

4-29-2021

## The First Flowers of Spring

Gretel Valdes  
*Linfield University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses)



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Valdes, Gretel, "The First Flowers of Spring" (2021). *Senior Theses*. 33.  
[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud\\_theses/33](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses/33)

This Thesis (Open Access) is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield, with permission from the rights-holder(s). Your use of this Thesis (Open Access) must comply with the [Terms of Use](#) for material posted in DigitalCommons@Linfield, or with other stated terms (such as a Creative Commons license) indicated in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, or if you have questions about permitted uses, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

# The First Flowers of Spring

By Gretel Valdes

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield University

29 April 2021

Approved by Joe Wilkins

## THESIS COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS

Please read this document carefully before signing. If you have questions about any of these permissions, please contact the [DigitalCommons Coordinator](#).

**Title of the Thesis:**

The First Flowers of Spring

---

**Author's Name: (Last name, first name)**

Valdes, Gretel

---

**Advisor's Name**

Joe Wilkins

---

DigitalCommons@Linfield (DC@L) is our web-based, open access-compliant institutional repository for digital content produced by Linfield faculty, students, staff, and their collaborators. It is a permanent archive. By placing your thesis in DC@L, it will be discoverable via Google Scholar and other search engines. Materials that are located in DC@L are freely accessible to the world; however, your copyright protects against unauthorized use of the content. Although you have certain rights and privileges with your copyright, there are also responsibilities. Please review the following statements and identify that you have read them by signing below. Some departments may choose to protect the work of their students because of continuing research. In these cases, the project is still posted in the repository but content will only be accessible by individuals who are part of the Linfield community.

**CHOOSE THE STATEMENT BELOW THAT DEFINES HOW YOU WANT TO SHARE YOUR THESIS. THE FIRST STATEMENT PROVIDES THE MOST ACCESS TO YOUR WORK; THE LAST STATEMENT PROVIDES THE LEAST ACCESS. CHOOSE ONLY ONE STATEMENT.**

I **agree** to make my thesis available to the Linfield University community and to the larger scholarly community upon its deposit in our permanent digital archive, DigitalCommons@Linfield, or its successor technology. My thesis will also be available in print at Nicholson Library and can be shared via interlibrary loan.

**OR**

I **agree** to make my thesis available **only** to the Linfield University community upon its deposit in our permanent digital archive, DigitalCommons@Linfield, or its successor technology. My thesis will also be available in print at Nicholson Library and can be shared via interlibrary loan.

**OR**

I **agree** to make my thesis available in print at Nicholson Library, including access for interlibrary loan.

**OR**

I **agree** to make my thesis available in print at Nicholson Library only.

**NOTICE OF ORIGINAL WORK AND USE OF COPYRIGHT-PROTECTED MATERIALS:**

If your work includes images that are not original works by you, you must include permissions from the original content provider or the images will not be included in the repository. If your work includes videos, music, data sets, or other accompanying material that is not original work by you, the same copyright stipulations apply. If your work includes interviews, you must include a statement that you have the permission from the interviewees to make their interviews public. For information about obtaining permissions and sample forms, see <https://copyright.columbia.edu/basics/permissions-and-licensing.html>.

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN OR ANIMAL SUBJECTS:**

If your research includes human subjects, you must include a letter of approval from the Linfield Institutional Review Board (IRB); see <https://inside.linfield.edu/irb/index.html> for more information. If your research includes animal subjects, you must include a letter of approval from the Linfield Animal Care & Use Committee.

**NOTICE OF SUBMITTED WORK AS POTENTIALLY CONSTITUTING AN EDUCATIONAL RECORD UNDER FERPA:**

Under FERPA (20 U.S.C. § 1232g), this work may constitute an educational record. By signing below, you acknowledge this fact and expressly consent to the use of this work according to the terms of this agreement.

**BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ALL WORK CONTAINED IN THIS PAPER IS ORIGINAL WORK BY ME OR INCLUDES APPROPRIATE CITATIONS AND/OR PERMISSIONS WHEN CITING OR INCLUDING EXCERPTS OF WORK(S) BY OTHERS.**

**IF APPLICABLE, I HAVE INCLUDED AN APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE IRB TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS OR FROM ANIMAL CARE & USE TO USE ANIMAL SUBJECTS.**

