CLEAVE, A FEMININE EPIC

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
ENGLISH

DECEMBER 2014

By
Jaimie Gusman

Dissertation Committee:
Susan M. Schultz, Chairperson
Craig Santos Perez
Miriam Fuchs
John David Zuern
Kathy Ferguson

Keywords: feminine epic, Shekinah, poetry, secular Jewish culture
ABSTRACT

*Cleave, a feminine epic* is a three part epic poem that reimagines the figure of the Shekinah, the divine presence of God in Judaism, and her exile from God’s Kingdom and Earth. As the title suggests, the work in this manuscript clings to and severs from the classical heroic epic tradition in both form and content. The structure of the work, an amalgam of prose and lyric, interrupts the epic form through poetic disjunction, nonlinear narrative, and the absence of a hero. As a feminine epic, the poems challenge the masculine epic tradition by subverting androcentric ideas about heroism, heroic action, female characters, and the lyric “I.”

In addition to calling into question the epic as a masculine tradition, the poems also speak to a personal journey about faith. Using the Shekinah as a vehicle for inquiry, I ask questions about how a female God’s presence might be different than a male God, how the soul and body are connected or disconnected by faith, and how gender might shape belief in and of a higher power. The desire to do this creative work was influenced by secular Jewish women poets Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Alicia Ostricker, and Adeena Karasick, as well as experimental poets Anne Waldman, Fannie Howe, and Alice Notley. Fueled by my background as a secular American Jew, who is fascinated with the complex relationship between practice and belief, the poems in this manuscript are representative of an ongoing spiritual journey.
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... i

Cleave, a feminine epic.......................................................................................................................... 1
  Part One: The Greater Shekinah ....................................................................................................... 6
  Part Two: The Lesser Shekinah ...................................................................................................... 36
  Part Three: Blue................................................................................................................................ 63
Introduction

The Feminine Epic: The Metaphysical Worlds We Write

Imagination, invention, judgment, taste, and truth; the four first are necessary to
Poetry, the latter to history. He who writes an historical Poem must be directed
by the pole-star of history, truth; his path may be laid beneath the bright sun of
invention, amongst the varied walks of imagination, with judgment and taste for
his guides, but his goal must be that resplendent an unchangeable luminary,
truth.

-- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Preface,” *The Battle of Marathon*

In the epigraph above, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, nineteenth century English
poet and prose writer, introduces history as a major component of her first epic poem,*
*The Battle of Marathon.* Like Ezra Pound, who memorably said the epic is “a poem
containing history,” Browning’s sense of epic poetry refers not only to the epic as it
contains history, but also refers to the epic as it creates history. That is, the author of the
epic constructs and inscribes a version of history through heroic narratives written into
verse. History explores issues of human existence, which can be seen in the classical
epic’s stories about wars and nations—the tangible aspects of human “being.” But the
epic also dictates a particular set of morals and reasoning for humans to live by—the
intangible aspects of being. While the tangible aspects of being belong to the body, the
intangible aspects of being belong to the spirit, making the search for truth, and thus the
creation of history not only a physical process, but also a spiritual one.

1 Ezra Pound, Interview with Donald Hall. “The Art of Poetry No. 5,” The Paris
Review, Summer-Fall No. 28 (1962), online, 1 October 2014.
<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4598/the-art-of-poetry-no-5-ezra-pound>

2 For more information, see T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: the Clark
Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926*, and the Turnbull lectures at the Johns Hopkins
The spiritual process of creating is the link between the writing of history and the search for truth, which belongs to both the classical epic and the metaphysical traditions. Authors of both traditions share a common goal of finding truth through the act of writing poetry. The metaphysical poets, writing in the seventeenth century, were known for taking on philosophical and spiritual subjects. They believed that the poet creates in order to “uncover both personal and universal truths” (Smith 271), while the epic poem “claims to tell its own kind of truth” (Bowra 40). In his essay on the difficulty of defining “metaphysical poetry,” W. Bradford Smith writes that “the ironical concurrence of life in all its opposites—body and soul, intellect and passion, grandeur and simplicity,” is what fascinated the metaphysical poets (272). Epic poetry also explores these opposites and the tensions they create, or, as Jeremy Ingalls writes, “dilemmas of the human soul” (The Epic Tradition 12). From the nucleus of history, the epic poet’s goal, as suggested by Browning, is also humanistic in that being human is rooted in “reason which guides the feelings in human ends or purposes,” or what Browning calls “truth” (Hayes 284). Poets of both epic and metaphysical traditions desire to seek truth through human experience. However, the human experience these poets express is from an overwhelmingly male perspective.

Epic poems, like metaphysical poems, are creation stories. Men’s creation stories are traditionally linked to narratives about nations, wars, and posterity, whereas women’s creation stories are traditionally linked to narratives about birthing, motherhood, and domesticity. Bernard Schweizer points out that “classical epics extol the heroic deeds of illustrious men in warfare and nation-founding while validating the dominant moral, religious, and cultural value’s of the author’s society” (1). This version of epic truth telling defines women as secondary characters at best, which not only neglects women’s experiences but also regulates those women to spaces that are clearly apart from the

---


3 I am using the term universal in the metaphysical context where universal truths refer to large inquires into the human understanding of death, love, life, the existence of God, truth, and beauty. See W. Bradford Smith, “What Is Metaphysical Poetry?” 262.
masculine world. When women poets write epics, they write themselves into already gendered stories because the tradition itself is historically androcentric. However overwhelming it may be to be a woman writing in a man’s genre, there are female authors like Elizabeth Barrett Browning who write themselves out of these masculine stories by infiltrating the very tradition that pigeonholes them. But the question remains, for me, is it enough for women to simply enter what has been coveted as a male genre? How does a woman poet successfully make the epic her own?

In this introduction to my creative dissertation, Cleave, a feminine epic, I will examine the work of women poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Hilda Doolittle, and Alice Notley, who transform the classical epic by reimagining the traditional epic’s hero and creating metaphysical spaces that, through the interconnectedness of history and truth of experience, provide a platform for women’s voices and experiences. I claim that the traditional epic’s heroic narrative isn’t a sufficient pathway to narrating women’s experiences and that an alternative “feminine” epic is necessary. The term is most notably used in Alice Notley’s essay, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” to characterize her own work. Notley writes, “I want to discover a woman’s voice that can encompass our true story existing on conscious levels, in the literal present, witnessing more than one culture” (180). While I agree with Notley that the feminine epic is a “public poem,” I believe that it can also mix the personal with radical form and content. This new, revised epic, what I refer to as the “feminine epic,” is an alternative approach to the heroic narrative, which expresses the creation story through women’s journeys and experiences. The discussion of the work of Browning, Doolittle, and Notley will lead to how Cleave, a feminine epic fits into an alternative epic tradition that learns from these women poets, but also departs from their approaches to redefine the genre.

Note that the “feminine” epic I am referring to is different than “women’s” epic poetry. For more on women’s poetry, see Jeremy M. Downes, The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women’s Epic Poetry (University of Delaware Press, 2010); Jan Montefiore, Feminism and Poetry, 2nd ed. (Pandora Press, 2004); and Linda A. Kinnahan, Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse (University of Iowa Press, 2004).
Before I trace a history of the “feminine epic” relevant to my work, I must explain the traditional epic. Epic poetry is defined extensively, and different types of epics exist outside of the Western literary tradition, making it impossible to come up with a single comprehensive definition. For the purposes of this introduction I am using what C.M. Bowra calls “heroic poetry,” the classical epic tradition that begins with Homer. According to Bowra, the epic poet “provides history as well as poetry” and that poetry “is not only objective but claims to tell the truth and its claims are generally accepted by its public” (40-41). Through this heroic epic, the poet must exhibit epic motive, which is “the composer’s intent to narrate dramatically, as pertinent upon a world stage and in a context of world history, a route through which the human spirit regenerates to durable spiritual enlightenment” (Ingalls 11). This spiritual enlightenment is achieved in part through the intervention of the gods and in part through the hero’s “supernatural powers…which other men have to a much less extant” (Bowra 91). Heroic qualities range from great strength and physical beauty to wit and intelligence—but a hero need not have all of them. The Greek definition of the hero is someone who has power, “an abundant, overflowing, assertive force, which expresses itself in action, especially in violent action, and enables him to do what is beyond ordinary mortals” (97). These powers cannot be attributed to the women of the epic because they do not exhibit the same masculine, warrior, and godlike qualities as men, nor are women present enough in the text to be necessarily and purposefully characterized. “In the epic, women have mainly existed at the symbolic peripheries as static rewards or temptations, as allies or antagonists, as inspirations or nemeses,” not heroes in the midst of battle (Friedman 205). Bowra writes, “The greatest heroes are primarily men of war,” indicating women’s exclusion from heroic status simply based on the author’s perception that only men engage in war activities (97). It’s not that female characters are physically weak; instead

---

5 For information on heroes in non-Western epic poetry, see David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub, Epic and History (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

they are characterized as domestic, like Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*, who weaves and waits in chastity for the hero, Odysseus, to return home to Ithaca. Vicki Bertram writes, “It seems that societies all around the world have developed their epics in a patriarchal idiom, with male heroes as role models, typically remarkable for their physical power and dominance (141). Traditional heroic epics never feature a heroine, nor are they written from a female character’s perspective. The epic’s phallocentric historical accounts of battle, featuring powerful heroes and nearly invisible female characters, coupled with male poets’ authoritative and dominant presence in the genre makes the epic difficult for women to enter.”

However, women writers have successfully entered this tradition by reinventing the epic, disrupting the patriarchal historical narrative of women, and representing women’s truths of experience in lieu of the universal truths generally accepted by society. When we discuss the recollection of history and the search for truth in poetic traditions, especially the epic, we must consider how conceptions of history and truth are both authoritative, subjective, and masculine constructions of human experience. For women to be heard, the plurality of women’s experiences needs to be written into these narratives about history and truth. According to French feminist Hélène Cixous, “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement,” not in order to describe the collective experience of being a “woman,” but rather as a way to express women’s differences (“Laugh of the Medusa” 875). With the understanding that feminism is twofold, “to break up, to destroy” and “to foresee the unforeseeable, to project” we can see that even though the epics written by Browning, H.D., and Notley are extraordinarily different, they all disrupt the tradition of the heroic epic and emerge as something entirely new (“Laugh of the Medusa” 875).

See also Akhtar Naraghi, “The Images of Women in Western and Eastern Epic Literature: an Analysis in Three Major Epics, The Shahnameh, The Iliad and The Odyssey” (McGill University, 1992).

The feminine epic accomplishes this mixture in three major ways. First, the feminine epic utilizes and reinvents the lyric “I”—as well insists upon the ebb and flow of pronouns—as a way to overcome the impersonal style attributed to the traditional epic. Women claim themselves as “I” in order to place themselves at the center of the text’s narrative. The “I” is not secondary—it transposes the personal and private lives of women to the public. However, women should also claim themselves as a “we” and “us” to show that the “I” is neither fixed nor dominant. Plural pronouns subvert the authoritative and masculine “I” utilized by the heroic epic. The second characteristic of a feminine epic is the erasure or decentralization of the hero. I don’t mean to suggest that women must create and then kill off the traditional hero in order recreate women’s history. Rather, the hero should either be reimagined as a heroine, or embody qualities that are not specific to gender—not masculine or feminine, but both. By doing so, the hyper-masculine, god-like attributes of the hero fall away and leave room for new protagonists, regardless of gender, to access power. The third characteristic is that the author of the feminine epic engages in social critique through the creation of a metaphysical world where women can exist as their own storytellers. Feminist critiques and commentaries take place in the imaginative and mythical worlds of women—the worlds where we imagine the birth of our mothers and experience women’s lives. Rather than evoke a historical event already impressed in the minds of men, the feminine epic’s setting must be an otherworldly civilization. As Alicia Ostricker writes, “civilization systematically oppresses, excludes, marginalizes, and trivializes the female, and privileges values that women not uncommonly feel to be deeply wrong or deeply partial” (479). Women must reimagine a civilization that is, even if unfair at times, representative of women’s struggles and desires, not those of the dominant culture.

