose. The cashmere
 cigarettes the air,

though the royals fade with each wash,
 photodegradating

with time and Gain. The elbow patches, astragals
 on sleeves, edges peeling,

clip over themselves in places where
 he's fingernailed

the imitation suede until its stiff
 edges became soft.

I thumb the specks of black in spots of grey,
 a constellation of ink

stains that tips the right cuff. Most would never
 notice how it bleeds inside

the sleeve then molds to freckle along the edge.
 I do. I put it on again.

Cherry Blossom Affair

Sitting in the passenger's seat, I watch your mugs
roll around the floorboard,
thrown aside
during hasty
mornings bridged with coffee,
their tan-stained rims left rattling, chipped

from months of abuse. I catch handles with my toe
to tip them apart. Four
off-white, thieved
from a set
un-socked from your divorce—
when you first moved away. The fifth, dark blue, some gift

now rolling around, mismatched, a bare tree etching
to the side with branches
stapling
into glaze
spotted blue, a creeping
crystal-mold splotching with neglect. Outside the car,

a cherry tree drops its petals. I am left thumbing
at the half-open air
vent, stuck, gummed
with soda
splashed on the slats during
our wreck three weeks ago, before the tree sprung pink.

Alabama Snow Day

The winter breeze
pendulums sweetgum balls clinging

to bare branches. On the couch, I watch
as a tree lets go of its spiked star, that I've been staring

at for an hour, dropping to the ground
frozen from a week of record lows.

Instead of popping a Coors on my porch,
you are across town, your arms around someone new

as you wait for the flurries to start.
This time, it's expected to stick.

Annual Homecoming

White pelicans beach
themselves on winter sand
behind my parent's pier.

One, injured,
must stay behind,
wing splayed and twisted.

When the pod clears,
her throat bobs goodbye
as if waiting for a surgeon's

dig to parse lose feathers, set bones.
Her throat sac swells with lunch,
a thumb ready to hitchhike.

From the kitchen, I latch
the window shut, swallow
the last bit of sweet potato

from my plate and clip
the butter knife beneath
the skin, peeling away

the layer of crisp
that sticks to my plate.

Living in Water

*Because there must be other ways to drown/
ways of drowning where you do not die. – Matt Miller*

Early hours hacksaw sleepless worry
I cannot shake from IV poles in TV light.
The bugs inside my lungs have found their home,
and I cannot seem to unsick their frost.

I curl into a ball in sterile sheets
that wrinkle me in sweat away from home.
I cannot breathe, so I stretch my lungs
for oxygen that drizzles into my nose.

Like hatchlings that curl their way to moon-lit water
that's shimmering them home, I hold my breath
and dive. Swim the current. In minutes,
breach the surface for air to hear a knock on the door,

a swish of khaki, the cold of a stethoscope
between my shoulder blades. Questions
no one knows the answers to right now:
Feeling any better this morning? Do you think

*the change in meds are working yet? How long
will it take to notice? A comment or slant joke
on talk shows killing braincells. Then more questions,
Did you like the movie yesterday? and When can I go home?*

After *Luncheon of the Boating Party* by Renoir, 1880-1881

She reds for him,
 body draping
over the banister. Lust

 trails,
 beading on the edge
 of her filed nails.

Her other hand cups
 her chin,
hymning him to join her. But

 he doesn't.
 Instead, he leers
 at the girl

in blue who blushes
 his gaze
off for the first woman's

 dimples,
 loons
 breaking the surface.

After a Week in the Hospital,

he tucks flyaways behind
my ear, machines alarming us,
alerts for heart or lungs. This time,
he smooths the flyaways behind
the cords, bundles he's watched unspine
my sleep by tugging at my chest.
He tucks the oxygen behind
my ear. Machines alarm until

they send me home, release me well
enough for now, lungs cleared, debris
shifting, from dark to light green, pale
enough to send me home, release well
comparisons to former sickly skin, pallored
blue around my nailbeds, fading.
They send me home, release me well
enough, lungs clear. Enough for now.

You Made Us Eggs

and grits, loaded

with cheese, bacon.
And on the other eye,

you melted

half a stick of butter
because neither of us own
a toaster and fried some toast
with a pinch of extra salt
to make up for my deficiencies
then clicked the pilot light off.

In that second, my trachea
is sandpaper.

Is there a word for the moment

between breaths?

