

Creation Myth: Periosteum and Self

*Hormonally imbalanced females of all deer species
have been known to grow antlers.*

This is what I choose. Periosteum rampant on my brow
and testosterone to activate it at the pedicle.

*“Luxury organs,” so called because they aren’t
necessary for survival.*

I choose the possibility buried in the furrow
which has ceased to disappear between my eyes
in sleep, in skin my lover has touched her lips to.

Females produce young each year. Males produce antlers.

Forget the in-vitro, expensive catheter of sperm
slipped past the cervix, the long implications
of progeny. I am more suited to other sciences, other growth.

*Researchers have snipped bits of periosteum
from pedicles, grafted them onto other parts
of a buck’s body, and grown antlers.*

I’ll graft it to my clavicle. My cheekbone.

Ankle. Coccyx. Breast. At last visible,
the antler will grow. Fork and tine. Push and splay.

*Researchers have tricked deer into growing and casting
as many as four sets of antlers in one calendar year.*

It won’t wait for what’s appropriate, but starts
in the subway, in the john, talking to a friend about her sorrows,
interviewing for a job. My smooth desk, my notebook,
my special pen with particular ink, my Bach playing
through the wall of another room—not the location
of the prepared field, but what the light says, when
the light says *now*.

*Deer literally rob their body skeletons to grow
antlers they’ll abandon a few months later.*

It could care less about the inconvenience forking

from my knee, the difficulty of dressing, embracing, or
piloting a car. It doesn't care

Essentially bucks and bulls are slaves to their antlers.

if I'm supposed to be paying bills or taking the dog
for her evening walk. There is no sense to it, no logic, just thrust.

It does its work. It does its splendid, difficult, ridiculous work and then,
making room for its next, more varied rising,

gorgeous and done, it falls away.

Nonnative Invasive

Lupine, gentian, chocolate lily. We've been naming, been exclaiming, been looking up in our guidebooks the alpine flowers. *But look at these!* Amy says, pointing to bright dandelions at trail edge, heads

like airplane aisle lights. *How pretty! Don't you want to pick bunches and bunches and bring them home?* A swell of roadside by my house yellows with them now, excessive petals turning to excessive seed. Curbside,

I'm glad they are not lawn. But they'll invade this meadow, push out with brash cheer forget-me-not and wooly lousewort. I want to reconcile them, but I can't. I hiked up to see anemones and saxifrage, to get away

from landscaping and what landscaping weeds out. I think of how they arrived, seeds embedded in boot-dirt, stuck to our socks and the fur of our dogs. *Praise their tenacity,* says Amy. But she's just arguing a point. None of us

is glad they've hitched a ride up here. None of us knows how to accept the way love changes what it's drawn to—smudging self across what's seen—when what thrilled us first was difference.

Multi-Use Area

Would the day on the hay flats—
sun slight through clouds, grasses
just starting again from last year's
grasses, geese and cranes bugling
over the marsh—have been better
without the old tires, the gutted couch
in a pullout, a moose slumped alongside,
meat taken but the head still attached?

I can close my eyes to the pop bottles,
booze bottles, and orange skeet shells
in the parking lot, along the river. Walk
past them. I can pretend my own steps
through the marsh convey a different
presence. But I can't close my ears.
There, a white-fronted goose, there
a pintail, willow branches cracking

underfoot, F-14s from the base. And there, again,
the shotgun blast and whoop which I can't
edit out, which I probably shouldn't.
It stops when I walk into view. I stop
and stare across the flats through my
binoculars, thinking *asshole*. And of course
someone's staring back at me
over a truck bed, thinking *asshole*.

Multi-Use Area

Would the day on the hay flats—
sun slight through clouds, grasses
just starting again from last year's
grasses, geese and cranes bugling
over the marsh—have been better
without the old tires, the gutted couch
in a pullout, a moose slumped alongside,
meat taken but the head still attached?

I can close my eyes to the pop bottles,
booze bottles, and orange skeet shells
in the parking lot, along the river. Walk
past them. I can pretend my own steps
through the marsh convey a different
presence. But I can't close my ears.
There, a white-fronted goose, there
a pintail, willow branches cracking

underfoot, F-14s from the base. And there, again,
the shotgun blast and whoop which I can't
edit out, which I probably shouldn't.
It stops when I walk into view. I stop
and stare across the flats through my
binoculars, thinking *asshole*. And of course
someone's staring back at me
over a truck bed, thinking *asshole*.