Women’s struggles and desires are thematically at the forefront of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work, but this wasn’t always the case. Browning’s interpretation of the epic in 1857 is quite different than her interpretation in 1820. *The Battle of Marathon* (1820) was her first attempt at the epic genre. Based on an ancient historical event, *The Battle of Marathon* recounts the first Persian invasion of Greece in 490 BC, and Athens’s subsequent victory. At this point in her career, Browning was heavily influenced by Pope’s Homer, the father of Greek epic poetry, which resulted in an epic that follows the archetypal narrative of the brave Darius the Great, rather than an epic that tells or recreates history from a woman’s perspective—either in content or form. It might be fair to say that at the time she wrote *The Battle of Marathon*, Browning was a young girl who was caught up in the process of writing as imitation, and there were no English women poets writing epics she could replicate. In a letter, she wrote, “I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none” (qtd. in Friedman 207). For Browning, in preparation to write her first epic, it might have seemed necessary to choose a model as celebrated as Homer in order to fashion herself as an epic poetess. Western epics teach us the heroic stories of men—how nations were built and wars were fought. And just like these epics that Browning knew so well, the problem with *The Battle of Marathon* is that, even though it is the first epic notably written by a woman, it ends up as a calculated attempt to replicate history as told by men. The act of writing this way adds to the perpetuation of women’s history under the patriarchy, and, thus, is a false conception of women’s history etched in poetry.

Years after *The Battle of Marathon*, Browning wrote another epic called *Aurora Leigh* (1857), which presents the story of Aurora, a female writer whose journey is marked by her desire to be a great poet\(^\text{10}\). Unlike *The Battle of Marathon*, *Aurora Leigh* takes the form of a novel in verse, interrupting the traditional form of the heroic epic that she

---

had aspired to replicate in 1820. This change can be attributed to the novel’s influence over Browning. With a lack of women poets to model her work after, Browning turned to an extensive reading list, which included Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, Madame de Stael, and George Sand, women who wrote about women’s struggles (Freidman 207). As Freidman suggests, women like Browning “experienced their literary matrilineage in the context of women novelists instead of women poets” and this influence led to a strategy for writing the epic (206). The nineteenth century was a turning point for European women, and feminist themes that worked to redefine women’s roles in society emerged in literature. Friedman draws our attention to Ian Watt and John Richetti, who made the argument that “the development of the British novel was closely tied to the changing status of women in general” (207). By 1848, just a decade before Aurora Leigh was published, there was an established feminist critique of European society’s treatment of women. European women writers “combined social criticism with fiction to make their points about the necessity for expanding women’s horizons” (104). Critiques of “male-established marriage institutions,” “womanhood,” “economic life,” and the “sexual double standard” exposed the inequality of men and women, and this feminist literature helped mobilize women’s emancipation (Offen 106). Feminist voices influenced Browning to take a riskier stance in Aurora Leigh, using the novel’s female protagonist as a guide for her heroine, Aurora, and to offer readers a perspective on women’s struggle over male dominance and societal expectations in the nineteenth century social and literary landscape¹¹.

Like the epic hero who “desire[s] to be himself,” the heroine of Aurora Leigh, Aurora, wishes to be herself (Bowra 125). For Aurora, this means being a writer. The problem is that Aurora is a woman, a role in society that expects her work to be domestic, rather than artistic. Browning's use of commentary, influenced by the novel, on the inequality between women and men is apparent in Aurora Leigh. For example, Browning writes, in the First Book:

¹¹ For more information on classical narrative influence on Browning see Isobel Hurst, Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer (Oxford University Press, 2006).
The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
To put on when you're weary—or a stool
To tumble over and vex you . . 'curse that stool!'
Or else at best, a cushion where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not,
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
This hurts most, this–that, after all, we are paid
The worth of our work, perhaps.

Aurora uses the “we” pronoun to speak for not only herself, but for all women—a heroic aim that Bowra attributes to a hero exercising his own will for individual gain or for the nation (100). In this case, Aurora’s nation is a nation of women. The “you,” then, obviously refers to the general “sir” who represents all men. The critical tone that comes from the heroine is an assertion of self, but it is also a strong critique of womanhood. The domestic “sew, sew” alludes to the Iliad’s Helen who sews the story of the battle of Troy and Andromache who symbolizes the dutiful wife weaving a cloak for her husband, Hector (Newman 10). Even the “pair of slippers” is a curious emblem of comfort juxtaposed with the woman’s pricked fingers and dulled sight. The work a woman is expected to do is physically and mentally painful, and is in the service of men. But this type of work is also oddly “heroic” in the sense that it is operational, shows loyalty/obedience, and is for the greater good of the patriarchy. Even worse for Aurora is that “we are paid / The worth of our work,” which is indicates how little value Aurora sees in work that is not art. Ultimately, Aurora exposes the illusion of the perfect woman as a “dream of something we are not,” which is easily reflected in Browning’s experience as a mid-nineteenth century woman writer up against masculine authority. Friedman writes, “As a narrative of the birth and becoming of a woman-poet’s self, the epic is autobiography” (208). Browning, the author, and Aurora, the protagonist, are both in the midst of discovering how to write as women. The heroine’s journey begins with a grim
view of Aurora’s future, but her writing results in a personal and political freedom, which can be seen through Aurora’s views on the construction of poetry.

Aurora’s commentary on the form and function of poetry indicates a departure from the heroic epic poem’s historical and structural tradition. Aurora states that the epic should be free from formal construction, guided by the spirit, and yield to the nuances of life:

What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit,
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward,—so in life, and so in art,
Which still is life.

Aurora poses the question, “What form is best for poems?” She is speaking to herself, a meditation, which allows her to express the type of poetry she wants to write. By moving away from the “external,” which represents the outside poetic structures and traditions, and toward the “internal,” which represents the inner spirit of the poet, Aurora frees herself from the form that she describes as imprisoning. According to Aurora, thinking of form as “sovran nature does,” subscribes to the metaphysical tradition’s emphasis on meditation as a process for creating poetry. This is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, “For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (116). With Aurora as her conduit, Browning is also able to speak about her own struggle with the heroic epic’s constrictive form and propose a new way of thinking about poetry. Through Aurora’s voice, Browning calls for a more personal kind of poetry, which frees her from The Battle of Marathon and allows her to write Aurora Leigh. This is a crucial argument that Browning makes about the epic, while engaged in writing an epic.
H.D.’s Helen in Egypt is a lyric narrative that, along with Browning’s Aurora Leigh, “deconstruct[s] the male epic tradition and reconstitute[s] the genre to serve their perspectives as women” (Friedman 206). In H.D.’s version of Helen’s story, we learn that Helen was never actually in Troy as the Iliad suggests, but instead is “transposed or transplanted from Greece into Egypt (1). H.D.’s reimagining of Helen’s story in Homer’s Iliad makes Helen the heroine of the story and places her and Achilles in a metaphysical and mythical beginning. While Helen is born to an empty page, Achilles is stripped of his mortal, godlike body, arriving in Egypt as a soul.

In Book One of Helen in Egypt Helen finds herself in at a nondescript place and time. Helen states, “the scene is empty and I am alone” (1). The “scene” is an interesting setting, recalling the heroic epic tradition’s dramatic narrative and performative quality. However, we already see a distinction between Homer’s Helen and H.D.’s Helen. In the Iliad, Helen enters not at the beginning of the epic, but in Book Three, the scene where she is the midst of weaving a tapestry. As I mentioned earlier in my discussion of Aurora Leigh, sewing or weaving is considered women’s work. In opposition is men’s work, which is typically battle, or in the case of Aurora Leigh, art.

While Helen of Troy enters Homer’s story weaving images of the battle of Troy into her tapestry, Helen in Egypt is writing her own story in the first scene. This new beginning in Helen in Egypt allows Helen to take the reins of her own story, signifying her powerful disruption of the androcentric heroic epic. It is important to note that this masculine-feminine power structure between weaver and writer can only be disrupted in a place that is empty—a mythical place where no man can be found creating Helen in his image. By characterizing this “scene” as empty, H.D. creates a blank page for Helen, and for herself as the epic poet. Helen describes her surroundings as having “long corridors of lotus bud…with reed of the papyrus” (2). This papyrus is Helen’s space where she can create her own identity, world, and history, but it is also H.D.’s invitation to write.

Horace Gregory tells us that “H.D.’s concern has been centered upon the nature of reality, or as she has said less abstractly, more modestly, ‘a wish to make real to myself what is most real’” (Helen in Egypt ix). For H.D., the “nature” of reality isn’t organized by any masculine tradition, but is rather, as I explained earlier, a metaphysical journey where the poet discovers a personal truth through human experience. This metaphysical tradition of truth seeking through creation is how H.D. departs from the traditional heroic epic and enters the feminine epic. She is able to give Helen a voice because Helen of Troy is already an illusion. Friedman writes that H.D. chose Helen’s story because “Helen as hero directly confronts the denial of power and speech to women, not only in the conventional epic, but also in patriarchal culture in general” (217). With Helen in Egypt, she can represent anything H.D. imagines to be true. Women aren’t written into traditional epics as heroines. However, in the feminine epic the epic poet can create heroines and give them agency, but she must create them in the unimaginable places uninhabited by men.

If H.D. is going to reinvent Helen as a heroine, she also has to also reinvent Achilles, the hero of the Iliad. In Book One we find Helen in the great Amen Temple waiting for Achilles—they are about to meet for the first time on the beach. Helen speaks, “it was God’s plan / to melt the icy fortress of the soul / and free the man;” (10). The “icy fortress of the soul” refers to the body of Achilles in the Iliad. But in Egypt, God (which refers to Zeus) melts this fortress, revealing a new Achilles in Helen if Egypt. H.D.’s subtext explains “Achilles in life, in legend, is already immortal—in life, he is invincible, the hero-god” (9). H.D. thus reverses Achilles’s immortality by transforming him into “a mortal after death.” His power of immortality is given back to God, and he is left more human than he was in Troy. This amended beginning humanizes our once divine hero, and perhaps suggests that Achilles and Helen are mortal equals in this new and mythical world. Helen continues, “I did not know why / (in dream or in trance) // God had summoned me hither / until I saw the dim outline / grown clearer” (10). When Helen sees Achilles’s dim light, she is seeing his soul. This dream or trance-like vision from God is a place neither Helen nor Achilles have inhabited before. It represents the space between life and death where it’s possible to see
Achilles stripped down to his inner light. This metaphysical place is where Helen and Achilles’s new lives are created.

Unlike H.D.’s heroine in Helen in Egypt whose journey is marked by self-discovery and reforming identity, Alice Notley’s heroine in The Descent of Alette (1996) is fixated on large-scale ambitions, such as rewriting the beginning of women’s history in order to bring down patriarchal society. Notley most notably infiltrates the heroic epic through her use of experimental poetic form and her construction of the mythical and metaphysical underworld. Schweizer writes, “innovation and epic are not antithetical; rather they are inclusive of one another” (10). Notley’s The Descent of Alette is a great example of how the epic poem lends itself to formal innovations. The book’s poetic lines and narrative structure feel strange and at the same time, familiar. The Descent of Alette is organized by quatrains, a recognizable formal four-line stanza. However, each line has metrical and visual divisions marked by her use of quotation marks. Each phrase is considered a metrical foot and marked as such by these quotations. For example:

“she made a form” “in her mind” “an imaginary” “form” “to settle” “in her arms where” “the baby” “had been” “We saw her fiery arms” “cradle the air” “She cradled air” (“They take your children” “away” “if you’re on fire”)

In her essay, “The Feminine Epic,” Notley calls attention to how her measure has been referred to as “feminine…a break with the male conventions of the line and layout” (174). But Notley doesn’t completely agree, acknowledging that her line is influenced by “both men and women: William Carlos Williams, certainly H.D. probably Leslie Scalapino a little, John Giorno a little, Bob Dylan a little, others” (174). By invoking these writers, we can see that Notley uses quotation marks not only as marks of measure, but also as markers of the past. McCabe writes, “Even as an experimental woman lyricist, she is caught up, implicated in tradition: she must still cite tradition and be cited by it” (45). The quotation marks indicate that, in order to break from the patriarchal poetic line, she must insert herself into the tradition. Notley writes that developing the
measure was also “finding a way for a woman to act, to commit actions, enact a story, that suited the genre of the epic” (“The Feminine Epic” 173). By emphasizing the importance of tradition, Notley’s goal is not to eliminate the epic altogether, but find an access point for women to enter the genre.