Before the inhale begins. Hesitation.

Mucus catches

somewhere deep
my exhale shallows

caught in the instant before

breath.

Hiding Behind the Birmingham Airport with the Sunroof Open

Your leg bounces to the pulse of the wingtip strobes
ascending, parked on the strip
where we always went
to watch departures. Your ears reach
for the moan I make right before
my lips tremble, syllables sticky,
a molasses too syrupy to savor.

I wish I hadn't shaken away
your sweetness with my shoulders,
that I would've settled in,
memorized the freckles that triangle your wrist.
Hadn't looked away the moment the fog
turned gold. Hadn't seen your wingtip
strike the matchbox sky.

Waiting for the New Mattress
After James Broughton's *The Bed*, 1968

We'll find a somewhere for it with a view
of the pines or the water, still choppy
from the postponed Labor Day parade.

Hooking the sheets around its shoulders, hips,
we'll talk of leaving it behind when we move on,
foolishly imagine other lovers, communions, reunions:

a place a mother changes her daughter
into flannel before bed, counting craters
in the side table to entertain attention,

or a grandmother and granddaughters' game
of Rummikub, blankets turning over tiles
from the kid's jittery refusal to concentrate,

or a couple tasting a new recipe for gumbo
they found while unpacking boxes. Maybe they,
like us, will find a time for hearing a new song

refraining *as we are*, sling back muscadine
wine we find in the storage closet where we hid it,
a joke we hoped would be funny one day.

MRJ & KEW

I tried not to ask about the steel molds
we put in the oven this morning,
the dough that needed to proof,

about why you clenched keys in your fists
in a doughnut shop down south,
in your hometown, and why

you purposefully mispronounced kolache,
cool-ach-e. Until you let the diagnosis slip.
It's all hard on the kidneys this first year

so we overflow with too much sugar
and whiskey that you've flaked away.
Instead, I asked if the initials on the picnic table

across the street were yours:
whether we should scratch them out or add mine,
like this is all we'll ever leave behind.

Down by the Shore a Month Before You Leave

We sip on gin with ginger beer we snuck
out from your trunk. Between mixed drinks, we shuck
oysters, toss shells beside our feet, our bodies
clasp-tense from knowing that you'll leave
so soon, that time is stripping down to fuck
us out of love, like stubborn assholes shrug.
But we just kiss the liquor's sickly sweet,

then tipsy-slurp the other's briney cold.
The resin spills and film-dries on my skin,
leaving me to rinse. What I don't get,
you lick: my chin, my stomach, anywhere it molds
its sticky trail. Finishing, you pause, paper-thin
your lips, as if you don't expect its brackishness.

At the Museum

After Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait*, 1930

We weave through galleries where walls
divide. The folk art stares at me
with charcoal eyes that, under eyebrows,
weave me through the piece that's walled
and you've ignored. Below her mouth,
her dress shadows in pencil-shades.
We weave through galleries where walls
divide. The folk art stares at us

and weaves us through the gallery.
With arms acute on hips across
the room, you eyebrow at art, earrings
that weave you through the piece. Then we
join up, our backs of hands bumping
again. You grow away, engrossed,
and weave me through the gallery
with arms acute. We end across

the room we've weaved. In the gallery,
I ask you if you've seen her, hair
pulled taut and dark. Just how you like.
I weave you through the gallery
to show you her red lips, the dimple
on her chin. You watch her eyes stare
and weave you away from the piece.
You tell me you can't see her.

Searching Equity

“Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.” – King Lear, Shakespeare

And again, during another late night
argument about the bathtub drain,
whose turn it is to fish out hair
that turns to a debate about yours
being 18% thicker than my
20% longer strands and my meds
make me shed 7% more. And somehow,
three lagers in, this spurned the almost-divorce
neither of us wants. The silence
that comes before the sunrise and continues
until you hear my keys jester me out the door.

Ode to Volcanoes

Vesuvius glowers
the gallery's entryway,
rock molting

into baseboard, silvering
a crust, a transmutation,
Dali's clock. Homeschooled,

I assigned myself
an essay on the skeletons
cast from negative space,

ash spewed with
gases of sulfides
and dioxides

that birthed atmosphere,
the same smog
and ash that suffocated

Burning Dog
into a comma,
his mouth agape.

No one thought
to notice the sputtering
respiration

of power
they accepted
without question.

