

SKINTIGHT

By

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ABSTRACT

“My flesh keeps the soul hostage,” the speaker announces in the poem, “The Bathed One.” This Aztec philosophy is what *Skintight* revolves around: the idea that the flesh was a mold, a simple barrier that holds the soul back from joining the gods that traveled with the sun. Identity plays a crucial role in this book—each poem representing change and personal growth. The self, much like putty, can be turned into myth. *Skintight* creates a world where the self can be redefined, transformed, and at the end, free.

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Bloom: “The Night Watch,” “Siberia”

MiPOesias: “Inside,” “The Bathed One,” “The Blood Countess,” “Sweet Boy,” “Scary Movie Marathon: Friday the 13th”

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MARSYAS

The radiator's hiss catcalls me
out the door all ribcage and nipples
hard in a tank top three sizes too large. I'm blackout

angel of my corner bar, I've a problem—
no problem going there alone, lonely
as I am, Stranger. I drink

until one eye is bigger than the other, until
close I talk close with men, blue and
glass eyed. Tear me away

from myself. Tear me through the open
veins of the city—golden and skinned alive
alive into dawn—through doorway to you

by skin. I am knife thin, Stranger, thinner than reed
slit between the teeth. Thinner than the pitted
string on the lyre. Do with me as you please

tonight, Stranger. Be strict. I do not like to be
touched on my back, that one wound, that nerve
that rings as the music—

INSIDE

my father's closet the suits run
on wooden hangers color-coded
deep into the back brown to navy
pinstripe to gray

tucked behind a black suit dust
clings to a green jacket a patch
on the arm still bright yellow the
cloth stiff

oxfords line the floor end at a boot
where the rough laces are tucked
into tongues

I am frightened by his rifle
from Vietnam behind the door
resting below the light switch a still
from a movie I've never seen

I am afraid it will blow off my hand

YOU LEFT SOMETHING BEHIND

You were so dizzy and soaking
wet after a night of dancing
that when Charles took you home

you don't remember sloshing
red wine all over the fine china,
painting the walls with the white

enamel left out for renovations
while he ignorantly showered.
No idea you tracked the dog's

shit across the fur rug or
fouled up the creme Egyptian
thousand count sheets before he

had you. And in the morning
while he slept, you had the *horror*
of discovering you'd left your face

on the pillow, so badly smeared
with bronzer—so completely ruined,
that you couldn't hide it, you had
to leave it out and open..

THE BATHED ONE

With necklaces, I entwine you
With feathers of macaw, I adorn you
I paint with gold
I embrace mankind

-Temolitzin, jaguar knight of Tenochitlan, ca. 1518

I am publicly displayed in a vat.
Marigolds fumigate my eyes. I drum
my obsidian mouth. Each morning
I am religiously washed. My skin
collapses firm around the sternum,
free of blemish. In my regimen

I learn to walk elegantly. One foot
over the other up the steep jade steps.
On a divan, I awake in zinnia. His
hands are tender. The hummingbirds
tick in the blackness of day. He brings
tubes of tobacco. I play a ceramic rasp,
dance circles and inhale violets.

My need is great. At midnight,
kept awake, I am smoothed alabaster,
cracked at folds. I sing until my voice
is ghost. I lie on a bed of whistles.
My hair is matted with patches of down.
Tonight, there is a golden tinge to objects.
My flesh keeps the soul hostage.

On the seventh morning, my captor extracts
my dahlia heart, steals it with a flint razor.

My torso is split up the back.

I dangle there severed at the wrists
and knees. For twenty days,

I am worn inside out, then
sloughed.

PORCELAIN

My legs. This is how I want them:
slick, defined, so bare the veins pop
down their sides split with muscle—
the thought drives me to glide
a Bic up my calves to the thighs,
working in the tub until the water
is hair, until the porcelain
has a halo. I've spent
an hour and I can't recognize
my legs. I pick out the drain
slip into pants, walk around
the house like everything is
the same. Until my sister
notices my ankle, smooth,
while I lay in the living room
she pulls back the cuff,
pulls it to the calf.

MY CHILDHOOD BED

It was my twin, a birch frame
with headboard cabinets
on each side where I displayed
Sunday school books and hid
comics and baseball cards.

I'd lay with my arms to the sides
on top of the covers,
a position I learned one night
when my father, checking in,
observed me still as a column,
blanket to the chin. Frowning,
he snatched my hands,
placed them over the comforter.