Another way Notley interjects women into the epic structure is through the heroine’s magical defeat of the tyrant. But to get to the scene where Alette “kills” the tyrant, a little summary is needed. Alette’s story begins on a subway in the underworld. In this underworld she meets various souls that have been affected in some way by the tyrant’s evil rule. Alette believes that if she finds “our first mother,” she will be able to understand how to defeat the tyrant. When Alette does find the first mother, deep inside the underworld, she learns that the first mother has been transformed into a snake and was forced to dance until her head fell off. The first mother’s headless body explains that the world before the tyrant was an “edgeless” / “entity,” which was filled with “orgasmic” pleasure (175). But then something “vague” happened to the male—the sexes began to take shape, women gave birth, and men lost their connection to the beginning of the world (175). The first mother was then banished to the underworld, forced to walk through the darkness, carrying her head, while everyone above ground forgot about her. The first mother says,

“History is eternity” “until this” “is righted—” “No wrong has”

“so long endured” “There can be no truth” “elsewhere” “until”
“this is changed” “The holy men,” “the saints,” “the wise men,” “the heroes,” “the poets” “are ignorant,” “are like” “simple drunks”

Hearing this enlightens Alette, but also fuels her desire to find the tyrant and kill him. Alette, unlike the “simple drunks” before her, now has the knowledge necessary to right these wrongs. When Alette does find the tyrant, he tells her that he cannot be killed. Instead, he shows her all the things he’s collected—objects that represent the things he’s taken away from humans—that he keeps in a museum of flesh. After this tour, Alette
engages in failed attempts to “kill” the tyrant. The unsuccessful battle makes the tyrant tired, so he goes to sleep. Alette realizes that if she cannot kill the tyrant, then he must not be real. Recognizing this allows her to find the root of all his evil, which manifests itself in a bush. She finds the bush and pulls every root of it from the ground with the owl powers she acquired after finding the first mother. And this somehow, magically, kills the tyrant (272-277).

Two things are significant here for our conversation about the mythical and metaphysical spaces created in a feminine epic. First, Alette must realize the tyrant isn’t real in order to kill him. Rather than portray the tyrant as human, Notley turns him into an idea. The tyrant is a symbol for the patriarchal rule we are all under, and in order to break that structure, Alette has to recognize that he is an apparition, a spell we are under. Second, Alette turns into an owl when she uproots him from his powerful position, and then turns back into a human woman when she’s done. I have already spoken about how H.D. must create a mythical world where Helen can become the heroine. Notley not only creates a mythical world, but Alette must inhabit a mythical body in order to complete her heroic action. This is representative of what McCabe identifies as “reimagined ways of inhabiting the gendered world” (42). Alette’s woman-body isn’t sufficient. In a sense, Alette must acquire supernatural qualities to defeat supernatural ideas.

The story of Alette is a broken structure—broken into verses, into parts/books, and into mythical underworlds. But within this broken structure is a rebuilding of history, Alette’s story, her-story, which is not only the narrative of women, but also of all people who have been subjected to the tyrant. However, the greatest downfall of this narrative is that it borders on being too expected. The heroine kills the antagonist, freeing the nation. But, what does killing the tyrant actually do? How has the world changed since Alette’s enlightenment? Can it change, or has the tyrant ruined the future for us all? Ingalls writes, “All epic poets share the same motive, an intent to narrate the route to and within a transfiguration from knowledge to wisdom” (15). But is it enough to say that a story that features a heroine’s journey to enlightenment is a feminine epic?
In the beginning of this essay I discuss the similarities between metaphysical poetry and epic poetry—the desire of these poets to uncover human truths. While I’ve spent time discussing how Browning, H.D., and Notley have infiltrated the epic by exposing “human dilemmas” from a woman’s perspective, I have yet to explain why these metaphysical aspects of women’s writing, especially when paired with a genre as grand as the epic, are so integral to my work. Cixous writes,

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallocentric tradition. (879)

Where metaphysical tradition considers poetry to be a spiritual journey guided by reason, the epic tradition considers poetry to be a heroic journey guided by a masculine conception of history. Taking from both of these traditions is important because nearly my entire personal history of writing has been based on these traditions written by men. But, as Cixous explains, writing and reason are not the privileges of women, and as a woman poet who is writing a “feminine epic,” I must acknowledge the weight of this endeavor.

It’s my hope that Cleave, a feminist epic, is different kind of epic, a feminine approach that redirects traditional routes to wisdom by focusing on the journey of the soul, rather than that of the body. My definition of “feminine” doesn’t equate with lyrical poetry or feminized topics, but rather, “feminine” refers to alternative structures and themes that reflect on women’s experiences as she, the poet, sees them. This is expressed in my work through the poetic forms I chose to represent as a feminine epic—the poems break formal rules instated by a masculine tradition of poetry. Additionally, by infiltrating the “history” of the Shekinah within the heroic epic genre, through various ways of dismantling form, I understand that while I am writing from a woman’s perspective, I am also engaging with historical content important to Judaism. As I will discuss later, because the Shekinah’s history is largely constructed of silences, I am participating in writing poetry that builds upon a history of absence.
My interest in this idea of absence comes from a tradition of secular Jewish American poets who write from a place of ambivalence—a feeling of not belonging, an aversion towards identity, and, as Language poet and essayist Charles Bernstein states, “a practice of dialogue and as an openness to the unfolding performance of the everyday” (“Radical Jewish Culture / Secular Jewish Practice” 13). Hank Lazer also writes about ambivalence by noting the Jew’s “discomfort with identity itself” in his essay, “Who or What is a Jewish American Poet” (Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture 19). Lazer states, “The paradox of this particular refusal of identity—the Jew who refuses the Jewish American or Jewish label—is that it has become an identifying Jewish trait” (19). Bob Perlemen, in what he calls “homeopathic Jewishness,” writes about a diluted Jewishness (“Addendum: on the ‘Jewish Questions’” 55) that speaks to ambivalence as well. Perelman relays that the strength of homeopathic medicine is measured not by how much, but by how little: “…the more you diluted a homeopathic medicine the stronger it got…So for low strength dissolve a drop of homeopathic medicine in a pint of water…Full strength would be one drop per gallon” (55). Therefore, Perleman’s homeopathic model claims that “The less overt Jewishness there is in the writing—the more diluted it is—the more Jewish the writing” (55). For Bernstein, Lazer, and Perleman, discomfort with Jewish identity is the common experience for the secular Jewish writer, and ambivalence about religious identity, rather than identifying the self with religion, becomes an inevitable argument for what can characterize a writer as Jewish.

The ambivalence that embodies “Jewishness” may be somewhat contradictory for the secular Jew who is hesitant to claim her religious identity, and, at the same time, sees herself as culturally Jewish. My interest in the Shekinah is fueled by my Jewish upbringing but is also a way for me to question my belief in God. By looking at this ambivalence as radical, if radical is, as Alicia Ostricker writes in her essay “Secular and Sacred,” “to go to the root of the matter” while also being “extreme” (Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture 190), we can see how ambivalence is a site of meaning for the secular Jew. Radicalism—looking back while looking forward—puts the Jewish writer in an interesting in-between space: she can never fully deny her identification as a cultural
Jew (secular), but she can disconnect from religious practice of prayer (sacred). However complicated this identification may seem, it’s this liminal space that is “Jewish,” allowing for the productive questioning of and objecting to unified, definite, linear meanings and forms. And in writing, this discontent with Jewish identification becomes a site of interruption, interpretation, and interlocution. For me *Cleave, a feminine epic* is as much about interrupting a male tradition of writing as it as a disconnection from my Jewishness.

Some of my readers will situate this work in a Jewish American tradition in poetry, not only because the manuscript offers allusions to Jewish traditions, such as troweling dirt upon the open grave during a Jewish funeral in “Salute” or the Kabbalistic references to the formation of the soul in “Shape,” but also because, hopefully, my conception of the figure of the Shekinah as the female divine presence of God in Judaism is a departure from what might be considered “overtly Jewish.” I chose the Shekinah as the main figure in this work because as I was researching “Jewish content” for my area exam in “Secular Jewish Culture and Radical Poetics,” I found it intriguing that the Shekinah, as a figure in the *Old Testament*, goes by many names and many forms. At the time, this figure in flux seemed directly related to my interest in the representation of the female in the heroic epic tradition.

First appearing in the *Old Testament* as the Wisdom Goddess (however, unnamed) and “spanning a thousand years from the seventh or sixth century BCE through to the third or fourth century CE” (L95-101 *The Cosmic Shekinah*), the Shekinah’s meaning has been interpreted across time and cultures. The literal translation of Shekinah, from the Hebrew שְׁכִינָה, is “the dwelling.” The Shekinah is further defined by the Jewish

13 Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers examples of Jewish content in her essay “Midrashic Sensibilities” in *Radical Poetics and Secular Culture* (University of Alabama Press, 2010): “Such terms as diaspora, nomadism, exile, messianism, the holiness of the ordinary, textual study as worship, the quarrel with God are among the repeated, although not atemporal, topoi in Judaism, while historical practices—whether this means assimilation, secularization, and the attenuation of Jewish tradition [...] or the impact of the Holocaust as a startling, almost unassimilable fact within modernity—have all been important not only to the Objectivists as poets drawing on, or approaching Jewishness, but to many poets” (201).
Encyclopedia as the “majestic presence or manifestation of God which has descended to ‘dwell’ among men” (“Shekinah”). There is a sense that the Shekinah is seen as much as it is felt, that it literally inhabits man as it “dwells” in him, but also is present before him—sometimes speaking, mediating, or in silence.

Other definitions with the root שַכִּית signify a tabernacle, a tent or tapestry, or a female neighbor (The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon 1015). While the literal definitions of the Shekinah are important—as they speak to the figure’s many origins and interpretations—the Kabbalistic understandings of the Shekinah, as they directly speak to a masculine/feminine divide, are also integral to the perception of this figure in Cleave, a feminine epic. In The Cosmic Shekinah, Sorita d’Este and David Rankine write that the Shekinah can be found in other ancient texts from ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Babylonia/Sumer cultures that associate other goddesses with wisdom (L95-101).

However, it is important to note here that the Shekinah as a noun is not found in the Bible. Rather, according to the Jewish Encyclopedia, Rabbis have replaced “God” with “Shekinah” in passages that speak of God dwelling either in the Tabernacle or among the people of Israel. This replacing and renaming of the Shekinah by men and the insistence that she act, as a verb, and not exist, as a noun, is significant in understanding how I am characterizing the figure throughout Cleave, a feminine epic as a woman who has been exiled from her own narrative with the opportunity to claim her own history and being.

Similar to Browning, H.D., and Notley before me, I imagine an epic poetry that doesn’t consist of “feminine” qualities, but is feminine in its goal of moving women from the margins of the story, into the center14. For me, this is accomplished in Cleave, a feminine epic’s resistance to historical settings, defined notions of time and space, and the singular journey of the hero/heroine, all while conjuring the larger fractured narrative that seeks to uncover and expose my personal relationship with faith. This resistance has

---

manifested in a story about the Shekinah, a figure that represents the feminine divine presence of God, and the women who believe that her existence will help restore their faith in God and change their destinies—all which have been fashioned in the image of a male God.

Like Alette, the Shekinah is an idea and unlike Alette, the Shekinah is not a heroine. She doesn't save anyone. She doesn't build a nation. She is exiled by God and returned to earth by women, only to be exiled again by the same women. Her qualities are hardly godlike. Even though she was created in God’s image, she lacks conventional beauty, loyal character, and maternal instinct. She is not heroic, nor is she considered “feminine.” She does not engage in domestic activities, she fights, and is sexual—with both men and women. Because the Shekinah’s origins are plural, depending on which religious and cultural text you are reading, she is also common. Cleave, a feminine epic does not narrate only the journey of the Shekinah. It also tells the collective and spiritual journey of women’s search for the soul. I see the soul as a thing unseen and unwritten. The soul is also separate from the body, making it free of gender codes and, thus, an attainable and symbolic emblem for the woman poet. In “Preamble” I refer to the soul as a “she” and a “memory receptacle” that is “responsible for what comes before and after we begin.” I refer to the soul as a creation, a living, breathing entity. However, constructing a grand narrative around either the Shekinah, a set of women, or the soul would subscribe to the heroic epic’s monolithic view of masculine heroism and unambiguous narrative, which is not my goal in creating a feminine epic. Instead, I have created a story that weaves in and out of character, place, and plot and a structure that folds upon and unfolds into itself.