How do I write about
something no one notices?
About breathing?

About breath?

I turned around. A child
frozen on his hands
and knees, head bowed

like mine was at his age, fists
reaching for medicines
in my mom's hand,

inhalers, oxygen
tubes. His mom,
feet away, faces him.

He's choking
on smoke, on
toxins, on

what he believes
is gods' anger.

Packing the Kitchen

Once wound tight, she now unspokes from him,
toeing at grout-worn joints in hazed moonlight
while reaching for chipped Target plates, their lips
gamming from years of sauces left, now blight.

She bubble-wraps her cups, staggering chips
and nips with alternating sides to keep
new cracks from etching into glass that, wrapped,
will jostle in a rented truck. She tapes

them out of view while, on the porch, his ashes
cherry as they're flicked, falling away. Pigment
residues the fading night. She argued
once for backspash lattices but commitment

rusted him thin, paisleyed like steeps of rain,
erasing him from her chalkboard mistake.

Saudade II

The chain latch
always bumps
the door
when I let go
and hangs
like static pinpricking
the air, a rubber band
stretched long,
pulled back,
finger to my temple,
the tremble right
before the snap.

On Trying to Remember Your Details

In my memories,
 you shrug your feet
 out of boots to settle onto

the couch after work
 before your image
 flicks a moment

then vanishes,
 like when the power
 went out leaving your

negative image,
 our superimposed silhouettes
 on the cathode-ray reflection

fading until it's only me
 and Van Gogh's crooked *Olive Trees*
 hanging on our wall.

I Don't Think I Returned Them —

the sticky notes I pocketed
from your office pack of twelve.

The dozen tulips and carnations
slipped into the trash, perfume
oppressing our 400 square feet.

I take it back—all of it—last Sunday night,
the coasters we slipped into my bag
before we left the downtown basement bar

where cigarette smoke choked
our cheese fries into Royals queso,
the throat-burn making them tastier.

If we blew smoke inside our house,
maybe we could flutter the cobwebs
between our coffee table's legs

until our breaths dust their joints
apart and melt them into tumbles
that I could manage into the dustpan.

Living Room at 11 p.m.

I use the wine to cleanse myself
of your bent thumbs, your freckled nose.
An hour in, I squint at bookshelves
and use the glass to distort spines
through white, a game that melts
titles: *A Palsied Roleplay Spoke*.
I use the wine to cleanse myself
of your bent thumbs, your freckled nose.

I Dial Your Number that I Memorized Years Ago by Accident

And there's your voicemail,
lilted high, a *hi* that almost fools
me into comfort, and my voice
on the mend starts to hoarse a reply

before the tone, what I want to say:
a tongue-in-cheek *How dare you
not pick up when I know good and well
you're on the couch eating nuked broccoli*

smothered in Velveeta.
And then the tone, my nudge
to speak. I abridge

my earlier idea to, first a hi, then this:
*I hope you're doing well. Our dog learned
the taste of apples today and for some reason,
it made me think of you, when you lived here.*

*I passed a Caterpillar scooping dirt on my way home
from work—do you remember when we watched
one spin its tires in Georgia mud, stuck on I-20
heading home? Back when we still*

*held hands, before the midnight we kissed
at the bar, the countdown to zero that, although cliché,
was a first for us both. And this is all a round-about way
to tell you I miss you. But instead of hitting end,*

I listen to my raspy voice play back, inadequate
or too sincere, select the option to erase my draft,
hang up, and hope that one day you'll call back.

Visiting Hours
—for Grandma

Once, we drew flowers
with sidewalk chalk behind your car.

You sketched lines from a brown stem
and, at five years old, I questioned

you, sassed a need for petals like mine,
rounded and mismatched,

each one a different pastel shade
of picked-over nubs, grazed down

from your eight other grandchildren
who live nearby. I settled for red

daisies, you for orange dandelions.
The weeds gape through cracks

between grass and gravel beside your car.
Their white eyelashes, fragile, bend

as you pulled one up and blew
the parachutes into the breeze.

Now, in your hospital bed,
while your grown kids fill time

discussing failed asparagus beds
and busted snow blowers,

your quietness pricks
new and sharp, easy to miss

when no one knows what to say.
Your cracking lips almost move

to speak. On your chest, the standard mint

green gown's design palsies,
dandelion seeds still hanging on.