Signature Signature redacted Date 04/29/2021

Printed Name Gretel Valdes

Approved by Faculty Advisor Signature redacted Date 04/29/2021

*The First Flowers of Spring*

a poetry collection by  
Gretel Valdes

*For Nino,*

*whose memory is  
always in full bloom.*

## *Contents*

Foreword 5

### **I.**

Pillowtalk 7

Autumnal Hues 8

Mis Cejas 9

Intimacy 12

Without You, in San Francisco 14

Sundown of Person 15

### **II.**

drinking honey with the bees 17

The Lady of Crescent Lake 20

A Collection of 2 am Thoughts 22

Cold Feet 23

Another Year of Thankfulness 25

My Grandfather's First Time in the ICU 27

For Oregon Where I Have Yet to Fall in Love 28

### **III.**

The First Flower of Spring 30

A Dandelion Before the Wind 32

Weightless 33

Aubade to the Other Woman 34

To Denica 36

Someday Soon 38

#### **IV.**

Recovery 41

Anxiety 44

On the first girl I ever kissed 45

Drinks I Cannot Finish 46

Misandry 49

Therapy Session 50

#### **V.**

Sometimes I Wish I Believed in God. 54

Stagnant 55

My Local Small Town Barista 57

Summer '19 59

On the Drive Back from Bend 61

Last Oregon Spring 63

Ars Poetica with Grief 65

Acknowledgements 66



## *foreword*

*The first flowers of spring have always been daisies and dandelions to me. Dandelions grow in between cracks, turning into wishes once done with bloom while daisies remain a symbol of new beginnings, ever abundant across any open field in Oregon. They mark a time of a change, a time of season, a time of cold and wet before things get warm and dry. Most importantly, the first flowers of spring bring about the most hope after winter.*

*This collection is an homage to the spring flowers, to the person I've been every spring for the last four years whose past has nurtured the ground in which these poems bloom from.*

**I**

## *Pillowtalk*

The dawn brings home  
the crimson in your eyes.  
I run my fingers through  
the clouds on your head.

The clock on the wall  
taps its foot.  
Light whispers behind the blinds,  
dust dancing in its wake.

We glance out the bedroom window:  
two kittens pounce  
and purr after one another,  
under a morning that has yet to yawn.

A grey fool  
with stripes down his back  
chases a tiny white spark, her pink nose  
dipping in and out of the shadows.

For a second,  
I forget the booked window seat  
of tomorrow, the phone to ear that will replace  
your fingertips.

I pluck an eyelash from your cheek  
and make a wish. Reaching,  
you smooth the questions from my forehead.  
I tuck your name behind my ear.

## *Autumnal Hues*

The autumn leaves  
tumble onto the street,  
ruffled by wind,  
dancing their way  
into the hair of a passersby  
bundled in a scarf.

Constant feet  
and constant rain  
pummel the leaves  
into the concrete sidewalks  
before they have a chance  
to turn to dust.

The ochre, the russet,  
the gamboge-colored leaves,  
begin to brown  
with every step,  
no resemblance  
to what they once were.

A woman sips her warm coffee,  
reddening her lips,  
yellowing her teeth,  
enjoying the fall  
of the world around her,  
as she waits for  
autumn to fade.

### *Mis Cejas*

My eyebrows speak a lot more Spanish than I do.

#### *Uno*

My mother told me when I was a kid,  
there was not an inch of my skin the sun  
did not kiss, with my eyebrows acting accessory  
to my color, one of over-baked sugar cookies,  
with an overly burnt rim framing my face.

She said I'd learn to love *mis cejas* anyway.

#### *Dos*

The girls with small hips,  
blonde hair, honey-tanned skin,  
lip gloss in the shade *beauty queen* ask me  
if I was aware they were “too thick”  
in reference to the caterpillar-sized  
coffee grinds smudged over my  
*cafecito* eyes.

#### *Tres*

I wait to love the space above my nose  
filled with Hispanic heritage:  
a black unibrow,  
a pledge to protect my Latina identity,  
to thank the outdoors for highlighting  
my mother's *taino* genes in the melanin.  
But my nicknames growing up were  
*blanca nieve, masita, y blanquita,*

white metaphors to sideline my *Latindad*,  
given to me by my family who willed  
my Latina roots to dry up, to fit in.

My grandmother gives me my first pair of tweezers.

#### *Quatro*

I dye my hair lighter in the fourth grade  
so a part of me could be whiter,  
even if these *cejas*  
were born in the Caribbean,  
*balseros* in a sea of possibilities,  
I split the bond between brows.  
Picking up a razor and a little bit of *confianza* to  
allow a little more americanization  
to cross the border *mis cejas* created.

#### *Cinco*

People now ask me if they're "authentic"  
*Who's your eyebrow lady?!*  
*They look TOO good for no makeup!*  
as though Maybelline could get the color of  
suppressed identity just right.  
Mis *cejas* look great, authentic, I know.  
They've been shaped perfectly by a society that assumes  
faster than the hands of the lady threading them.

#### *Seis*

Constantly picked and prodded,  
my eyebrows have grown tired of being asked:  
*No, where are you really from?*

I am from *mis cejas*.

I am from a small *pueblo*  
called *Remedios*, in Cuba,  
a place I was born into,  
only to make home in the “land of the free”  
where a lack of melanin equates to more *libertad*.

*Ocho*

No amount of waxing,  
careful plucking,  
constant maintenance,  
can redefine the darkness  
that frames these Spanish-speaking eyes.

I learn to love my eyebrows anyway.