However disjunctive Cleave, a feminine epic may appear, its organizational structure lends itself to a narrative that while abstract and nonlinear can be followed thematically and stylistically. I have organized the manuscript into three parts, which all have

---

15 Not only am I working against “nation building” as a theme that belongs to the masculine heroism in the classical epic tradition, but I am also disassociating the Shekinah from the idea of a “Jewish nation,” which is the religious, nationalist, and political belief associated with Zionism, not secular Judaism as I define it in terms of ambivalence.
significant meanings in Kabbalah, ancient Jewish mysticism. Part One: The Greater Shekinah describes the Shekinah figure as holy, where she dwells with God in the third Serifah (also called a “serif”), or world, and also means “wisdom” (The Cosmic Shekinah L472-77). Part Two: The Lower Shekinah describes the Shekinah as she dwells amongst God’s people, in exile, which correlates to the tenth Sefirah, and also means “understanding” (Drob 367). The significance of the Greater and Lower is that “the erotic unification within the Godhead is symbolic of a cognitive unification between wisdom and understanding” (Drob 367). In Kabbalah, the idea that a feminine divine presence should engender creation represents how feminine existence must be negotiated between the spiritual and material worlds. In this way, the Shekinah is “in a dynamic polarity with the masculine divine” (L472-77), but the desire for unification represents how the feminine is a necessary element of the spiritual realm and the earthly realm. As quoted in The Cosmic Shekinah, the Bahir, a medieval Kabbalistic work asserts, “it is impossible for the lower world to endure without the female” (L492-98). While the Shekinah is only part of the male God, she is crucial to his existence. This information gave me an understanding of how I wanted to invoke the Shekinah’s many beginnings—as both part of God and separate from him.

In Part One of Cleave, a feminine epic, the Shekinah is imagined as many figures: the Tree of Knowledge, God’s lover, a one-eyed monster, and a sea creature, among other things. She begins as God’s creation, then God’s lover. When she is exiled from the Kingdom, she is banished to a house in the forest where she finds thousands of other women. Throughout the poems, sometimes she appears as “I” or “Shekinah” or “She,” which invokes her plurality—the Shekinah is never one being or one idea. Part One also has narrative prose sections between the lyrical poems that help guide the reader toward constructing a narrative. I added this technique as I revised the manuscript in the spirit of H.D.’s Helen in Egypt. H.D. begins each poem with a section of prose that explains what’s happening in the poem that follows. These prose sections are always written from

---

a third person perspective, a narrator that is neither Helen nor Achilles. Her prose sections are obvious breaks from the lyrical poems, but she links them together by including a line from the poem into the prose. For example, H.D. writes in prose, “Actually, they are both occupied with the thought of reconstruction, he ‘to reclaim the coast with the Pharos, the light-house,’ she to establish or re-establish the ancient Mysteries” (63) and in poetry H.D. writes, “while I work to re-claim the coast / with the Pharos, the light-house // ask the oracle to declare, / Helena which was the dream / which was the veil of Cytherae” (63). The prose is narrated to the reader from the third person, while the poetry’s lyric “I” is the voice of Achilles. Both retell the same story. I have also used this two-fold technique, not just to provide narrative clarity, but to also disrupt the epic’s objectivism with lyric and the lyric with epic objectivism.

In an effort for Cleave, a feminine epic, to break from form, each part is different in both story and structure. The poems in Part Two are continuous and do not have titles, nor do they have narrative prose poems like the first part of the manuscript. Instead, this section is a mixture of uninterrupted prose and lyric. The seams between the forms are undone, new characters are introduced, and the narratives fold into one another. Part Two: The Lesser Shekinah describes how the Shekinah was summoned from her grave to live as a God-like figure amongst the women of a nondescript time and place. In Kabbalah, “Lesser” signifies the earth, where the Shekinah is a “dwelling place” for God’s people. The Zohar, the foundational work of Kabbalah, indicates that the Shekinah is in exile, and that the union of the masculine and feminine is necessary in the Lesser world because the main goal of religious life is to restore the unity of the masculine divine principle with the Shekhinah, a unity that was broken by the sins of mankind, the exile of the Jewish people from the land of Israel, and the hold of the evil powers of the “Other Side.” (Drob 366). The Shekinah’s exile from heaven and presence on earth is narrated in Part Two, by telling the story of the unification of the Shekinah and the “I” character. Instead of the authorial “I” representing God, the “I” in this section is the woman who prays to bring her to earth, while the Shekinah also goes by the name “S.” The women in Part Two realize that the Shekinah is not the God they had hoped for—the Shekinah turns out to be no different than the God they already know—
so they bury her again in the grave she emerged from. Alternatively, the poems in this section offer another story: the Shekinah exiles herself back to her grave after failing to be the heroine/God that she is expected to be. There are other narratives that emerge in the poems as well. The Shekinah and the “I” character begin a sexual relationship, the Shekinah convinces the women to destroy the wolf/God by “inserting a river” into his head, and the Shekinah attempts to negotiate her role as the female divine presence of God by pushing the boundaries of what it means to be a “mother” to the women.

Although there is a version of the Shekinah responsible for creation, often referred to as the “mother” or the “daughter,” the Zohar also explains that the Shekinah’s unification with God is not only for procreation. It is cerebral. I wanted to channel this power of mind and body through the manuscript, especially in Part Two of Cleave, a feminine epic, through the sexual and intellectual relationship between the “I” and the Shekinah. The “I” character, which represents the women, expects her unification with the Shekinah to be a comforting and loving reunion, similar to a reunion between mother and daughter. Unfortunately, this loving reunion leads to further exile.

In Part Three: Blue, we find women in a blue world where they attempt to unite with their souls. I imagine this Blue place to be a space between the Greater and Lesser worlds—something between God and Earth. “Blue” is a play on the color as a marker of the male gender, a blue world where women live, and also signifies its contradictory representation in the Bible as the lowest color in the spectrum and the holiest color in biblical visions. This third section is also where I see myself entering the poems and disrupting the overarching “story” with my own. For example, poems like “Dreamsong” and “Swoon” are about my own ancestry, childhood, and relationship to faith. But “Epiphanic Tête-à-tête” merges the private “I” with the Shekinah’s eye, making the personal journey interrupt the public one:

It is me, or I, or her and we.
She is also us and you.
I am addressing you
from the hole in your eye.
In these lines the personal “I” is speaking through the hole in the Shekinah’s eye, which the reader first encounters in the Part One of the manuscript. By returning to the beginning of *Cleave, a feminine epic* in this third section, I hope to create a sense of narrative and structural return. In the final poem, “Afterworld,” I recreate the poem “One-eyed Monster” from the first section, telling the story about the Tree of Knowledge from an “I” perspective, and again in couplets. The poem recalls the love story between the Shekinah and God with the lines “I want to tell you about the trees. / The place where I carved your name, // got on my knees and pared my bones / so you and I had the same markings” making the “I” voice seem like the Shekinah is speaking about her love affair with God. But the voice is abstract, lending an interpretation where the “I” could just as easily be God’s or another woman’s voice and “the woman running on top of me” could be God or the Shekinah watching, either himself/herself or the woman who summoned her, from beneath the earth. This multiplicity of self also mimics the feminine/masculine and body/soul divide I want to channel throughout the manuscript.

There is also the personal aspect of this poem. I, too, have imagined myself in this mythical, spiritual forest that the Shekinah is exiled to in *Cleave, a feminine epic*. It is the place that represents where I feel closest to the earth and the divine presence of God. Growing up as a secular Jew was confusing. I was expected to have a bat-mitzvah, but my father was an atheist and my mother never went to synagogue. We didn’t fast on Yom Kippur, but when I wanted to go to the movies on the holiday, my father took the battery out of my car so I couldn’t leave the house. I felt, and still feel, trapped by the beliefs of my family and a religion I only half-practiced or understood. In “Afterworld,” I write, “But what was I even running from? / The trees I made a bond with from our sap?” Writing this manuscript has been a way for me to explore what it means to be simultaneously held to and split from my faith. The Shekinah (mother) and God (father) in these poems double as not only a religious lineage, but as a familial one. In an attempt to erase the idea of the father, I realize the idea of the mother is no different. Both are
made in *his* image. Gods are constructed through epics and myths. I end the manuscript with the lines,

    Some days I think how strange
    it is to absorb your own body.

    Other days I’d rather think *there*
    *is much to consider out there*, the sunlight

    beaming through green leaves like stars,
    brilliant holes in the roof of the house.

There is the thought: the soul and the body are unified after all. But even after the search/journey/epic is over, the holes reveal other possibilities or other explanations “out there…through the green leaves.” Enlightenment arrives as an aperture. The mysterious (“stars”) and intelligent (“brilliant”) conundrum—*there is so much to consider out there*—is a comfort in faith (“a house”).

As a “feminine epic” that borrows from both the epic and metaphysical traditions, this manuscript relies on the disparity between the three parts to create an overall structure. *Cleave, a feminine epic*, as the title suggests, isn’t meant to be read as a cohesive “story,” but rather the collection appears disjunctive, fragmented, and abstract, because it’s a work of resistance. By the word’s very definition, “cleave” means to cling to as well as sever from. Even in the act of resistance, there is a desire to be acknowledged by the very thing being resisted. I view my project as cleaving tradition, belief, and femininity—subjects that are, to me, very personal.

I set out to explore the fluidity of Jewishness and femininity through the Shekinah from the perspective of a secular atheist Jew—someone who identifies with Jewish culture and tradition—the secular aspects of Judaism—but not the Jewish religion—the sacred aspects of the Judaism. The Shekinah is an intermediary between God and the physical world, and *Cleave, a feminist epic* gives her agency that playfully
engages with this in-between space and further disassembles expectations of gender and power. I understand the Shekinah’s exile from and unification with God as a way for the feminine to textually exist alongside her male counterpart. Poet and essayist Hank Lazer points out, in describing Jewish poet Jerome Rothenberg’s work, that “the hope that the female side of God—Shekinah/Shekina—as herself in exile and evaded by orthodoxy will now return to astound us,” as she makes her way back into text (“Who Or What Is a Jewish American Poet” 30). Rothenberg’s treatment of the Shekinah in his work views the removal and assemblage of the orthodoxy and tradition surrounding the Shekinah as a site for unhinged creation and secularism. On the other hand, Alicia Ostriker thinks of the Shekinah more traditionally, as “God the Mother,” which “remains alive in the belly of the beast” (“Secular and Sacred: Returning (to) the Repressed” 184). The beast being “God the Father” suggests that the Shekinah is a mother in exile, waiting for her return to and unification with God, which treats the Shekinah’s reunion with God as sacred.

While I appreciate both these secular and sacred approaches to characterizing the Shekinah, for me, the Shekinah’s return from exile signifies that she must stake out a new place for herself entirely—a new beginning—in the text. This experimental approach of reimagining a biblical figure like the Shekinah uses “Jewish content” to acknowledge history, but also to question it.

Similarly, Rachel Blau Duplessis, a Jewish American women poet takes on “Jewish content” in her book-length poem Drafts. For Duplessis, Drafts upholds what she refers to as a “midrashic sensibility,” which speaks to the link between Jewish responsibility and experimental forms. While Duplessis admits that Jewish themes make their way, culturally, into Drafts (“The ‘Jewish allusions’ are often diasporically dispersed”), what is more “Jewish” about her work is her concept of Midrashic form (“Midrashic Sensibilities” 212), which is an experimental approach involving “elaboration via gloss, self-reading, reconsideration, recontextualization, citation and debate” and “a way of living in textuality characteristic of a Jewish heritage” rooted in Midrash (“Midrashic Sensibilities” 220). Duplessis’ use of Midrashic sensibility (Midrash literally means to investigate) in her poetry cultivates a multiplicity of interpretations and repetition, which is both formally and thematically Jewish. Duplessis is interested in “the
continuities and debates within a textual commentary, the historically situated necessity for interpretation and reinterpretation, the dialogue and arguments over meaning” (“Midrashic Sensibilities” 220). For Duplessis, both experimental form and the Jewish tradition of commentary actively participate in the unfolding of meaning as a necessary ontological exercise. Cleave, a feminine epic engages in a similar practice, specifically as it relates to the Shekinah and her many interpretations within the Kabbalah. Like Midrashic practice and experimental poetry, Kabbalah offers readers and writers a place to explore and decipher meaning. Kabbalah, which overwhelmingly influenced my conception of the Shekinah, is an important site for my project that seeks to challenge the male God grand narrative through deconstruction of meaning, language play, and by undermining the authorial presence of the lyric “I.”