Maid of Honor

Aqua rustle of taffeta over flattop, foreign
zipper up her spine, all up her spine,
from coccyx to nape, her un-
willowy arms in puffed sleeves,
and her mother's voice muffled but
clear: *For me, then. Wear it for me.*
It's your sister's wedding.

There's a photograph I have of her at nine
in Florida, standing by the mechanical elephant
at Pedro's mini-golf, quarter in her pocket for the ride,
one eye squint-shut, one hand in the hip-cocked
pocket of her jeans. Tomboy in a blazer
that her mother must have chosen
with her, bought for her, approved back then.

May of 1968. Palm trees flagging over astro-turf.
*Yes, I think, each time I look at it, how could anyone
miss what she was becoming?* And yes, she should
be able to straddle that elephant, sit in the red saddle
as her parents smile and wave and the upraised
trunk blows luck all over her.

She pulls up to the church on a Nighthawk,
the only vehicle she owns, swings her leg
to the ground, underskirts rustling down
over black boots. And now it's clear

to her mother on the church steps
holding the bouquet for her other daughter. It's clear
that even pumps and hose, a manicure, a waxing and,
for god's sake, some makeup, even the desire
that brought her here to *Try, for me*
couldn't make her that kind
of ordinary.

Butch Poem 4: Losing a Father

With him, something left her, some hook
by which she gaffed the world
and held it to sense, to love, to logic

despite the awkward ground she'd learned
to claim. His best son, at his side
she cleared gutters of leaves, shoveled

the drive, changed the Chevy's oil,
sat back after dinner
heavy in a chair. She learned

to be a gentleman. Hard at first for him
to see her tapping out his cigarettes,
wearing his old belt and shoes, to see

what she took as her own.
He came again to love her,
and to love even what rested silent

between them. And she knew her luck.
But when he died some of her swagger,
some of her bullheaded sureness, some hope

to be praised for the likeness she'd made
was shaken. I have no metaphors to lend this,
just witness to her decentering, just certainty

that only the loss of her mother
—the self she made herself against—
could be more difficult.

Cul-de-sac Linguistics

Today, the boys call each other penis.
Hey penis, commere, penis, pass me the ball,
penis. Last week it was *whore*, discovered

halfway through a game of h o r s e
on the mini-hoop that backs my fence.
And earlier this afternoon, the teenage girls

whose bedroom window stares
above my thumbnail yard improvised
outgoing messages in theatrical rapture:

first the easy scatological, then
a nursery rhyme that morphs
into an anti-homo riff so suddenly

I actually look up

to see if they're directing this at me
(they must be), down in the yard, reading poetry
as my girlfriend weeds the flower bed.

O, the high profanity of kickball games,
the rough posturing demanded
by even this tame street. Listen, they're learning

how well bastard fits with fucking, how ass
can't be mis-used. No one could hope to ease
their jagged entries into this profane world

which is fucking beautiful, ass-bastard gorgeous,
the evening light wild and soaring
like kickballs on a true arc into flowerbeds

of penis tulips and pussy daffodils
that nod their heads in wild agreement
with the whorish, shit-loving lot of it.

Butch Poem 5: Recognition and Praise

Blinking in the turnpike restroom
when Jenny walks into the Ladies,
the matrons and bachelorettes
of New Jersey recognize a butch.

The grocery store clerks, too,
of Alaska or Florida, saying *sir*
when Lisa buys tampons, not looking close
or maybe looking closer than the rest.

When I spot them on the street, in line
at the movies, unmistakable, here
is what happens: love floods me.

Butch Poem 6: A Countertenor Sings Handel's *Messiah*

Seven verses in, he has stepped out from the tuxed and taffetaed quartet of soloists. He has begun to sing: *Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his son Emmanuel.* Amplified by good acoustics, the hall is rustling accompaniment to the countertenor's solo:

Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid. Arise, shine; for thy light is come. From my seat next to my parents, high in the mezzanine,

I can see heads turning, bending toward each other, toward the program, small lights coming on above the paper. My parents restrain themselves. But the rest of the hall is turning to the biography. Is lifting opera glasses. Is straining ears to hear him:

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. He is singing the alto's part in her key, his voice light and clear.