## *Intimacy*

The sing-song tone  
of your voice  
laced with your slightly  
plum lips  
almost always  
tastes of summer  
that's been smudged  
on your cheeks  
I cannot begin to help myself  
to the sweetness  
to the sunlight  
to the warmth  
of your eyes  
a red  
a brown  
mixed on an artist's palette  
the color of sheer drapes  
of an abyss so casually seductive  
I know now why anything destructive  
is a temptation  
of your hips  
of a pout  
of always too much  
space to close between us  
lips beckoning to sculpt my neck  
as I am tempted  
to move into your collarbones  
to tuck away under your eyelashes  
take residency under your ribcage



fusing us together as  
moonlight  
soft lit alleys  
the lingering smell of rain.

*Without You, in San Francisco*

I define happiness by the miles  
between me and this city  
you have not touched,  
people who don't know your name,  
your kind eyes,  
timid face.  
Here on the twin peaks,  
crawling up on the hills just for a view  
of a future so overwhelming,  
you have to climb up to see it.  
I am without you—  
but in a moment's breeze  
I am reminded of the emptiness  
between my fingers—  
I fill them with hope this time  
rather than you.

*Sundown of A Person*

We immerse the tips of our fingers  
in caution when we begin  
to tell others the worst parts of ourselves,  
the parts we fear will crumble when  
completely open in embrace—  
much in the same way people  
hold open arms to the sun,  
confiding in sunscreen for protection.  
Yet I am still nursing sunburns  
from days where I, too,  
thought sunlight was fleeting.  
I worry more about new people  
who will notice the tear in my dress  
or the slight smell of smoke  
attached to my bag  
from the ashes of my past I've smothered,  
as I compete with the seasons to see  
who can move forward faster.  
I wait for sundown  
to see which parts of myself  
I can dissolve at dusk,  
turning all the pieces into  
a mosaic of mistakes I have made  
trying to be kind to others before  
the girl I used to be.  
Every morning before day break,  
I wait to forgive  
myself for all the things I could  
not save myself from.

# II

*drinking honey with the bees*

is a metaphor for hanging out  
with a perceived danger  
that actually is quite  
innocent until you  
swat  
step  
sway  
in its direction  
because in confusion  
the bee will choose death  
or to give bees more credit  
they defend their graves  
when threatened  
but by definition  
most bees are docile  
meaning  
perhaps it stung  
by mistake  
when it mistook an  
upturned palm  
as a threat  
rather than a beacon of safety  
that turned graveyard  
when the bee was  
taken aback by  
a pinky's twitch  
misinterpreting a  
*come hither* for a  
*you want some of me, punk?!*

it does not leave its opponent  
with enough time to think  
before it attacks  
stinging  
leaving behind its  
digestive track  
accompanied by muscles  
nerve endings  
all the things you  
need to feel things  
to enjoy a warm drink  
on a summer's day  
with a lily who winked  
as you fluttered on by  
from a bustling honey comb  
you are proud to be from  
all the while  
the petunia across the garden  
grows jealous wanting  
to feel the  
hum drum of a bee's wings  
as she is pollen deficient  
thirsting over an embrace  
from the bee's knees  
I do not understand  
why a bee simply can't  
disengage from it's weapon  
and suffer less  
however  
if one  
must live by their sting

than they shall die by their sting  
as they bring more hell  
to people who are allergic to bees  
than the other way around  
so maybe just maybe  
it's good to leave  
bees alone  
even if they drown  
in your swimming pool  
late in the summer  
when they went off the diveboard  
trying to impress the flowers  
because they will perceive  
a savior as worse form of death  
than being sent  
to a chlorine coffin—

I pluck the petunias,  
crush the ants,  
stomp the lilies,  
eat raw honey combs,  
in envy of the bees  
with how easy they can choose to die.

*The Lady of Crescent Lake*

Below the water I spot an apology;  
my own reflection begging to come up  
for air. I avert her gaze, dragging  
myself alongside the wooden dock, gritted teeth  
and all. A breeze picks up the smell of lavender—  
wisps of my hair flow with the breeze,  
across the lake's still face. Somewhere under my feet,  
the Lady of the Lake longs for her ex-lover,  
the man who smudged the red off her lips,  
the hands that knotted her fate to the bottom of the  
lake. Her ivory corpse shimmers underneath  
emerald ripples, never to speak again.  
Nearby a young couple dive in feet first,  
breaking the calamity of the lake's surface—  
my concentration disrupted, distracted.  
Perhaps this summer I will sit in beds of sunflowers,  
unbuttoned sheer white blouse with forgiveness  
written on its collar, a marionberry tongue,  
a little cheek; comfortably alone under these Northern Washington  
mountaintops where the pines hide the sun behind  
their backs, bringing out the wolves and wanderers  
of the night. I close my eyes to the thought of a quiet future,



sighing in relief with the welcome of the still daylight;  
the color on my lips still intact.

*A Collection of 2 am Thoughts*

A manic episode is good TV for someone who's grown used to static,  
the depressive lows are simply bad commercial breaks.