PAKAL FALLING TO XIBALBA

I died a natural death. No water and my tongue split
bone dry. A jaguar evaporated in Palenque. My eyes
lit east to west in the monster sun. In my mouth,
a bead of nephrite was planted to germinate
my breath. For days priests attended to my shadow,
then spread me in the dust of the threshing floor.

First they drenched me in resin, bruising my skin onyx.
Women shrouded my body and tied me in mantles
of cotton. They lacquered me carefully in cinnabar
until I was fluid, until I was a painting of blood.
I lay in my bath until the red around me whitened
with stucco. Sealed in my limestone, I waited.

I am decadent. Cubes of jadeite are pressed
in each palm; my ears plugged with stone gauges.
Gold wire spools the plaques of my viridian
skeleton. A marble collar holds my skull in place.
My mouth is simplified, an ornament. Mute,
a jade mask ripens my face for eternity.

I rise but am not alone. Five servants sacrificed
pool around me. Preserved in calcite, I will climb
out the open jaws of the earth. I will repeat
time until the next cycle crowns. Maize will flare
from my lips. A serpent, my voice. I will be

beautiful forever. All of this is pretend.

HOW TO BEGIN

Strip your life
as Venus and Mars align,
catching you
staggered as traffic
swims the wrong way
down a one-way street.

Throw all of your gold
in a lake, Wait for it to rise
to walk you through the city
on your eyes. Change
your name. Get kicked out

the after party
for having the wrong card,
for holding two glasses up,
three poured back.

Notice the gray in your hair.
Pluck them out one by one.

Hold two glasses up. Pour
three back at the after party
for having the wrong card.

Get kicked out. Your name—

changed. On your eyes
walk through the city
waiting to rise. In a lake,

find all the gold you need.
Walk the wrong way down
a one-way street
staggered as traffic
is caught, as Mars
and Venus align.

Strip your life
is how to begin.

II.

AFTER IT RAINS

This morning in my dreams: a dog blind
with rabies unravels my stomach

in a fenced yard I can't escape. A cockroach
inches across the ceiling, retracts its wings, drops

right in my mouth and I'm fastened
to the bed. The interpreters say these images

equate dirtiness at home, or the betrayal
of a beloved. This has nothing to do

with health. They say it's time to take off
the rose-tinted glasses. It's time to clean house.

Today after it rained—nothing but evictions
all down Park Ave—endless tables, chairs,

sofas all carelessly flooding the banks
of the sidewalks, as if Baltimore loosened itself

inside-out. As if the city regurgitated
bricks. Today, I looked down

out of the blue and noticed my fingers—
all the skin on each tip had peeled back.

I can name a million reasons.

THE SALEM DUNGEON MUSEUM

You rush me through the basement
where the witches were tied to cell benches,
past the illustrations: Bridget Bishop,
the execution of a minister, the nineteen
tried and hanged.

I stop at a painting of Giles Corey,
crushed beneath two heavy boards,
a dozen boulders. The punishment
for standing mute. The sheriff adds a stone.
You turn back to find me staring.
“Let’s go,” you whisper.

Deliverance Hobbs confesses to the court.
I signed the black book with pen and ink.
The mock jury erupts as she is hauled away.
During the commotion, you grab my hand.
Our guide explains not to feel sorry:
*In the trials, the accused who play along,
those who charade, avoid Gallow’s Hill.*

GRAY

Almost clipped by a bus
waiting at the intersection of Read
And Eager Street, broad daylight.
He rounds the corner, stands
beside me barely shaven,
trucker jacket, jeans, Marlboro
balancing on his lip.

He leans towards me, smelling of
watery beer.
I'm afraid he's going to touch me,
to make a pass. I've seen him
working this block before, walking
up to parked cars.
He starts talking.
*'Getting older is wretched.
Today the wind blows
what little hair I have left.'*
He pulls at it, holds it out
from his face as if it's string.

I let out a laugh
because I have nothing to say.
He tells me,
'I just turned forty-seven.'
I quickly respond,

'You look nothing of it,'
nervous—because he looks like me.
'Yeah, you're going gray on your sides.'
He shrugs. Walks away,
pays me no more attention
as he changes in the green and red light.

THE BLOOD COUNTESS

Yes, I killed the servant girl. I smeared her body
in honey, left her outside in the dead of August.
I live off her sugar. I took

her blood for the elixir I found. The elixir
of youth, mixed it with strawberries. How
easy it is to be selfish! Of course, there

were thousands: the ingenue I captured. I lit oiled paper
between her toes, clipped her fingers
clean with shears. Afterwards, I groomed

myself blind in a red mirror until my wrinkles turned
virgin. I choose them for the softness of their
flesh and tongue. I sew their mouths in a knot

in my blood thirst, beat them charcoal. I do not love
them. How easy it is to make them servants. How
hard it was to get caught. That simple soul!