Another Jewish woman writer from Canada, Adeena Karasick, comes to mind as someone who engages with Jewishness through experimental form and Jewish content. In her book Dyssemia Sleeze, Karasick has a section called “The Wall,” which uses the Western Wall as a site of both visual and textual representations of Kabbalistic practices. For Karasick, Kabbalah is “a complex assemblage of mystical teachings, techniques for decoding the arcana, believed to be concealed within canonical Jewish texts” (“Hijacking Language: Kabbalistic Trajectories” 409). Although Kabbalah looks back to “canonical Jewish texts” in its practice, what arises from this “decoding” is new meaning. In Karasick’s Western Wall she explains, “each brick metonymically became like a letter, a syntagmatic trope, an instance of history, identity, blocks of meaning” making what’s left of the Wall “fragments of history” (“Hijacking Language” 410-11). The traditional site of prayer in Jerusalem is deeply rooted in Jewish history, not only as the place where Jews from all over the world gather to pray, but also because it represents the exile of the Jewish people. The location of the Wall marks the destruction of the Second Temple—a history of Jewish exile traced through the rubble. This history becomes both the roots of Karasick’s radical work and the site of creation. What grows from what Maria Damon calls an “archive” is Jewish mysticism, the practice of Kabbalah, which literally opens the language up to new meanings (383). Playfully, Karasick writes, “[Like, how a second is a moment {en passe} and is also what comes to the aid of], the Second Temple can neither be
originary or secondary, but an origin that comes to the aid of, that passes into and out from and origin that is not an origin” (Dyssemia Sleaze 38). “The Wall” is a recreation, or “simulacra” that is, as described in the poem, “Inscribed in multiplicity” (Dyssemia Sleaze 39). Invoking a Wall that does not exist, that Wall of the temple, which is a site of destruction, is “elsewhere” (38). This elsewhere is not symbolic, rather it is a “transcribed as repositories of a meaning which was never present whose presence is always reconstituted by deferral, nachträglich, belatedness, supplementarity” (39). The multiplicity that Karasick is engaged with is “the Wall” as “the wall within the wall” (41), the “incalculable singularity” of each brick (44), and its “individual data”—“notes that are shoved in the Wall, like secrets with their disrupting narratives, wishes, dreams, locations, “hesitations and stutterings” (Dyssemia Sleaze). Like Karasick’s project using the Western Wall, my project uses the Shekinah, “Jewish content” that is self-conscious of history as it is rooted in tradition, but also as a place suited for creation.

The “Jewish content” from which Karasick writes is Kabbalistic in that it is fractured, multiplied, with language and “at the base for all thinking” (“Hijacking Language: Kabbalistic Trajectories” 410). Karasick writes of her own work, “it’s not that I’m writing about something overtly ‘jewy,’ but it’s this awareness of language, of the intricacy of letters, sounds, movement that energizes the work” (“Hijacking Language: Kabbalistic Trajectories” 414). I identify with Karasick’s awareness of language, rather than the “overtly jewy” content. I also think Duplessis’ poetic process describes how I view language as an experiment that fosters conversation and debate. Although I do not claim that Cleave, a feminine epic is only a Jewish piece of writing, and although neither Karasick nor Duplessis has written a “feminine epic,” their work suggests a tradition of Jewish American experimental writing that my project shares in form and innovation. By working with “Jewish content” and long poetic forms, both Karasick and Duplessis challenge hegemonic narratives by embracing the possibility for and change within language use.

I am aware that this project is an ambitious one, a challenge both for me to write and for readers who set out to decode. It is a project of epic proportions, and although it is not a confessional piece, it was a personal journey to complete. Implementing the
research I’ve done on the feminine epic and the Shekinah has been a long and difficult process, but it has opened the door for me to combine my interests in the spiritual with my love for the experimental. Women poets who write in the large space of the epic represent only a sliver of the tradition. With more women entering the genre, I hope to see further scholarship on the “feminine” epic. I wrote *Cleave, a feminine epic* with the intention to contribute to the genre and field of study, but also to participate in a larger undertaking where women poets write their stories by unraveling the ones written for them.
Works Cited


Cleave: a feminine epic.
By Jaimie Gusman
The crushers are crushed—torment and cried are past. 
Now there are new faces, new souls, and new spirits. 
--Isaac Luria, “A Song for the Sabbath Bride”
Preamble

1. We are always starting in medias res.

We are starting in a body.

Our beginnings must belong to the soul. We must believe this, that the soul is a memory receptacle. That she is responsible for what comes before and after we begin.

2. In the following story, there will be no linear narrative.
Instead, a middle that unfolds upon itself / the body will proceed.

Perhaps this is the job of the poetic, a soul’s resistance to the body.

Who holds whom together by the assemblage of lineage?
On the question, have you ever been microscopic about faith? she responds that faith is the non-religious belief in the soul. God has nothing to do with this.

3. Mythology is Adam met Eve from his rib. But the woman before her? The God-counterpart? A group of pious rabbis made her up and named her in the margins of biblical commentary. Her name is the Shekinah.

The Shekinah took her banishment from the earthly world very well. She coddled the idea of banishment, kept it close to her ribs. God sent her down, as the female divine presence of himself. He sent her down among the ruins. He sent her down without a face. The Shekinah is a presence, a concept, a nonlinguistic apparition. A handful of hes made her up and wrote her name as “glory” and “holy” and “tabernacle” and “tent.”

4. This part of the story we know:

The Shekinah was sent down, by God, to hover.
They called this unrecognizable light mother.

5. In Hebrew, the Shekinah is defined as “the dwelling place.” In Hebrew, Shekinah is a feminine noun. Her sound-ending, “Ah.” As in, open wide. As in feminine mouth.
Holy, holy, glory, hole.

Once, Isaiah referred to the Shekinah. In his mouth she became a glorious pronoun.
In Hebrew, “you” or “thou” can be either feminine or masculine. “It” is also gendered. Shekinah is she | God is he.

6.
A part of the story we don’t know:

When the Red Sea parted, the Shekinah hovered as a cloud. Red skydust. At night, she towered as a pillar of fire. The Shekinah is often referred to as Knowledge or as Nature as well as Mother. The Shekinah widens her eyes and watches her “children.”

The Shekinah stayed this way, hovering, with Moses and God’s people for forty clouds and forty fires. Mother – Daughter - Nature – Knowledge – Concept. God’s people, even Moses, didn’t always believe, but had faith.

This is not the story that will be told.

7.
In the mystical teachings of Kabbalah, the Shekinah is both independent of and the essence of God. The Shekinah is the last of ten worlds or “serifs,” which has mystic ties to how we see and understand the world. Each serif appears as a sphere, surrounded by light.

The Shekinah’s serif is known as the Kingdom. Each serif before the Kingdom leads to this dwelling place.

8.
Take refuge between walls, in hiding, in the faceless creation of physique.

9.
In the Zohar, the foundational work of Kabbalah, the Shekinah is in exile. We are not talking about homelands. This is metaphysical exile.

We are talking about the Shekinah as the vessel that must find her destiny with God. We are talking about the masculine-feminine divide, the soul and the body, and faith.

10.
The Shekinah, being the 10th serif, receives the 9th serif. The 9th serif represents Primordial man, or the phallus. It comes at her like a hull. The 9th world enters her, the Shekinah, the 10th serif, the Kingdom. They two unite. Then creation and change occurs. This is a story we know, the oldest story of birth.

In these mystical teachings, change is only possible through the Shekinah. Change is cerebral. The cerebral is erotic. Thus, creation.

_Ah my God!_ can be heard as an echo in the Kingdom. (Open Wide) We are talking about the pornographic intellect.
When the Shekinah hovers with God’s people, she is already in exile. According to the Kabbalah, this is called the Lesser Shekinah. When God desires her back, summons her back to the heavens, he is calling for unification, what is referred to as “Greater.”

God cannot create without her. He is limp, sterile, idle. The unification of the earthly realm and the spiritual realm is body and soul is masculine and feminine.

God was in the middle of a story when the pious rabbis named the Shekinah.

11.
In this narrative, the Shekinah comes from the dirty middle of earth, from the grave of the story. You see, the death of a body and the birth of the soul is where the Shekinah is called back to earth.

These three things we know:

The people want to be hovered.
God is in love with an idea.
The soul is writing the poem.
Part One: The Greater Shekinah

Narrative is a falsification, but still, inside it strange things begin to happen.
--Elizabeth Robinson, On Ghosts

I'm in love! I'm not in love!
I'm crazy! I’m not crazy!
--Sappho
Scroll (1)

history is fluxing
her muscles, sorely
underwritten

curves—the “o”
fallen off
lifeboat, lighthouse

the skincuts linger
too deep, no pain
could summon a voice

where we are
in a kitchen or
in a seaship, both tilt

their bony rooms
against the earth
edging away a flood

the containers
hold these vessels
pumping fast

water, blood
for even breasts,
dry and enraged.

upon waking,
we thought evidently
a dream

she was wrapped
tightly as an egg
in her thin white sheets

it was found
muscles carried
her to rivers

in the heavens
which also flowed
heavily upon earth

but the evidence
was unclear, as
expected, retold.
Before God fell in love with women, he fell in love with his garden. He grew everything he could think of—figs, lentils, hyssop, endives, chicory, cantaloupes, dandelions, grape hyacinth, almonds, caper bush, and sage. He walked through his garden, picking fruits and not thinking of humans, but instead thinking of himself. “What if there was a woman as powerful and beautiful as me?” He thought deeply about this question. “Could I love her?”
One-eyed Monster

before narcissus could learn
self-love and before oedipus

could learn self-doubt
a villous woman was born

from burning stars and dust.
there was a nebulous stretch

of land, sometimes called the garden
of God or the garden of eden.

but before eden blossomed
into the jungle it became,

desert pathways led to pools
of water carved in sand.

when the woman stood over
one particular glistening pool

she saw her face, but did not
believe this could possibly be

her face staring grimly back at her.
a bone structure that disgusted

her, cheek bones that rose to just
under her eyes, jutting out like hips,

and greyed teeth that simply hung
in grief over her bulbous bottom lip.

it was also the first time she saw
the dark hole, the cavernous dip

below her forehead, that must have been
where her right eye once blinked, lived.

at first, she moved her hand over
the dark crater, as if to wash it away,

but, like all versions of man’s visions,
permanence lingered and the hole stayed.

at the sight of her face, anger boiled in
her limbs, this small instance of seeing

herself marked the dusk edge
of belief, which also meant

the self’s suspicion was right: *my damage is written in this skin.* she lifted her head,

screamed, tearing at her neck with thick fingernails, dousing her face in the pool.

in the pool’s reflection she saw a shadow behind her, just a small tree sprouting

underneath her knees, and more trees growing upward, suddenly, from the desert.

soon, an entire forest sprung up, a blue jungle thundered from every direction.

too nervous to look, she covered her one opened eye, the other quietly

vulnerable to this newly formed world.
soon, an assault came fast on her bones;

*all of me will be gone,* she knew this and felt it in the movement of her gut.

then, the inevitable: her body grew stiff and bound to the forest, statuesque

and forever watching from the tree hollow of a damaged oak, haunting what is

yet to be created, and haunted by those looming creations.

**THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE,**

they would call her, and at times,

**SHEKINAH,** and at time, **SHE**

would be called upon, to speak up.
Commencement Speaking

we cannot start with God

an animal was here first,    paws & fur,

fully animal & heartbearing howls.

she bends down to pet it, its fur
shedding beneath her palm.

we cannot start with I so we must start with we.
We are writing I (I know), our narration.

what is it?
matted, mange, muscular.

she continues to stroke limply,
her thumb stretched out like netting.

the fur gets stuck to her skin.
her hand becomes a feathered wing.

she thinks of this wing.
tell brain to tell wing to leave this place.

so, begins knowing:
flight and blood temperature.

a wolfdog gives wings
to a woman who hovers.

wanting comes soon after,
for things soft, for things cold,

for heat in the cold nights.
God is our cue for desire.

she vows to give knowledge
to all things gnawing.

inside a soul learns how
to call a spell and spell it.

but we cannot start with a place
so we will start with the edge
of a seawall—wolfdogs, dogfish,
algae, the entire underbelly, a spectacular

ordinary world beginning to knock
other phantasmal worlds.

we will not say we heard
her open a door

nor that her vision was clear
when she found God,

sad, sitting on a tree
stump dreaming this thing up.

we will not say we were a Jerusalem
or an Egypt and that she was dressed in the dust.

all we can say is that in the beginning
she found something to love.
First Date

the Shekinah met God on a cool summer day in heaven. God was playing with a strange contraption, and after a while, watching him, the Shekinah realized his hands were stuck, his fingers wound up in the thing God was holding. she asked him, what are you making? you, he said, looking up at her with the saddest blue-sea eyes.

while she acknowledged God is strange, she also acknowledged God’s attention to detail, his precision with a knife. his fingers unstuck, with her helpful weaving, and once they were free, she felt the deep lines in the palms of God’s hands.