Whispering underscores the music:

What is this high, sweet voice in a tuxedo?
I am transfixed. I want to reach under his starched shirtfront and find a different sex. Listen to him—

He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.
He's singing the score and another story alongside it:

He hid not his face from shame. Through
these old words, he is making song
of the drag queen and the bulldyke.
Let him sing without the accompaniment

of rustle. Let him sing without any doubt
between body and voice: high but not shrill,
more lovely than the wide-skirted soprano,
the chunky tenor, the dapper bass. I watch
his shine-parted hair, his weight shift at key change.

*Thou art gone up on high, thou hast led captivity
captive, and received gifts for men.*

Afterwards, in the bar, where anemones
splay open and salmon flick through
canals designed for our wonder, no one
mentions the countertenor. My parents,
I think, are trying to navigate the appropriate
path of the moment, as am I. But he's all
I can think of, his rolled r's, Adam's apple
lifting his tie at crescendo. Onstage,

*Then shall be brought to pass the saying
that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.*

billed as high culture, this unsettlement,
this beauty applauded at last.

Concerning the Proper Term for a Whale Exhaling

Poof my mother sighs
as against the clearcut banks near Hoonah
another humpback exhales, its breath
white and backlit by sun.

Don't

say that, says my father, disapproving
of such casual terminology or uneasy
with the tinge of pink tulle, the flounce
poof attaches to the thing we're watching, beast
of hunt, of epic migrations.

But I'm the naturalist,
suggesting course and speed for approach. They
are novices, and the word is mine,
brought here from the captains I sailed for
and the glittering Cape Cod town
where we docked each night
after a day of watching whales.

Poof,

Todd or Lumby would gutter,
turning the helm, my cue to pick up
the microphone. Coming from those smoke-roughed cynics
who call the whales dumps, rank the tank-topped talent
on the bow, and say each time they set a breaching calf
in line with the setting sun, *What do you think of that? Now that's
what I call pretty*, then sit back,
light a cigarette—coming from them,
I loved the word.

And even more
because the dock we returned to each night
teemed with summer crowds, men lifting
their hands to other men, the town

flooded with poufs free to flutter, to cry, as they can't
in Newark or Pittsburgh or Macon, to let
their love rise into the clear, warm air,
to linger and glow
for a brief time visible.

Whalefall

I hadn't really thought about it, to tell you
the truth, those bodies sinking
to the ocean floor. The term

sounds like nightfall,
and I picture them coming down
like a huge and lazy rain,
like hot air balloons landing in an open field—that
silence and fascination as
anything meant to be suspended
touches earth.

It's frightening—the arrival,
the dust, the realization that this
is not graceful after all.

There must be an archipelago of whalefall
along some lines in the ocean—greys
beside California, humpbacks along
the Carolinas. Swimming
and then falling, their bones silent and then landing
and then settled.

The ocean floor is more vast
than the myth of Wyoming—endless
plains, plentiful herds, sky
uncharted still. Cattle
skulls glinting white between the grasses
picked up, decorated with turquoise, hung
on a barroom wall. Not death then, but watchfulness, memory
in its white and hollow-socketed form.

I've been trying to decide
which I love more, the dark bodies
falling or the pale and teeming scatter of bones
in the unlit sea. Or maybe it's just good to know
about landings. The awkward,
gorgeous reconciliation
with the ground.
Honestly? I need to believe
in the beauty of falling.
The stunning ache of descent and then
its unexpected practicality—
new habitat. Decorated and watching.

No More Nature

No more nature we say after fourteen hours on the water in August, skin ready to crack, lips too tender to close. *No more nature* in November when blackfish strand in the salt marsh

and we've stood in sulphur muck as the tide falls out to dark, their breath whistling hard as we dig pits for flippers scraped raw by sand, as vets try to predict which

could survive until flood, which should get the syringe of chemical sleep. *No more nature* after the storm blows up while guiding kayakers across the bay, which means towing home

the shoulder injury, prow lunging the chop, tow rope cinching the gut. *No more nature* after waking before dawn to band birds in first frost, shin after shin ringed

with numbered metal, wing after wing teased from nets until we almost forget how frightened their small hearts made us when we first held them. No more, we can't take it, can't

resuscitate our wonder, can't keep up with its unrelenting. But then we have a beer. We take a shower. We decide to walk around the pond and look for turtles. After all,

we could see a coyote lapping its reflection, we could find the nest of the great horned owl that calls each night as we lie in bed, unable to not listen, unwilling to miss anything.