I caged her in a box of iron needles, posed it as
a suicide. They sealed me in the castle, in a walled-up
room behind concrete walls. Dinner—through a slit.

Can you describe a pact with the devil? It is
ninety-nine cats in a room. The room is so quiet

you can hear your heartbeat.

LINDSAY LOHAN

Sedate in your mug-shot, I'd worry
my eyebrows weren't impeccably plucked,
my chin double.
I'd love to be unable to move my face.
Pinch my skin taut behind my ears.
Pump my lips, doc. Pump them
to a permanent pout like Lindsay.
I don't fear needles, incisions, or drills.
File my teeth down to the nub. Give me
veneers, doc. I've got a daily ritual:
eye serums, white-strips, line breakers,
ten pushups each time I walk into
my bedroom, I perform crunches over
crunches over crunches.
Suck my stomach to permanent morning.
Snap my nose straight. Lift my ass.
Lindsay, I'd steal that necklace.
And I'd wear it out in public for everyone
to notice. Because it was mine. Because
if you believe so deeply that something
is yours, that it belongs to you, then it does.

ONLINE LESSON

Upload a photo, advertise.
Write: brown hair blue
eyed six foot angel
with a dirty face. Create
your profile so it states
your intentions and clearly
expresses your true desires,
omit: here to make friends—
you're not looking to date.
Don't host. Travel. Always
have the affair at his place—
you don't have to wash the sheets
Strictly business when you arrive,
No small talk. Knock back
the drink he'll hand you,
embrace, let him go down,
the action will go by quick, don't
reciprocate or even touch,
it eliminates the risk
I think, when its over thank
him for the release, handshake,
sing his face in your mind,
the first becomes
a repeating bus ride:
getting on getting off
getting off getting on

new messages, replies,
meeting, then leaving,
for some man,
in some strange place,
yourself behind.

CLEAN

Below

in the kitchen where
my grandmother lays, the men
in blue are cleaning up
the blood
that did not clot from her legs—
thin as cellophane, sticks—
sliced open
by the sides of her shoes
as she fell taking a step,
identical wounds
on each side.

Upstairs

in the bath, I study
moles on my hands that match
on each side,
washing away the thought
that I had let her fall, the sound
the crash of wooden chairs against the wall,
the sight of her walker
watching over her body,
like the shower head
watching over me.

SIBERIA

He is driving. His hand moves to my knee.
While he chats about his life in Russia,
I stare at the red patch on his knuckle.
It's cold as Siberia, I mention.

He describes the weather in Russia
as I roll up the window, turn on the heat.
It's not that cold in Siberia—I'm corrected,
nervous that it is contagious

as he rolls up his window, cranks up the heat.
I stare at the red patch on his knuckle.
Don't worry, he says, *It's not contagious*.
He is driving. His hand is on my knee.

MOTHER

Madonna of material, I snapped
my rosary, made it into a bracelet for you
at Sunday school, sneaked downstairs
to see you lit before inflamed crosses,
my fingers scented with your patchouli-
cassette. I get drunk, Madonna.
So drunk I sneak leftover drinks
from the bar. I lose myself in the mirror
plucking gray hairs, tug at the sag
in my belly. I want to conquer my fear of
heights, Madonna. Of having roaches or the virus
inside my body. I want a cheap twenty-two
year old lover that doesn't speak
English. I want my hair bleach blond.
I want to go to the bar, Mother. I want
a vodka double, Mother, a double vodka
Madonna on the rocks.

NOW YOU'VE DONE IT—

kicked a chair at the ex,
lost the keys, burned the sweater,
broke the glass, the dirty dishes
stack higher. No returned
phone calls, messages, door
never buzzed. You are not
welcome anymore.

If you won the lottery, things
would change. Things
would be different. You'd stop
biting your nails. Take care
of your cuticles. Eliminate
crow's feet. Scrub the dirt
out of pores. You'd be
Scrubbed clean. Rid of
enablers. If you won, you'd
flee the neighborhood

for another neighborhood. Begin
the next procession, the next
trial period. You'd walk it until
your eyes cycle back, until you didn't
fuck up. Until the next man
you love stays. If you won
the lottery, everything would be

different. Nothing would change.