he told her he had been broken before, that he had taken up grief as a hobby. they laughed, however the Shekinah was suspicious, but not enough to ask him about his former lovers. let it be, she said to herself, with an enamored glow. but from time to time her mind wandered back to his tangled hands – what kinds of messes they had made.

it wasn’t before long that God leaned in for a kiss. he told her to be still so that she could feel the burn of the midday sun the exact moment their lips touched. that calculating God. that hopeless romantic God.

it is noon, he said. we are halfway to something. the Shekinah, unaware of positions like “noon” in time, could feel her head burning. it was as if noon meant the sun was reaching out its inimical rays across her face, if only to warn her that love is an injury of some degree.
Blade Story

armor is a heavy weapon put on to distract
humans and gods, covenants and pacts.
take her to bed
approach her like steam,
this animal you love
in the animal’s name.
Conundrum

as the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

I can advise the following:

(1) do not allow the sun to burn your body, especially the top of your head;

(2) loose dogs will ravish you - you are a mother. they will fly backwards, and away;

(3) while fire-breathing dragons don’t exist, other mythologies do, listen;

(4) some force beyond nature exists, hence, I am stuck in this tree and you are stuck in this tree.

as the TREE OF LIFE (your desires)

you are advised against:

(1) breaking up your parents’ marriage, they are your rivers to consume;

(2) covering the thin breath of the ear are your secrets which cannot suffer;

(3) deflecting the air around a mirror, the nostril is the middle of your life;

(4) closing your mouth, only one exit, one source for deciphering, one tone of she.
After God banished the Shekinah from his Kingdom, he sulked. His sulking made pools of water all along the earth. It wasn’t before long God wept great lakes and oceans. Small pools gathered in the middle of forest floors, drenching the roots of trees and drowning small insects and reptiles. Everywhere he traveled left a trace of blue. Yes, he felt terrible and yes, he felt hopeless (and still in love). But what happened, exactly? What could break up two creatures so terribly in love?
My Wedding Dress to Captain Your Trap

*please, help us, they beg, we’ve fallen in love*

*  
  
the backstory is:  
when God made the first move  
  
he knew it was a mistake.  
*what is our lesson?* he examines.  

*  
  
humanity will do what is necessary  
to define its humanness.  
  
when we talk about faith  
we speak of inheritance.  
  
that which we can’t escape.  
I admit, I was trapped  
  
in a bloodline, an oval  
shaped like a balloon.  
  
some of us raise our hands,  
and some of us lose our voices.  
  
I’m told about my foremothers  
swallowing their fists.  

*  
  
so here are we: a woman-  
goddess looking after the trees.  
  
her dress sewn from all  
our dresses found in forests.  

*  
  
the woman goddess doesn’t plant  
new seeds or care about regrowth.  
  
where is the “I” in her songs  
about warships?
how many branches
must she make into fire?

*

when we bend our backs
to her, she cries into a pillow.

I ask her, if we hold hands
will something about us change?

the woman goddess shrugs,
asks for ice for her fist.

I show her mine, gauze-
wrapped and also in bloom.

*

in the next house she sleeps
like a broken bulb soaking up dirt.

she waits for the water to come
and groom her, drop petals to her feet.

*

love was not at all what God imagined.
he could not keep her.

God was not at all what I imagined,
this white dress, this breakable glass.
Work Chorus

a girl with a puddle. a king with a piano.
spill over their days. spill their legs over.
and into their caves. and into their safes.

goin' to town with this little foot.
goin' to town to kick the town down.

my child is pretty. my child is forbidden.
this world is scary. the world scares this world.
I won't let you go dear. I won't let her go.

goin' to the city with a cloak and a bow.
goin' to the city to let the whole city go.

a girl and an apple. a king and his pleats.
dance with the demons. dance with the sea.
fall into your under. get under your fall.

goin' to heaven with hell in my spine.
goin' to heaven to claim what was mine.
The Shekinah found out about the other women. She was wandering in the garden and found a mysterious bronze colored door covered in yellow leaves, so she opened it. On the other side of the door was a house, a three-story structure with thousands of women inside. Women who were sweeping, women who were bathing, women who were fighting off the urge to sleep. When the Shekinah asked one, “what are you doing here?” thousands replied, “we are waiting for God.” Frightened, the Shekinah closed the door behind her and ran back to the Kingdom. She asked God about the other women, but he denied their existence.
salute

there is meaning,
she says, in a line.

is there also
nothing different

than a fallen
woman failing

to refuse
everth’s opening

as the dirt
in her core?

it is customary
to cradle the dirt

in the palm
before throwing.

the grave is God’s
generous gift.
How could she accept his word? She saw these women for herself. "You’re a liar," she said, which infuriated God. With his red, fiery hand, he took her by the arm and led her to the garden, "There, there!" she pointed to the door. God opened it and threw her inside with the others. The women clapped, called her a goddess, and named her She.
Stakeout

when the women want things
they ask, like windpipes
they blow their whole beings
through a strawlike vessel, to heaven.

one woman sets her strawlike vessel
down, says to hell with the other

women who peel their veils
down to hide their faces. some even

chew their own lacy fabrics with gratitude,
to keep from smiling.

but She, as we’ll call one woman,
climbs upstairs, holds her own black

sheath below her waist, tightly against
her thighs—maybe in anger or the shallow

sadness women only express in rooms
with mirrored doors that loosely swing.

She has been here for too many years
battling thoughts of escape routes, tales

of ladders made of women’s clothing
or hair, and the deep swallowing oceans

that churn outside the boundaries
of an idea invented to tame her boiling blood.

these fictions bite at She, keep She’s reach
elongated and obsessed with “rescue,”
sometimes confused with salvation
sometimes confused with prayer.

the only time She kneels, or clasps
her hands is at // thoughts, the ones

that make it nearly impossible to open
her eyes or get lost in the day’s work.

we all know this feeling—the women
choke and hurl their words forward

like pigeons, clumsy on the phone
lines, their heads gathered in soft air.

*if* only falling erased fear, *if* only fear
erased falling off of and apart from bones.

reassuring this fear only comes
in the console of present repetitions—

*there, there*—but the only words She
can manage are the ones buried

in the teeth of spirits and paper notes.
yes, She thinks of these things at night,

then in the morning, She scans the room
for women’s pursed lips to open and blow.
Dream State

we must understand a woman never dreams
in any state of unconsciousness.

we must understand that a woman’s dreams occur
only during the heat of midday light.

with a woman’s eyes open, her limbs are automatic
but her mind is preoccupied, afloat.

He said, we must find a box and the shiniest bone-white woman,
wrap her in a thousand sheets of paper.

we must sacrifice this woman for all of us
who dream and wake up dream and wake up dream and wake up.
The women wanted to know how She lost her eye. “It was a knife fight,” the Shekinah explained. But this was a lie. She was born this way, a defect, a reminder that love is not a choice, it is chosen for us. But the Shekinah decided to make the story better. The blade God used was sharp as a wolf tooth, but she was not unarmed either. She drew a sword as long as her body, but the weight of it made her shoulders sore. Could we blame her? Could we all not feel her pain? When she put the sword down (she was just resting!), she turned her back to God. That’s when it happened. She turned around and he stuck the knife into the center of her eye.
Accidental Life

cut, still lodged in She’s eye does not create pain.

cut seeps out in tender waves of discomfort, but not hurt. She can only describe it as a subtle burn, followed by blue flashes of light.

cut dances around the room like stars smashing into the ceiling.

//

a woman is generous when it comes to pain. She comforts it, as though it’s the pain that needs rescue.

//

the rags feel like heavy carpet draped over her face. it was She’s prerogative to say, “let it come out. I want it to come out of me like a flood.”

//

is blindness a way to self-medicate?

we wonder ourselves, if our eyes are two pills caused by an interior reaction.

the women try to wrap She’s whole body in a twice-bleached sheet. but when they approach She begins screaming, I am still inside, I am still inside!

//

we try to not get the fibers stuck inside the wound.
we wash our hands in the tub before touching She’s face, before touching the handle on the blade.

what is most worrisome is if the contents of She’s eye come out, the other eye will swell. She could lose that eye, too become nothing no one without a soul.
when the burn comes
let it settle me into dust
when the dust comes
let it burn his eyes.

let me die, let me die

but, of course, we cannot.
Mythology: The Hot Season

*pilot:*
what predetermined intention
selected you—was it impossible

summer fog, the burning sticks
they threw under automobiles

or the match that lit up your breath?
*enough.* even the earthly sand began
to take “surface” more seriously
drawing herself closer to the shore.

*episode one:*
the goddess of earth
had a troubling birthplace—the land
did not comprehend her and thus
emerged from the sea our “sealegged

baby girl.” her sealegs made her
slither and tired of being so slick.

*episode two:*
what happened to our slimy daughter?
she had no slimy mother to slip into.

*episode three:*
the goddess of earth
was somewhat human, born heartbroke

only to die of thirst—but the ocean,
being so far away from her mountain
town, left her gaping—
a void as exposed as a reef.

*episode four:*
b/c woman has this great opening
to house our sounds, our words,
she is forced on stage to perform.
when all she wanted was water
to come out of her like wordwater
the goddess of earth, tired of being slippery,
of performing with her sealegs, is imagined
to have drowned in glorious amounts of gemstoned attire.

not even you, dear audience, expect this
and those tears, those are real sea-drops from the sky.

*episode five:*
the people in town refer to the animal,
the entertainer, as the Shekinah—dangerous

woman-goddess-word. rumor: she is said to have taken
her tubular body and slithered into the water forever.

they say her spirit is some kind of crocodile
with bottomless hunger and large white teeth.

*episode six:
the town decides to push the issue of belief
away, focus more on themselves than the text.

they do, in fact, however throw many
burning sticks under slick automobiles when

no one can find the Shekinah floating,
face down, somewhere in the ocean.

they, in fact, cannot see any figure in the thick
summer fog and instead of looking on land, forget.

*episode seven
the Shekinah, who doesn’t actually drown,
places herself in a deep hole beneath a tree.

she swallows a box of matches and says *enough*
to the surface (and all above it), and disappears.
Emergent Prayer

out of water, not a fish but

some animals are strangely finned. as in, close to extinct
but their bodies do not know this

as they cut through
the natural world.

to be finned means to have a winglike appendage.

*

spirits are gossiping: extinction is a terrifying word, don’t you think?

*

when I tell the story, I let my audience look at the eye,
look deep down into the tunnel of my carved-out hole
and ask, can you see my soul yet? and then I move closer,
how about now?

*

what do you believe, if you do not believe in sacrifice?
for example,

from the delivery bed, a friend says
the contractions feel like sharks eating at her stomach.

at some point, we all pluck an eye.

*

in order to swim, you must
remember.

it might be this simple, but
to float, you must concentrate
on every part alive in the world.

pay attention
the story will only lose you
if you forget to breathe
if you forget why you must

*

my spirit-animal lays eggs.
it has taken my spirit-animal
3500 years to build her nest
because her imagination
runs wild, gets in the way
of settling down,
of having babies,
but after many years
of tearing down the nest and
reconstructing it, the eggs
appear, in the bright-white morning.

*

I’m afraid I’m no one
especially in the sea.