My mother said once you should never treat love as a convenience;  
she stays with the unstable wall that is my father for the children.

Every intrusive thought acts like a crumb on top of an angry, blazing, red anthill;  
I stepped on one when I was little and I still have not forgotten the burn.

Most of the time I think my boyfriend is lying to me when he says he's home;  
I am exactly 754 miles away.

I moved from desert to constant clouds of rain to better myself;  
my doctor tells me I'm Vitamin D deficient now.

My mouth knows freedom better than my body does;  
as long as the cage bird is singing, she's still free, so it goes.

Phoebe Bridgers wrote, *I solve my problems with you as shotgun*;  
songwriters are poets who can sing.

At my last therapy session, my therapist asked if I had a baseline for being okay;  
I suffer panic attacks months at a time as a superpower.

This spring I found out daisies are pink in color before they bloom;  
I see myself blue, before I turn bright red—a firework or trainwreck.

*Cold Feet*

The stars:

pinpricks above the hood of my seaweed colored Sonata--

I drink two bottles of water

to drown the woman in my stomach

who insists on drying out my mouth

so every kiss is hesitation,

as the wheels stall on Wallace Road.

Crickets twiddle their legs on your driveway,

the only beacon of light on your street a block away,

a moth with weather-worn wings

settles on the dim light of your television.

You open the door,

but I let you in, stumbling through the threshold,

as you have already forgotten my name--

you seamonster of a man--

You, biting the pink polish off my nails,

grinding teeth, a crack of the neck,

settle me on the edge of the sofa.

I lose both of my socks.

The tips of grass lightly frosted on the walk back to my car,

two new blisters begin to form at the back of my ankles.

I find my knees kissing asphalt,

dread filling the cracks in my lips,

a sparrow scrounges nearby.

The morning calls for both of my hands to pick it up,

to bring the sun above the horizon. I stand:

finding dignity back on my passenger seat.

I breathe a sigh of relief as the sky turns blue,

slowly receding from your driveway,

my bare foot on the gas.

A moth stuck on the

windshield.

### *Another Year of Thankfulness*

My mother attempts a casserole for the first time  
alongside box-made mashed potatoes and sweet  
cornbread souffle, something she saw on Facebook,  
but she never forgets the *boniatos y tachinos*.

My dad lights a Cuban cigar  
to ensure he is toasty warm when he's outside  
conversing with guests about communism,  
reggaeton blaring behind him.

My youngest siblings hide away in their rooms,  
shy but still dressed for our Thanksgiving dinner  
in our Thanksgiving home. The dog barks,  
wanting just a bite or maybe some attention.

My older brother forgets to pick up his girlfriend  
while my sister spends three hours caking on makeup;  
she says she's doing it for herself, for a memory  
of the evening when she forces a smile to post online.

I separate the cats who have clawed their way onto  
the dinner table, fighting over the best spot for turkey  
while my grandparents make comments about getting  
rid of them; we joke that they're the ones who should go.

I spend the day counting the paper cranes taped to my ceiling,  
hungry for something to satisfy the loneliness  
that creeps in with the Christmas music, as I get ready  
for my 6 am flight to take me back away from my

Thanksgiving home so I can miss my Thanksgiving family.

*My Grandfather's First Time in the ICU*

*After "Hospital parking lot, April" by Laura Kasischke*

I remember the family of eight screaming as a father's heart fizzled.

I remember a man who was more steel than bone after a motorcycle accident.

The wind outside from earlier had died down but only because it made its way through the automatic doors, past the metal gate that read "TWO VISITORS PER PATIENT MAXIMUM", snuck by red elbowed nurses, stirred a lone wheelchair, and found its way into my grandfather's room. Heart attack. Anxiety. Fear. The pricking sensation of death dancing in the curtains. That same wind replaces my grandfather's hearty laugh with a wheeze of machines. I have seen the end now,

and it is cruel,

and it is inevitable,

and no one ever talks about facing your fears

and still being afraid of them,

as my grandfather lives to tell how death shook his hand

but left his heart intact.

*For Oregon, Where I Have Yet to Fall in Love*

I love the truth / of your autumns / leaves losing their color / with the receding days / browning by the first snow / there's an abundance of puddles / this is the kind of truth / I never knew in my desert home / where a lack of color / begs to be quenched / I moved to a place where / I can finally drink / tap water / where the sky greys by November / bringing memories of old lovers / of coffee-stained apology letters / but here I am / distracted by the corners of my mouth / sore from the cold / while the daylight burns away / crackling sunsets / ashy midnights / I cannot do this beautiful of an autumn / without a crimson love / is what I mean: / the shade of my favorite lipstick / the color of fresh blood after a bruised knee / the flush to my cheeks when he says / he misses me / the kind of romance you buy a new dress for / a promise you dance for / a trust you taste / the fireflies I see in his eyes before a kiss / the ones that fizzle into my tea by morning / I gulp them / in hopes that I can hold / his promise a little longer / Oregon / I know the trees will grow bare / that I will slip on icy grass / because I always / wake in hope / before the sun / has made its rounds / I'll do it anyway / because maybe the rain will wash away my insecurities / and you'll see the way my hair takes humidity / like a woman / who has not seen / hydrating / rainwater kindness / from her desert home / since the last man she loved / and maybe then / you'll let me under your umbrella too.