BRIEFS

It is always boys in my poems,
but I can't think of anything else,
boys swishing past on Charles Street,
my attention on the basket of their jeans, their knees, their
thighs, started when I was young, in the bathroom
mens catalogs stashed in my mother's Bazaar, I studied
the glossy torsos, the trace of hair to the navel, the certain
way they stood, shoulders back, hair on the brow,
the upward curvature of the lips. I longed for legs
like men in the magazine, slick, defined, the thought
drives me wild, I'm fifteen, I glide a Bic razor up my calves, my
thighs, working until the tub has a halo, the water is hair.
I pick out the drain, slip into pants, walk around, everything
is fine, until my sister notices my ankle in the living room
she pulls back the cuff, pulls it to the calf—I couldn't
recognize my legs, smooth. Back then it was
always about boys, catching pro wrestling on T.V.,
fascinated by the costumes, the leather boots, the sweat,
a battle on the screen, another raging in my briefs, it was
Anthony Marino showering beside me after gym class,
his soapy, bouncy crotch; the men's health sections of bookstores,
tracing my finger along the titles. It was always boys
in my poems, one about a man walking on Charles Street,
my attention on the blue of his shirt, his arms, his
mouth, he told me I had beautiful eyes, the poem
was my strange joy, once finished, I stuffed it

down my pants—the safest place.

THE NIGHT WATCH

I hunt in the mirror for a scare
inside my mouth, the first white
spot on the back of my throat, checking
if my gums have receded from the teeth
in high arches, for tenderness
in the neck, armpits and groin,
a colorful blotch on the back of my thigh,
on my feet, between the toes. The lint
from a black sock shocks me.

I am six, finishing a nightly bath.
I do not unplug the drain. I decide
to bob face down on the water,
to fake I am drowning.
I dip my head under, closing my eyes,
turning my head to the side. I float;
my breath makes dents in the water.
I wait for my father to come up the stairs.

SKINTIGHT

My father hands me gifts he bought Christmas Eve:
an extra-large broadcloth and thirty-four waist khakis.

I dress different from the boys at school. My shirts fall
at my navel; my jeans are skintight.
I am to wear the outfit or my clothes will be ripped apart.

The neighbors are talking. No deals, no exceptions.
We are all there: my mother, my sister on the couch, my father
urging, *Put them on. Put them on.*

I strip in the bathroom with my back to the mirror.
The shirt hangs to my knees, the pants slide on buttoned.
My face is hollow. My skin—deaf. The audience,

the family await me outside, my mother knocking,
Put them on for your father.

When I step out my mother will be silent. My sister—gone.
My father will clap his hands. He will look me in the eye, ask me,

Do you feel like a man?

III.

BLOOM

You are not the expert of your body. Tonight, your eyes are masked.
A scarab capers over your lips. Seven mosquitoes tread water

beneath the hanging spoon fed moon. In this hour, you learn to knit
desire out of the inexhaustible bloom of your jaw. A madrigal

of unknown names is recited by your dead tongue. It is faster
than shadow. But you are not the expert of your body. Osiris

balances your heart now. The brain is discarded,
form of the face evaporated against the weight

of a father. Write this poem when the hour winds itself asleep.
Speak up. Stand as voice. Everything out of the mouth is a lie.

VIRGIN

I am afraid to go into my room. She
is there after school, tidying, folding
my shirts. She demands,
*Why do you want to get sick? Why
do you want that filth in your mouth?*
I am a virgin and believe AIDS
is hidden inside my spinal cord. If
I have sex, one day it will release,
a sort of magic. Under my pillow
she leaves an internet printout. A
story of recovery from a college boy.
*This is normal. This is a phase. You're
fine.*

When we fuck, I think too much
of the fire beneath sheets she
planted. There is a constant rising
of skin when you pass through me
faster than the wild flowers between
the long stretch of highways—all
the Black-eyed Susans, periwinkles,
the perfume—

SWEET BOY

He comes over.

My sweet, sweet boy
from the university nearby.

I have my apartment immaculate
when he arrives, floors
scrubbed, rooms dusted,

everything aligned. Clean
bodies, pure morals, it says when he knows
only my name and age.

We sit at my kitchen table. He
complains. *Nothing to do*
but drink. I smoke

cigarette on top of cigarette
until I tire, walk into my bedroom
and he follows. Sometimes,

I find black circles on his arm.
No matter how fresh the burn,
I never ask

my sweet, sweet boy
who rides me in sweaters

band-aids, antiseptic.

THE ONLY TIME

I stood up to my father was in the parking lot
of a Sam's Club. I was nine.