*

I wanted wings
to swim out of rage.
it is so easy to hate
the things a hand makes.
The Mend

She’s eyehole throbbed. the throbbing was worse in the room’s stillness where She sat propped up on two straw-threaded pillows. She’s dollface faded. the daydreams stopped, and were replaced by emotions, real ones, that welled up briny inside her throat. there was nowhere she could go with this heavy anger and sadness saddled to her chest. the women, who dragged her body into the room, could hear shallow shrieking from upstairs, assuming She had finally found prayer. the women whispered, soon He will save us. but She was purging – a new ritual for removal: the throat, the legs, the eyes. these came from God. these are the things that must go, will save us.

where did I learn this voice?
mother, who are you now?
Covenant

in the shape of an echo
her calling name
I tell her, convincingly
she is the blue bird, she cannot swim.
/
when I call
you will answer
says the subject to the object
consider this trap your calling name.
/
if her rings fall
a saturn, a yellow flake
a field of flakes,
would reposition her, but she evolves.
/
no partial moon shrinks
underneath the full moon
let me pull this string here
with my blue birdeak.
/
her grave, a stopping point
or cover,
one I was addicted to
knee-bones and prayer.
/
moonblood
is too real.
it pulls her out of it
snaps her beak in half.
/
iff and only iff
woman-god is a good-god
her good is a good bird
we might lean on prayer, again
/
there are rings for this marriage
what emerges from a tiny finger
is a fragile contract; adieu adieu
Part Two: The Lesser Shekinah

We think back through our mothers if we are women.
-- Virginia Wolf *A Room of One's Own*

I want the men I know to stop inventing.
-- Erin Moure, “Some of the Women,” *Domestic Fuel*
Scroll (2)

history is dry and enraged.
curves a dream

it [ ] found
The place was meant to be a secret as the women had built it in the off hours in the behind times. Here, walking backwards becomes a staircase. Are we going up? Coming down? In the house, *I is totally alone.* I, a total creep in the shadow between a wall and a wolf. Someone approaches with a thick mustache with a grandfather coat two pockets in front of my face. *Take one* he says, but he is talking to himself. He cannot choose just one, he says, they are all so beautiful, the secrets in their eyes grow larger and curvier than their eyes and am I now blind?
I am not sure not in total certainty in what I can or what I cannot distinguish as the shape a letter of or the sound of an opening. Is this the pathway to the soul? No. Is this man a wolf? Yes. Since he is blind, can I tell him to come inside the house? Please, do. I tell him, don’t say “curtain” don’t say “cover” don’t say “cunt.” And the silence puts him to sleep. But do say “exposure” do say “expunge” do say “exit” as to give the behind times another secret for building without hammers, without waking a wolf.
Define: Shekinah

(a.) mother-dwelling, and (1.) light, and (3.) female divine, or (xxx.) to dwell inside, and (4.) the ‘other’ God, and (e.) guidance, presence

or complacency with self

or self-satisfaction

or (xi.) sexpot, and (7.) offensive woman who radiates sex, and (h.) savior

also known as S.
Define: the wolf

the man behind the curtain;
he turned into a wolf;
the wolf is how God imagines himself on earth;
the wolf is God;
the wolf is a sacred animal;
the wolf is our sacrifice to her;
get the wolf’s brain;
carve the wolf’s head hollow;
insert a river into one wolf half;
draw a picture in the skull;
she will come for the wolf;
she will come for us.
S. comes in thunderous thwacks
[“hard” and “harder”]
          twinkle twinkle           a star unspangled,           S. weighed
down with her otherworldliness.

[points with arrows, no cherubs here]

“I told her to get on her right side so I could fuck her like a soda pop”     think:
          am I the only weasel in this place?
When the bar shuts down, Henry, Harry, & Lou wipe the bathroom mirrors with bike rags.
“Who are these guys?” S. asks. Just random bar backs
S. threw all three into the stall &

she came like a god / is a god, hence the mirror
she straightened up in, smacked her lips
          Henry smiles at Harry smiles at Lou and they make shiny cocoons
with their hands,

but in a regular bed S. rolls over my oh no’s and crosses her lady legs, coyly

I whisper to H., H., & L. the secret not to tell
I prayed for our reflections to burst.
[Thoughts: I fucked a holy thing.
It’s the middle of winter.
The next minute, I was chewing on a napkin.
That point of viewing—
I licked her habits like rabbits, leaves.]
Where she came from was and is not under discussion. The women sat around the sun like revolvers in gripping destinations although no invention for her existed yet around her body now all aglow from fingertips to leather straps some of the women poke her and use her as though her breasts were dirty triggers. You are it you are it you are it the sun shone and revealed the magnesium holes in the discussion of when and where they placed this part of her or that part of her the gallbladder removed, the exchange for the liver, the one breast lower than the other so that the stitching would stay forever lace a new blue
to soften her face

soften her bursting organs

someone save me
the good parts

she said,
pointing
to the wolf.
She is a positive noun. As in a *pro.* (Once, a profeminist?) One can be good at She, or, alternatively, suck the life out of She. Being good/bad is stuck to the noun. *Goodgirl. Badgirl.*

There are many instances of, *My empty sisters.* Contemplate: “She has nothing,” which is a positive because she can own that. Around noon, the sun burned Moses a grease spot. She saw this and tightened her eyelids into wet roots. A group of us blinked, too. She holds onto one side of the water, her sisters she holds the others like whips. Her eyelids tighten, glass or wet rods. Strike this! And nothing.  }
We want to know everything,
and how this led to
a bar fight between
two. God and Goddess
and their swords were long
as sharkfins / seriously
all the guys watched
the Shekinah fight
her lover, some frail thing
in a dotted dress.
“Everyone knows real gods
don’t wear lipstick
that dark” –some girl.
The crops grow toward her. She is the sun. They call her the bitch with water jugs two heavy on her chest. Her shoulders creak. The crops don’t mind suffering for her—goddess built to suffer to sweep the land clean of its sand. Sometimes I get tired she admits this but how a goddess of the sun curves the land—warped glass, limbs, animal hairs stuck in the crevices of husband-gloves. He takes them off so slowly, hands still. She wants to touch the sun just under so lightly her fingers burn the land and soon: flames, scarves, scattered like dunes, and the doom the goddess sometimes knows. Until death, do us something good. It’s a good life, she has to remember this with her hands folded. He promises her children to water to pluck at the jugs while she’s walking they scream for saviors like irises but what about me? she thinks. For years her irises are shrunken resin-tins. She lashes out on herself whips her ankles into the folds of the land. She calls herself bitch. When she walks, we can hear her feel her heat. She radiates in the southern part of her body; she is an extraterrestrial being, abandons signs no one can see. A new prayer: for acid burns on the crops (she will surely never hear the end of this one) even if she has to carry the babes over oceans to prove her grace.
Every night I prepared
for the Shekinah’s arrival.
I would halve then scoop
a wolf’s head, give a good luck
kiss for any opening.
I wrote thoughts of the dead
woman in the grease-pan,
I pasted letters with milkpowder,
with a paintbrush.
An alphabet— two hands
pressed together, like a garden
between cut by a river.

the night S. came / I spent shedding the floor of its floorboards / put my kneecaps to my
heart rocking / my naked ship searching / the edge of the land / where my spirit could
open / my open mouth across / a grass facing north / where does the spirit open? / even
the loneliest tombs / weren’t always black / but beneath the house / he built us into trees /
this is where I would find her / in the roots

In my despair I was told
of an injection into the forehead.
How a river could split the brain.
Make it water. I was told
of the dangers of leaking.
The divine presence herself leaked all of them.  
She leaked into the underground.  
The story went,  
“that’s where she belongs.”

Long ago, she was lured there.  
As the staircase descended I thought  
*why have I never been this far down in the earth*  
*why has it taken me so long to prey*

In the story, opening the door doesn’t allow her to enter: she crawls, clings, slithers.

I tell her the story of this beginning,  
but she is skeptical of any beginning  
that places her beneath the Image of God’s house.

When she emerges from the earth and into the house  
she rubs her chest against the wooden banister,  
her heart exposed—a thumping bulb of tin and tins.

I’ve been waiting for so long to welcome her,  
to call her mother, lover, goddess of all earth.  
*Hello? What kind of mess did I get stuck in now?*
The Shekinah told us about the absence of her mother.
“I never met her. I figured my father swallowed her whole.”
All of us knew how the story went, but for the Shekinah?
Even our nods seemed nothing like comfort, nothing
like the shared experience of being shoved in a closet
and given a coat to gush our childish teeth in: blue fabric,
a tweed that never suited the climate. This is the kind
of thing mothers carry with them in case their babies cry.
one fist two fist red fist blue fist.
his fist her fist whose will bite first?

go fist row fist fast fist slow fist.
his first her first time to get fish.

no fist glow fist know your own fist.
don’t make this fist a wish you’ll miss.
After summoning S.
from under the earth,
S. did not say thank you

(Or the joke is that I am
the one saying thanks.)

After the incident at the bar,
S. did not apologize for arousals
(You followed me to the stall, too.)

or the fight she started with God
(It was probably that HENRY!)

*

I make tea, prop the ottoman
under her feet; resting place.

She casually opens a book
from my shelf, mocks me—birds?

Mythical ones: the ziz,
hippogriff, pontianak, and siren.

I told her I like to study wings,
and the cuts they make in the air.

*

Icarus’s father made him wax-wings
that fell into the glittery immortal sea.

Our father left wings out of the equation.
Women were not going to be birds, fly.

I tell her I’ve been praying
for my own.
“Maybe you could stich them for me?”

*

She says prayer isn’t heard,
isn’t always birdsongstuff.
Anyway, I have pictures of prayers. I show her my stock photo frames.

I always wanted mothers and sisters but no, they are not keepsakes.

I change the subject. I have an evolutionary alphabet that often escapes me.

S. tells me there is no reason to sew, no reason to fly away.

*

She wants to know why I summoned her, why I dug my heart, then the earth, disturbing her peace, her resting.

“For this disaster?” she said. I looked around at the homes lining our streets, dilapidated structures, half-walls, foundations where storms came and went, leaving the enormity of empty.

She pointed at the neighborhood, We looked like tired, disgusting sheep.

*

I thought she wanted out/above. Would she be able to see now?

We need narratives to make us happy again.

*

We need her to put a new spin on our histories. (I want to be dizzy.)
Twist them so that the advantage in the beginning was: woman, is.

“But you already have a God. Do you think I’m cleverer than that?”
So it is decided that we will not insert the river into the chest. The Shekinah says that it all starts in the head, that we must find a way to get into his brain and I say we might do this through his dreams but she says this is the wrong way to think that we must not think like ourselves anymore if we are to become otherwise but a thought. But I explain that I have dreamt this before: after putting the babes to sleep we put on our slippers and slide across the wooden planks and unhinge the door so that it does not creak but instead we remove it softly as cotton spun in morning and gather around his mattress and stroke his hair because this is the usual ritual and he cannot flinch for when the moon hits he is in his deepest sleep and it is then when he breathes in the silver night that we each kiss his forehead and with each kiss the skin deepens and the skull collapses like a wet grave then we are kissing the inside of his head until the hole is deep enough to fill: glory, glory, prayer.
The Shekinah folded
felt napkin-sized & all crumbled.
All this moseying around didn’t suit her holiness
and she (wholly) wanted back into the ground.
Each limb placed where I found her, mangled
and angled towards moon, sun, whatever light could reach.
Who needs mothers anyway? I tried to console.
The daughter is just meat.
Some rivers will come apart. I hear the tear outside the window where S. walks around in circles, makes wishes and writes them all down. Sometimes the waterpaths fork like undetermined brain waves, and sometimes she’ll get frustrated and replace them with flames. But the flashbacks continue: after she said to God, *who do you think you’re going to be?* he told her to calm herself. He gave her a new name, buried her under his house. One night she started talking in her sleep. She told me to hold her one night *so tight I can’t breathe* I knew this was the grief of God, the remoteness of God, his face pushing against her name. And in the middle of the night I would wake up to wailings and nonsensical chanting. That the water will dry up. That the sun will burn out her heart. *I should cover the light,* she repeated to *cover the goddamn windows* and when her mouth opened something in me would blister.
And although the landscape never changed
for us ladies of the terrible cities, the Shekinah felt
transformed. She didn’t need light. I didn’t need light!
The darkness is here, so we walk around in it
bumping into the things we grow and buy.
And it’s all tasteless. We tend to our fathers,
our mothers, never asking what this authority
means for a child. The Shekinah was not the mother
I’d hoped for, called out for in the most tragic
episode I could think of: the ritual of faith.
She sat on a stool and told me all her regrets:
“Nothing, really.” And I wanted epiphany, really.
I wanted blue sea to foam from her mouth.
I wanted her neck to cringe and pulse for things
she did and did not do. I wanted green words,
blue-green washes of sound and tongue.
I wanted her as an apology I could hold, to say,
“dear God,” and “what have I done to this child?”
Like a painting’s stillness and afterglow,
“I’m sorry, my light was never fantastic.”
She moved her hands over the mud in prayer. 
She came from a plot, stroked the plot.

She came from a shadow, caressed the shadow, 
than carefully rolled it up as a map.

She pressed these paths between her thighs. 
She stroked and caressed her thighs.

She wrapped her hair around her thumbs, 
the thunderous stories in her thumbs.

She wore a long white dress, a scroll, 
dragged the dress around the plot.

Dirty stories wedged underneath her fingertips. 
She picked at tiny woodchips from her nail beds.

She said we needed trees, 
that we all come from swift movements,

from the breeze shaking and the sap spilling down thick trunks rooted in earth.

She pulled some thinner roots from her throat and strung them over the ground, like trails.

She kneeled to the ground. She stroked the ground. 
She spelled her name with the roots on the ground.