# III

### *The First Flower of Spring*

A tiny pink nose opens the door,  
followed by a soft patter of paws--  
bursting green eyes saying *hello*  
accompanied by a posh upturned tail.

*4:02 pm, my brothers voice quivers.*

You stride towards the dusty window  
to sunbathe under the winter sun.  
I watch as you get comfortable,  
as if asking me politely to come over too.

*“Hey, you might want to sit down for this.”*

I find true life within my feline friend--  
a budding muse and  
the best kind of listener.  
This is the picture I frame.

*“This morning she passed, bugs is gone...”*

I keep this peace in a photograph,  
or in a couple, strewn about the walls.  
Behind every almost-gentle-into-the-goodnight,  
I found solace in quiet kitten kneading.

*“Are you going to be okay?”*

The image of you and I,

cuddled under hopes of a new season,  
is also the last moment I have of us  
before you were under cinder and roses.

*“We won’t bury her without you...”*

*A Dandelion Before The Wind*

I saw a powerhouse of a girl  
sing a song about mangos on the corner  
of Orinda and Frances once.

Her eyes twinkled,  
a deep brown mahogany,  
accompanied by a head  
of careless, chaotic  
auburn hair  
swishing with her every step.

She serenaded carnations  
with the sway of her hips,  
invited the sun to bring warmth  
to her conversations,  
brought down the stars to  
fill every street lamp with light,  
just so no one would walk  
alone in the dark.

She smiled and the grass grew.

She laughed and it rained.

She blooms at sunrise,  
tucks in the sun at sunset.

When the moon comes out,  
she tells him every secret,  
whispering her weaknesses,  
as the moon listens,  
offering to hold her  
on his crescent shape,  
rocking her safely to sleep.

## *Weightless*

The strained red canyons across my stomach  
remind me of the journeys I face,  
the Stairmasters I have yet to climb.

The extra skin under my arms  
stabilizes my flight at night  
when I crave a calorie's comfort.

My swollen cheeks are blushed:  
a result of indulging in porcelain bowls,  
bruised knees from the bathroom floor.

After a cold-water shower,  
I dive into the dryer headfirst,  
hoping to shrink a little faster.

I only weigh myself with the lights off,  
hoping one day the bathroom scale  
takes into account a heavy heart.

*Aubade to the Other Woman*

You were born under an Aquarius sun—  
a wide-eyed owl convinced herself clever,  
bathing in the heartbeats of mice men  
you capture in between  
princess colored talons.

Yet you are oblivious to the one  
who leaves you in the nocturnal:  
man made of his father's  
recklessness,  
one who never told him how  
to be delicate with women,  
coupled with his mother's silence,  
who taught him not to show  
emotion to save face,  
to hide it well and bid yourself  
to forget feelings.

All of this down your throat,  
through his fine lips  
full of urgency and promise.  
A hint of me  
etches onto the back of your throat.  
I find you all over him:  
strewn about his backseat,  
tucked in his sheets,  
braced on the collar of his shirt.  
I convince myself you were a  
moment of weakness,  
an indulgence,

a moment faded in the past.  
Not a point of comparison,  
a question to rehash every night  
on whether or not he still  
sees you in his dreams,  
but maybe,

I am afraid to admit he may  
still love you  
with my heart in his hand.

*To Denica*

They found you lying in a ditch.

Not a garden or a patch of wildflowers  
or something beautiful enough to write  
a poem about.

Not somewhere peaceful and serene to lament  
the passing of the girl who buried herself  
in the lips of another before all  
that was left of her was secret and stone,  
obituary and a picture of your purple converses  
tucked in someone's "catch all" drawer.

I still think of you  
every late august as the date of your last  
breath hovers in the back of mind,  
as I try to remember if I ever met you  
in passing or if Scout ever introduced  
us or if somehow I passed you  
wearing a red shirt once but maybe  
I never met you past hearing your name  
in conversation.

Wondering if you smelled of warm vanilla  
or anything sweet enough to compliment  
your upturned doe-eyes  
pictured in every single memoriam.

Even if all the proof I have of your existence  
is the way Scout talked about your  
death like an unoccupied chair  
in the room that is our friendship,  
I remember you.



We use your memory to remember why  
we both are alive,  
why we never jumped off bridges  
while riding on our bikes,  
or dissolved our livers with Tylenol  
enough that charcoal couldn't bring us back.  
Us scarred by all the ways we would have  
mourned each other had we not known  
what it was like to miss you.  
We are alive.  
You would be 25 now,  
only eight years later would I learn  
  
you passed in a park, in a bed of dandelions.