If your hand is bigger than your face, my sister insisted,
You've got cancer.
In the back seat, I palmed my face.
She reached into the back seat, smacked my hand,
You've got cancer, you've got cancer—

As we parked, she made a fist,
hits me again, laughing.
I asked my father: *Is your hand bigger than your face?*
as we walked through the parking lot. I tightened my fist,

lifted it up, punched him right on the nose.

DANDELIONS

I was standing in the backyard, knees bent,
hand over hand on the driver

like my father taught me, my eye
on a dandelion head.

I had beheaded a dozen that day. Their faces
littered the lawn. Some have landed in the neighbor's.

After twenty, I was pulling the club back slowly, ready
to follow through with my hips. The swarm

came from behind me. From the porch: a black
funnel of honey bees over the grass, quickly

engulfing my ears, flying up my shirt. I threw
the club in the air to the side, swatted my face.

At this moment, I want to lie. To say I was
stung. Stung on the neck out of my need to feel

crisis. That need to feel alive. I want to say
my throat swelled, the taste of metal, the taste of
a story flooded my mouth.

SCARY MOVIE MARATHON: FRIDAY THE 13TH

Maybe it was short-shorts Kevin Bacon
half-naked arrow through the throat,
the danger of Camp Crystal Lake where sex
equals death that taught me how to find
Matthew's cock in my basement
in the eighth grade, my hand
inching across the couch
to his gym shorts. Maybe it was
he was moving to Aurora—
that stroking him in the darkness
could keep him. That night
my mother almost walked in.
What are you boys doing? she yelled
from the top of the stairs. That night
we slept in separate rooms.
He left silent in the morning. We hugged
in my driveway, my eyes bloodshot
from watching his door all night.

CHEMISTRY CLASS

“Only faggots use purple pens,”
my lab partner Brian announced to the class.
“But I’m colorblind!” I insisted,
defending my writing utensil.

He snatched my pencil case. “Now class,”
Mr. Mckinley directed, “measure your beakers.”
Brian rooted through my supplies—
“I bet he’s got a tampon in here!”

“Remember to measure from the meniscus,”
Mr. Mckinley pronounced the term with a lisp.
Brian ended his search. “I bet he’s got it in.”
Mr. Mckinley why didn’t you rescue me?

I talk with my hands and a lisp too.
“Homo,” a girl coughed behind me.
Mr. Mckinley didn’t you see me—
slumped in my chair, studying my fingers?

“Measure the HCl homo,” Brian sneered.
I silently recorded our group’s findings.
Mr. Mckinley sat. I stared at his ring-less finger,
his immaculately combed hair, designer suit.

As he marked the class attendance,

I wished he'd cure my colorblindness,
sit beside me and announce to the class—
“I write with purple pens too.”

THINGS MY MOTHER SAYS

You have me so worried, how many
meals did you eat today? Two?

No, I think you need three. An egg
for breakfast and more protein,

none of that junk for lunch. You're not
on cocaine are you? I'm not being crazy,
I've just seen too many people crash
on dope. You know my first boyfriend

got arrested for selling it out of the back
of my VW—such a good car! It had a ten
gallon reserve tank you just had to kick
and you could continue to drive and wait!

You're not sick are you? You're not
going to these sex clubs where people
have sex on the floors? A girl friend
was telling me that she saw some

gay guys at a bar covered in sores, so
don't have sex with strangers. Wait
until you're—until you're committed.
She says, I am not going to bury
my son.

ANNE SEXTON'S LAST DRINK

I came out of the Charles River,
a sunflower smiling at you on empty soil,
rising full light in your hand out of need

to travel through the galleys
of your memory, a donkey on a crash
course—I'm the driver. You can't flee

yourself—that putty, iron maiden
of the mind that converts you back
to the witches. Any plans you had—

I made them instead. Put on
your mother's best mink for a burning.
Turn circles alone, ignite into the front
seat of your sealed loading zone.

La de da,
How does it feel when I row
the world back? You'd say—
cordial. Quite the gentleman.

THE DAILY OUTFIT

My sister kneels on the mud room floor;
ticks come in May. She checks my legs,

rolls my shorts up; her eyes scan my calf.
She pinches a black tab on the back of my knee,

the body—too small—too deep to pull out.
My shoes are grass-stained. She strikes a match,

holds it to the spot. The tick rushes, two legs
disappear into skin.

I prepare for a bullseye each morning.
I wear pants every day, all summer long.

Health is a sleeve;
a daily outfit put on.