The women’s shadows hovered over their bodies, 
then dug for their own plots; theirs were briefly told and buried.
And that’s where I left her. In the text, floating around the story. Sinking. Catching her breath. Using her arms. And for a moment I felt loved, cradled by the commas that held her together. Even from the concrete ledge I said *breathe young lady*, when she panicked.
But the truth? I’ll crawl on my hands and knees to her, crawl inside her arms, let her talk dirty and it will make no difference if I can see her long hair tangled in my lap, feel her pricking my thighs with her nails, or screaming for relief. “Just let me go,” she would say in her dreams. She might have been talking to God, too. She might have pleaded “this is too much” and took her dwelling back to the darkness.
A napkin. An envelope. She came to us
twisted and already her narrative falling apart.
She got up from the stool, kicked back a whiskey
neat, and headed back with a shovel.
Badass Shekinah. Movie-star Shekinah.
Whatever she was wearing we wanted.
However she moved, we documented.
We applauded, wondered if after she goes
would God ever come back, reclaim it all
or stay obliterated, shaking so hard his teeth
would fall out? And then it snowed little God-teeth.
And I forgot a little and slept a little and thawed.
Our little puddles become so much.
Part Three: Blue

your soul is just length of baby
--Fanny Howe, “The Descent”

When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.
--Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*
Scroll (3)

where we are

[ ] a [ ] ship [ ] tilt

vessels

heavens

heavily upon

the evidence

unclear, as

retold.
Shape

The ocean is ice blue, a translucent clearing that could chill a wolf’s jaw. Our skin is not yet ready for it, but reflects a similar frosty pigment. We are still developing our hypodermis, but all the other organs are in place. We are not quite inside out, we are flat sheets of muscle. We are scalps, faces, hands, nipples.

But how old are we?
We are old enough to be your mothers.

Us blue women stand around the edge of water, take pleasure in watching the cold steam rise into fibrous silks, then hit the air like soft, warm breath.

We are old enough to be your mothers, so listen.

On earth, everything begins as a blue organism. First, we are liquid drops. Some of us join with others. Some of us stay singular. We all develop small shells that hold our insides together. This is where we produce livers and hearts and brains. Then, we break open and suddenly have wings. But we don’t know how to use them, and they eventually fall off, then we grow skin.

In the fetal stage, we develop the lowest aspect of the soul. It matures in the liver, spreads throughout the body via blood.

Behind us are white mountains and gulches that are iced over, so we can never tell how deep the openings drive into the earth. Forests, too, ancient greens are browed over by dense moss and loamy soil. We have the ideal topography for growth.

When our wings fall off, the sound is exactly how one would imagine chitin to crumble, like the half-dead roseblooms continuing to hold shape.

Below our breasts are our hearts. They thump so hard that you can see the little beats bulge through tender sternums. The middle part of the soul lives inside the bulge, chirps like a bat. It feeds off breast milk and sings when it’s full.

Chitin is not elastic. When its time for us to grow, we have to push out of our wings, split open the structure like a cicada from its shell.

On days when the lights are turned all the way up, we find bows and arrows and guns and knives stuck in tree roots. When we try to touch them, our hands go numb until we pass out.

Passing out is like dreaming. Sometimes we wake up back at the edge of the water. Sometimes we wake up again with wings we know we will eventually lose.

Around us is a welcoming luminous globe of white.

The brain is the highest level of the soul and comes to us when we hunt or imagine the forests turning to mud. Other colors flood in and the blues fade in the light.
We can’t swim through water, and there is no way out.

When we gather by the edge of the water we play the water game, *what are you thinking?* We stare into one another’s eyes and guess. Each time our thoughts get more complex, and some of us have to squint to find the answers.

We are blue, but our souls are blue hot.

When a soul reaches full development, it abandons us for the water. We watch them form from the steam rising.

But without wings, our souls float away from us.
Dreamsong

I always wanted to find a man
on an airplane to submerge

in the unbreathable space
that is plastic but also air.

While flying, I dreamt
wings took me to South

America to visit my ancestors.
we huddled and listened

for coyotes and made male
calls and female calls at night.

We watched the female coyotes
come to devour all the males

while humming dramatic
telenovela love songs.

I imagine finding rocks
to tie all our ancient

books to, and after I submerge
the texts under the south Pacific

my arms fall away. I walk into
the ocean, the water always blue

and overweight with what
thou cannot measure.
Of Being and Lightness

“Go forth and bring me what shatters
the moon, but also brightens the earth.
Go forth and strike stones with red thread
dangling from your desert skirts.
Go forth and upon going forth, take silent
breaths, wear them heavy on your breast.
Go forth and look over your shoulder
because she is coming after you, after all of us.”
It

Being means your eyes are monster-large, like dreaming is something of that size. She figured this out in water.

It wasn’t a reflection.
It wasn’t after tormenting a blouse on a washboard.
It wasn’t about rubbing her eyes out.

Nor did she bathe coolly with her bare skin or skinned bones. She noticed the largeness about her run out of her body and then back into her body as though this was a game and she was up in a tree, then submerged underwater.

She was close to drowning.
She was tied to anchors.

Before he pushed the top of her head further into the water, she heard, you are it from the distance.

She was a pin of light.
She was the interruption.

A monster woke, furious. The monster swam against her body, brushing past the tiny hairs on her skin. / The monster found his hand pushing down like a fallen plume like an angel’s torn and feathered wing. / The monster reached for the hand and gently held it like a petal. / The monster asked her is this it? all that I am?

Stunned, thinking of asking the same thing.
Stunned, thinking of swallowing water,

she bared not a reflection
but in her palms thin threads
running blue
running electric.
Mistaken Prayer

Yes, bodies are found blue, fond of water.

*

Her face emerged at pace with other blooming:
wet petals,
buffalo grasses,
fleece flowers.

I counted lines
when I was blue.

*

Her softened voice, at first, sacred
instead, a high-pitched alarm or, no, grandmother?
No. I wasn’t asleep and she was not yet alive.

*

A shimmering
intestinal rope, bones
like glass flutes.

chirped and ragged.

*

She: a rose from the earth.
At first thought: this is my grandmother

She: a prose. mouthjar, blue nests on her tongue.
Blue? air and water and unto the insides: lungs, a brackish heart, two almost-iced ovaries.

*

I place my hands like a cup
below her hips. we’ll make a toast, to “us.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Omen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>when they are coming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their flesh is burning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summon the thirty-two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pathways to the soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they stand together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unravel her threads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the wine disappears</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Swoon

When I pass out I have visions of my soul.
My soul is a large blue flicker with white glow.

I pass out two or three times a year.
The first time I held my breath before jumping
in the pool – I was ten or eleven years old.
When I jumped I had already began to lose
consciousness and the dream began
where I was floating inside a huge bubble
in an ocean full of bubbles—each sphere
held a fish or a seahorse, sometimes a wolf.

When I didn’t come up to the surface my father
jumped in after me. I felt his arms beneath
my diaphragm and even though I couldn’t breathe
I felt his lungs, those heaving boulders, against
my spine forcing me back into life above water.
I knew what I was doing, but I never told him
because daughters can’t be suicidal, they must
learn to grow fins for balance, swim side to side.

*

It’s hard not to be so personal—some myths
are so embedded in your history, wait,
some histories are so embedded in your myth
that even breathing requires a rhythm.

Instead you must catch yourself as you fall or
learn how to let go and hope you’ll wake up
with wings larger than your body, larger
than the soul you want to fit into your body.

Sometimes I will pass out when I drink
too many whiskeys in short glasses with ice.

My skin gets cold and the dream comes back.
Why is everything in circles? Why don’t we collide?

Sometimes when I’m drinking I cry so hard that I can only breathe between long images of panic: the roof of the house crumbles, my lover reaches his hand down my throat and pulls out a long beam made of wood, my sister is watching from a hole in the floor.

*

When my bubble reaches the water’s surface I’m afraid it will burst, or worse, the air will leak through a small hole and fill the bubble. I will be forced to take long breaths of fresh air.

I grew up on a peninsula, surrounded by salt water and mangroves, crooked like hooks. They stay alongside you as you cut through the ocean, like your arms are wings made of blades.

No one asks if you want to stop swimming. They only ask when you want to dry off.

When I reach the shore, I pull the bubble behind me and drag it to the edge of the beach.

Is the bubble my soul or just a shadow? It deflates on land, heavy as a pile of wet rags.

I unfold the bubble and lay it out like a blanket. First I sit next to it, then I put my back against the cold flat surface – but we are stitched so closely together, only inches apart.

*

When I wake up, I am in bed and someone is feeding me toast, stroking my face.

I cannot move freely from the bubble and the bubble cannot move without water.
I’ve seen my soul up close and the flickering isn’t light emanating from the outside.

Instead, my soul is a pool of water dripping back into itself like a thousand round waves.

When I wake up, I am in bed and someone is feeding me toast, stroking my hair.

The only dreams I have of my mother are the ones where she helps me put stars back into the sky. They are glow stars, and when you rip the paper off their backs they stick to anything, so I put some on her skin. When the stars are gone my mother turns into a wick.

She burns feet up, the ash consuming her from the ground to the ceiling of my room.
Bloodswatch

Try as you might, you cannot trade blood for more water or for another type of blood.

You might want to know who I am, why I’m interested in your composition.

I found you washed up on the shore with a rope around your neck—was it umbilical?

was it made of metal wire or ancient seaweeds? These are things I’ll need to know.

During the transfusion, your arms will become limp and you’ll forget the promises I made you.

Right now I promise to find your blood mother. Right now I promise to keep you from sleeping.

Nod if you understand, or nod if you are awake. Under this spell, you’ll retire your sealegs to the sea.

Nod if you want these wings, or nod if you recognize these wings from maybe a dream or maybe another life.
Epiphanic Tête-à-tête

The blue part is also
the color between two
worlds, one made heaven,
and one made earth.

I don’t want to bring back the dead,
I want to know that the dead are all right.

You cannot remember blue
thoughts because they
are made of water,
and your body is blood.

I don’t want to tell my mother
the things I said when I was dreaming.

Who is in charge
of the story?
We all want to know
why are we starting over?

But I can only speak with her
in the middle of a dream.

It is me, or I, or her and we.
She is also us and you.
I am addressing you
from the hole in your eye.

You either learn to let go or keep
falling, the same as the poem.

When we wake up
we will be happy
we didn’t die, but we are
so empty, so hungry, amen.
Afterworld

I want to tell you about the trees. The place where I carved your name,

got on my knees and pared my bones so you and I had the same markings.

From our scars, from our paper skin we illuminated blue blood and blue sap.

I felt this—you and I were one being, one large bright wet organism.

Now I believe these things are true: the soul doesn’t want to be found dead,

she wants to linger, always steps ahead of your gait, the object of your longing.

I was running in the forest, trees fell with such tremendous weight, the earth shook, cracked, left a red opening—lips that appeared in the dirt and a voice inside the opening, or maybe a whisper, called my name, but I was running and couldn’t look down or I would lose my footing, trip on the roots bulging like spears from the falling trees, so I kept running, the opening followed me through the forest and I thought, can I run from this forever?

But what was I even running from? The trees I made a bond with from our sap?

My legs were getting tired and I bled from my knees so much they resembled rivers and began flowing very quickly into the opening beneath my feet.

Soon my body became a river, my skin
my bones, my organs all turned into blood

but the feeling was still as if I was running
with wind blowing through my hair, the sun

bright and beating down on my face,
the moisture in the air thick, smelled
delicious like the mangrove seeds and salt
from my childhood and I was floating

into the opening, which felt wonderful,
and I was no longer tired, just warm.

When I woke up I was back in the forest
looking up at the green canopy, the sun
flickered through the leaves like flames.
It was breathtaking, this angle, this tilt
upward because by now, I was a river
flowing through the forest, moving
quickly over roots, through brown leaves,
pooling around the base of flowers.

I could feel everything, taste the pollen
in the air, hear the soft peduncles shiver.

Then it hit me—a foot, and then another.
A woman was running on top of me,
through me, and I became violent,
which was so unlike me—my calm
demeanor was rattled and I began bubbling
with anger and soon I was red and hot,

not quite lava and not quite water—
something thick coming from my throat.

I followed the woman—I called to her,
what is your name? But she wouldn’t look
at me and just kept running, which felt
familiar, like I knew her, so I called again

what I thought was her name, but still
no answer so I climbed up her legs
to get a better look, but as I crawled
toward her face, the rest disappeared.
Something urged me to keep climbing,
so I did until the top of her head slid
between my lips—but no sounds, no struggle.
Soon she was not gone but part of me.

Some days I think how strange
it is to absorb your own body.

Other days I’d rather think there
is much to consider out there, the sunlight
beaming through green leaves like stars,
brilliant holes in the roof of the house.