## *Someday Soon*

We could build a small house  
out of our winter swap-meet blankets,  
all six of your pillows, my determination.  
We'll hide it behind our favorite smoothie place:  
your breath, peaches and silk.  
Mine all mango (maybe a hint of passionfruit).

We could build a small house  
on a foundation of trust and "what ifs,"  
built during the season where things  
glow bright red and fall,  
as if to remind ourselves  
that the bitter cold is another  
opportunity to make warmth.

We could build a small house  
painting the doors with potential;  
a midnight blue, accented grey,  
or if you prefer lighter colors,  
I'll plant sunflowers in every room—  
we can assess water damage later.

We could build a small house one day  
out of your hesitation and my yearning  
for a balcony outside our bedroom.  
We'll light it up and sway,  
where the hand I have longed to hold  
catches my fist after our first fight.  
You carefully unclench every finger.

We could build a small house one day  
with a small garden nurtured  
on discarded orange peels, miracle grow,  
  
and forgiveness. Maybe then we'll have built something to last.

# IV

## *Recovery*

The simple taste of an extra  
sauce cheesy domino's pizza  
to comfort the broken child  
in my stomach—  
a chubby third grader who  
started to measure her worth  
by wrapping her hand  
around her wrist to make  
sure she was still  
thin enough to do so.

The pure thrill of a grande  
caramel frappuccino, extra caramel,  
to satisfy the empty hole  
in her mouth from a fallen tooth  
that begged to be satiated  
by her grandfather's after school  
sugary coffee runs she bragged about  
before the girl with protruding collarbones  
and pointy nose at school said  
*that's unhealthy*  
to a perfectly healthy girl.

Despite the doctor's disapproval—  
it's high in sodium, high in fat,  
Takis chips that bring about the most warmth;  
heartburn chuckles,  
perfectly kept secrets  
between her and kind friends

over a bag of the vended hot chip  
full of guilty pleasure;  
a mouth small, salted, red-stained.  
She ate without worry or thought

that she was starting to harbor  
a permanent echo in her stomach  
from the lunches she skipped  
or  
that she would only consider herself  
good enough when her hair fell out  
around the raised toilet seat  
or  
that despite her best efforts  
she would one day be labelled  
diabetic by a dietician who recommended  
starvation as a saving grace  
despite how already  
devoid of sweetness she felt

and with that same diagnosis  
in an eggshell colored office,  
with hollow eyes,  
reduced tooth enamel,  
and a prescription for Metformin,

came the collapsing realization:  
this continuous recovery began  
with the small girl who just wanted  
to eat all those years back—

I care for her,  
at last.

## *Anxiety*

Sizzles at the tongue.

Breath

labored.

Hummingbird wings

drum.

The sparkler

fizzes out.

The beat of her wings

blows out

the candle.

Plunging the room

into silence.

The speed

kicks in,

the neon chemicals mix,

the moon retaliates,

kicks stardust down my throat.

I turn blue,

bleed oil-slick

under moonlight,

every night,

most nights,

caught in an undertow

of my own

insistent

fluttering eyelashes.



*On the first girl I ever kissed*

the windfall straight into your arms gave me whiplash / for the next three years /  
for the next two men / that replaced your soft / simple / supple / small lips / I  
swore I would miss / had I not been so coward / to call you mine / to admit feeling  
/ to become more than a note / in your bullet journal / you bought at the corner  
store / where we drank coffee together / as a first date / I wish I could have seen /  
you were a poetry book / written by your own accord / that I would spend hours /  
reading in a bookstore / so I would not have to commit / to take you home / find  
you a spot on my bookshelf / pick you up whenever I wanted to / only to let you  
collect dust / amongst Sexton and Plath / I remember / the way you swayed / with  
the Oregon grass widows / your taste stuck / to roof of my mouth / like the first  
time / you made promise / of your memory on my lips / when I lost my wallet / on  
our walk home / you ran back the two miles, / found my red-leather identity / and  
gave myself to you then / because a simple act of kindness / goes a long way /  
when you have been devoid of it / for so long / but you took it further / invited me  
to stay the night / but I declined / watching you dance / inside a jewel keeper /  
opening you as I pleased / twirling / yet from a distance / as you sunbathed in the  
afternoon light / and I stood outside your dorm / never allowing myself / to bring  
us together / when I should have given you a chance / over men who have never /  
bothered to ask me / who my favorite poets were.

*Drinks I Cannot Finish*

Bacardi

even sounds like my father's full belly laughs  
and smells of warm leather.

His footsteps heavy on the stairs,  
as I shush my sister,  
we both feign sleep hoping he'd come in  
to plant dreams on our foreheads—  
most nights the footsteps marched by  
with a semi quiet shutting of a door,  
our rooms illuminated by the tiny blue screens  
in our stubby hands—  
my mother would come in at midnight  
smelling of japanese cherry blossoms.