MONDAY NIGHT RAW

I was glued to World Wrestling Federation in my room,
to opponents in Lycra briefs and vinyl boots
slamming each other in the ring, performing
head locks and bear hugs, bouncing off
ropes to the cheers of fans and cardboard
signs—unable to understand the other
battle in my Hanes, why
I'd lock the door, pin myself
on the four post bed and struggle
underneath the invisible
body of a man.

GRAND CENTRAL BAR

You could care less about anyone there. You come here for no one else.

Not the chiseled bartender who only speaks Polish, who you know is secretly balding, but enjoy because he smiles when he sets down the offering: your vodka tonic. Not for dated videos that strobe above your head. Not for olive skinned Ben beside you with the bleached button smile, a hand on your ass. Not the music,

the DJ still playing *Baby, you've got to show me love* for the five boys fluid on the empty

dance floor. And not for Ginger—the mechanic by day, drag queen

by night—limping in her shimmers and velvet heels, who hands out coke

for free when she's properly sauced. Not even for the mirrors. Not even for the mirrors.

You come for no one but yourself. You come for the indulgence

of the best kind: the heavy pour slung so stiff it brings on goose bumps. The heavy

bass you need on your throat. Because in the moment, you are a palpable thing

more concerned over the cherry trapped at the bottom of your glass. Because

at the end of the night, you realize Narcissus would've lived, had he closed

his eyes and drank himself.

DEER PARK

Gabriel, a sprinter from the rival school
across town, ran hurdles. I eyed him
grazing in the field, stretching his dark calves.
while I jogged beside the distance runners,
my shorts hiked up, waist band rolled down.

On the cinder track, I scarred my knees
training for his event. I stutter stepped,
never kept my trail leg flush.
At the first race, we shared a nod.
The gun went off, his muscular torso,
gone. "Good race," we managed
at the finish line.

Visiting home years later, I sneaked
out to Deer Park, a gay dive off Route 40
my mother discusses whenever I'm back,
"They've got glory holes there," she warns.
But I go for the decor: mounted taxidermy
beside True Blue Madonna on the walls.

The bar was dead as usual. The music,
out of season. I played pool, my attention
diverted by a man entering, his shirt,
pressed to a familiar chest. I took a shot,
the balls scattered across the table.

We stopped, frozen in our tracks.

FAGGOT BOY

thorn in his side, called faggot faggot everyday and I'm dying to die. The high schoolers at the bus stop gossip about the suicide, the neighborhood girl who strapped her neck to the closet, the boy removed for screaming he'd shoot himself and take others.

I bike past the manor on the hill at night because there's a story.

The ghost, a man who hanged himself in the attic, the light flickers on and off, his face in the window. There was a desire to try. On CNN the Jeremys, the Sarahs, the faggot dykes spill over bridges & bedrooms spawning Twitter followers. I avoid the stairwells at school because they wanted me. There was a desire to plummet down the middle over railing, over stair—to stone.

NOTES ON RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

1. Stringing the Lights

My job is to unwind the strings, lay them
in lines, to check for missing bulbs. *Just
like a system*, my father says. He removes
Christmas lights from a box, tosses them
onto the garage floor.

My mother takes our photo in the driveway:
I am wearing a tan coat, my father's gloved hand,
across my chest. His face is china pale. We smile.

He winds a shrub in lights, pulling on the cord,
the slack I carry. I follow him down the hedgerow;
he wraps one bush after another.

My mother is in the window suddenly. She taps
the glass, mouths something, something about
hands to my father. He drops what he is doing.

Through the window, he disappears
into the kitchen. My mother follows.
She carries a green cartridge, a syringe.

II. Self Portrait

My body is dressed
in the finest suit:

a coat out of my ribs,
the sternum playing
a tie,
the clavicle,
a collar.

I crack my knuckles
and my back snaps.

III.

He was taking enbrel. My mother kept the vial

in the refrigerator. She did it all for him.

She bent my father over the kitchen island. She pulled back the barrel

of the syringe, unloaded it into his left side

of his belly. Or the right. She switched every week.

She says it is the least painful spot. I know

when he needs a shot. He comes into the kitchen at lunch;

his hands are claws.

My mother asks him how the pain is today—

✧ He says, “It is screaming.”

IV.

When he was on prednisone, especially prednisone,
my mother warned me of the mood swings. Sometimes
he knocked groceries out of her hands to get to the pharmacy bag.
“Don’t piss him off,” she’d tell me in a hushed tone,
her hands resting on my shoulders.