Coffee-Flavored Patron

as it was the first thing I tasted  
after the man I loved  
kissed the woman he told me not  
to worry about;  
my best friend kisses someone  
outside of the bathroom door  
instead of holding back my hair  
at a party I spent most of the night  
throwing up his name  
all over her purple fringe rug.

Tequila

or as my first year college roommate called it:  
liquid violence.

After a shot or two  
it makes you want to hit something,  
and it took one night out for her to decide:  
I was her tequila target,  
her bone to pick,  
her scab to pluck,  
as she swung a clenched fist  
right into my self esteem.

Pineapple Vodka  
because it smells of college parties  
I never got invited to—  
of the girl who got stuck on our floor  
with chunks of her mistakes  
stuck to her hair,  
a loose limbed, naked stranger  
I took care of.  
I pull the sweater off my back  
to protect her dignity  
from rolling completely off her skin.  
At the same time she breathes  
fruity tinges into my face,  
the hall is filled with sorority sisters,  
small giggles yet she is out here  
unclaimed but now at least dressed.

Green Apple New Amsterdam  
was the first shot I took  
where I did not wince

but only because I had taken  
four at once so I would not  
have to face the pain of losing  
yet another man  
to distance,  
to a woman closer to home  
than I.

I didn't finish that bottle either.

***Misandry***

*In memory of Sarah Everard*

A little misandry is good for  
the souls of us women  
who turn our trauma and fear into  
dinner table jokes we never take too far  
in front of any man,  
as men have treated women's freedom  
as something to challenge,  
to question,  
to destroy even,  
when our thoughtful giggles  
turn into pleas for an ill-minded  
man to let us live through the night.  
When we call friends,  
share our locations,  
text our partners,  
to help us survive punishment  
from the male gaze  
in situations  
we were just existing in—  
our hands bruising  
from how hard we have held keys  
in between fingers,  
following in example of the women  
before us who too,  
feigned ferocity  
in case a man tries *anything*—  
  
we continue to count our blessings  
for surviving another night of womanhood.

## *Therapy Session*

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

A chipped tooth from a harmless  
accident when I smiled too wide,  
falling down my childhood driveway off two scooters,  
an innocent stunt to prove that I could do  
two things at once, marked my smile for life.  
At least I showed even the concrete that I was happy once.

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

I watched my father dangle from a string  
of christmas lights stapled off the eave  
of his new apartment. Across town,  
my mother laughed for the first time in years,  
replaced her sheets: a matrimonial white  
for a freeing bright pink.

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

A pummeling from older boys when I was 10,  
who chanted *cow* to a chubby peach of a girl,  
at some distant family friend's party.

As the bruise set in, I sang:

*sticks and stones may break my bones  
but words will never hurt me.*

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

The curly-haired boy who held my hand for years  
kissed a girl with blue eyes, a too-much-gum smile,  
all while asking me for trust and forgiveness  
in between bare chested breaths and foggy windows.

I tasted her for months.

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

Las Vegas. October 1, 2017.

58 dead, 869 wounded.

*“Did you know anyone?”*

*“I hope no one you know is hurt.”*

*“Do you want to go home?”*

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

Pinned under a wolf of man

whose arrogance growls through his chest,

the acidic taste of a mojito swishing,

as I find the courage to throw up his name

to an officer who asks me to remember everything carefully.

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

A failed attempt to become Icarus,

to fly off a bridge, melt under the sun,

prove to everyone that I was meant to shine:

a lethal dose of benadryl

swirls in a dorm room toilet bowl

after I apologized to myself enough

to want to live after all.

He asks me if I am familiar with the word *trauma*:

I choose carefully,

running the words in-between fingers,

rolling them, smothering them,

sitting in the same beaten leather

chair from the last the 3 years I say:

I am ambivalent.



**V**

*Sometimes I wish I believed in God.*

I grow sunflowers out of my hands,  
see rows of faith, of hope,  
and not a single ounce of doubt.  
My mother beckons me to  
braid my hair out of my face,  
to run freely among marigolds.  
Red and black speckled ladybugs  
fly onto my cheeks,  
crawling, leaving careful kisses.  
All my faults turn to weeds,  
mowed by my father  
who never lets the grass grow too high.

Sometimes I wish God believed in me.

Lying on the dirt beside a rose bush,  
tiny dandelions spring from my  
forehead. The wind bends  
the tall grass.  
I spread my fingers, claw-like,  
feeling soil under my nails,  
a mouthful of gravel.  
I chip my tooth  
biting down on rock.  
Worms sniffing at my eyes  
wondering what kind of corpse cries.  
I beg the sun to soothe me  
into silence. A beetle knocks  
on hollow cheekbones.

## *Stagnant*

Either I've forgotten what  
a metaphor is  
or I've lost it.

Between dull nights  
and bitter anxiety attacks  
that leave me with  
less and less of myself,  
I consider the future.

I see it and I turn it over,  
in this fryer that has  
become what resides  
on top of my shoulders,  
only for it to sizzle away,  
morphing into something  
I don't recognize  
anymore,  
taking all the  
savory ideas with it.

Whatever it once was,  
the draw or the spirit,  
that drew me to simile,  
to idiom, to irony,  
to metaphor,  
took the last train of  
thought out of my head.

Leaving me with questions

rather than answers.

What, exactly, are these hands

supposed to do

if not feel things

and write?

*My Local Small-Town Barista*

Lavender latte lilies  
bloom  
under the sun of your smile  
in those moments at the coffee stand  
where I breathed you  
for a few moments,  
a small window,  
few quick brushes,  
so inviting,  
I drove by at least twice a day.

Living in the daydream  
where you and I find out each other's  
middle name,  
dragging out each syllable on a walk  
alongside a distant beach,  
the blood leaving our toes,  
travelling to our fingertips,  
building enough courage to take  
this crush down to the Rose parade  
in Portland.

We even had our own favorite sushi place  
where I envied every  
spicy salmon roll that grazed  
your tongue,  
every grain of rice that got stuck  
swirling inside your mouth,  
every moment your fingers

picked up chopsticks,  
putting them to your lips  
with such precision--  
I memorized your entire sushi order.

Had I said something then about  
how my indigo heart bloomed red  
every time your green eyes softened  
at the promise that we really  
should see each other  
beyond this small-town coffee stand,  
beyond a couple of hand-offs,  
beyond asking me what I was drinking today,  
  
you could've had more than just a sip.

*Summer of '19*

We ride the horses down  
to the farmer's market to taste  
what the sun has blessed most  
that week,  
what hands took the time  
to pick the ripest fruits,  
presenting you with only  
the sweetest.

Right beside marionberry vegan  
pastries sits a jar of your  
hopes to live under Berlin skies,  
to taste funny little European coffee cakes,  
indulge in velvet train seats,  
to finally escape whatever memory  
is left of your mother's cooking--  
I pick up a box of faulty  
sparklers.

But we don't know that yet,  
as we head to the Lincoln City beach,  
bounding straight to the shore,  
full of hard cider bubbles, singing,  
*I love you, ain't that the worst thing  
you've ever heard?*

We don't notice when the swell turns  
riptide  
or when a man tells us *watch out!*  
frolicking anyway, as if we'd ever listen to a man--  
I comb the beach for a sand dollar,  
while you ask taco bell for dinner  
one last time.

Thinking about the bags you have left to pack,  
the way you'll forget beach hair  
and Oregon sunset  
as it fizzles out before us.

You lodge yourself in between  
my car seats,  
every grain of your laugh effortlessly  
clinging under my car mats, in my trunk;

I promise to never clean the sand out of my car.



*On the Drive Back from Bend*

Sitting cross-legged in the back of a 2016 Jetta,

watching trees turn from desert to forest,

Leon Bridges sings of the rivers we pass

with the bluest waters we have ever seen.

I steal a ring from Sisters that fits just right,

while Nicole blasts country-pop songs,

with the windows all the way down just

to feel something run through our hair.

We order too many onion rings at Mill City,

where Grace's laugh soothes our mistakes

reminding and reassuring me that too much

can be more than enough for the right people.

We talk about everything and absolutely nothing,

as every single dog we pass is our best friend,

and we don't worry once about whether or not

this is the last time we will be this close again.

*Last Oregon Spring*

The summer tip-toed in

behind the wilting cherry blossoms

after a few weeks of

blessing blue-bird skies

bringing out the melanin

in the crooks of my arms

while my cheeks spring

daisies and dandelions in wait

for an overly warm summer

as junipers bloom eagerly

reaching out towards the sun

bringing it down closer

forcing thirst on open mouths

that await the plunge into

the cracks of the Willamette river where

the water is never warm enough

to soothe our bare feet.

## **Ars Poetica with Grief**

*In memory of Ned Vizzini*

There's no easy way to grieve  
the person who gave  
reason for you to write  
in the first place.

The one who allowed us  
to speak about the tough man  
we harbor in our stomach that tells us  
to keep going when the curtain closes,  
our hair falling in clumps  
from writer's block,  
from trying hard to keep pushing—pedaling,  
past every bridge we thought about jumping,  
we cross them instead.

Lingering with thought,  
a cauldron sitting on top of shoulders  
in a permanent state of brew,  
mangling and mixing itself,  
waiting until the candle reaches its end  
for it to blow itself out,  
with only the memory of smoke to remind us  
the flame was once alive.

## *acknowledgements*

*The collection could not have been finished without the support of Linfield University's English Department. I give many thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor Joe Wilkins, whose advice and relentless positivity helped complete this project as well as to my first mentor on campus, Dr. José Angel Araguz.*

*I would also like to give thanks to my many muses: my family, my sister, Fereli Flores-Yanez, Ruby Guyot, the barista by the Goodwill, Scout, and Nino, who all deserve more words than I could write.*

*Lastly, I'd like to give thanks to Ned Vizzini, who helped me figure out that the best way to deal with my feelings, to deal with all the sadness and excitement of this world, is to write. May he rest in peace.*