# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Book Is a Hungry Darkness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Whole Water-Faced Auditorium</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Love, My Taxes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palomino</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Grove and a View of the Pacific</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if the Drought Stayed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Paint</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Polarized Lenses</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Deer Mistaken for a Statue of a Deer</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southpaw Skin the Gloves</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Is the Body and the Un-Body</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asteroid Recovery</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum Fear</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elysian / Echo</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upland Honest</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almanac Traction</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Days</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward Falling Daytime</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Most Elegant Way to Win Was to Quit</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk Like a Steeple</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I Loathe in Others I Like in You</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open the Box that Holds the Fire</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Barrow Street   "The Book Is a Hungry Darkness"
Colorado Review  "Forward Falling Daytime"
Devil’s Lake   "The Whole Water-Faced Auditorium"
DMQ Review   "Hawk Like a Steeple"
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Guernica   "Number Love, My Taxes"
The Journal   "Museum Fear"
LIT Magazine   "Sunday Polarized Lenses"
    "In the Paint"
Ninth Letter   "Upland Honest"
Pleiades   "A Deer Mistaken for a Statue of a Deer"
Prairie Schooner   "Southpaw Skin the Gloves"
    "Almanac Traction"
    "Asteroid Recovery"
Sixth Finch   "Some Days"
    "What I Loathe in Others I Like in You"
The Southampton Review   "Orange Grove and a View of the Pacific"
    "Purpose Is the Body and the Un-Body"
    "Palomino"
Witness   "The Most Elegant Way to Win Was to Quit"
Zone 3   "What if the Drought Stayed"
THE BOOK IS A HUNGRY DARKNESS

My desires are berries because they are small and many.
Fig leaves embarrass the body.
Wine is my water when I am writing,
blood when I am dancing, sweating.

My parents’ god is the sun
at 7 a.m. in December, that close to nothing.

My father had no sons.
My mother sends my wife her love.
In all of this, forgiveness

assumes sin and I’m not sorry.

I am the snake and I am the silence,
an animal’s rib picked clean.
THE WHOLE WATER-FACED AUDITORIUM

for C.D. Wright

Body exalt.
Ozarks exalt.
Judge and court reporter and shorthand exalt.

Salt the ice where the grave-pull hits you.

The porch hammer guard-dogs what we’ve got,

champagne taste
and high life money.

White girls fuck white girls without drawing the blinds.
Sometimes light bulbs fall asleep, too.

There is no sell by date on mourning.
NUMBER LOVE, MY TAXES

Like a wrapped gift I had put off opening because the shake of it said I got right answers in me. And I have been holding the map in a fog so thick I can’t see the length of my arm.
So this cosmo quiz of income I’m counting on to make sense of how we were never married, but I dream more than I sleep now.
Of how the fire alarm went off for twenty minutes at midnight, hungry for a nine-volt, and hitting it with a broom handle felt like shaking a baby.

My neighbor drives his kids four hours one way to see their mom and she will still be locked up for years.
Someone abandons a wheelchair in the snow in front of my house and somebody else shovels a bent path around it.
When they test my blood they ask have you ever exchanged sex for drugs or money or something that you needed?
There must be a write off in all of this.

In the number of boxelder bugs trapped against storm-windows, in the growing mole on my left breast, in the way a woman puts her hot tongue to it long enough that I forget my grandfather’s melanoma, my Aunt Barb’s mastectomy, in who claims each of us and how they do it, how the tattoo won’t come off, how we are so many dependents, how one headlight will do for now.

We expect a tear-away check in the mail some weeks towards summer, those of us who didn’t stack enough in the black. I recycle the magazines wearing strangers’ names that I don’t call to cancel because I am alone enough already. And when the check does come the
watermark reads *leave this town, leave the state altogether,*
like a receipt stamped *no returns, no exchanges.*
You can’t undo what you have done.
PALOMINO

after Mary Ruefle

Did you wait for hours at arrivals?
Did you curse when you got back in the car?
Did you eat an apple? Did you eat its core?
Did you drive to Mexico out of spite?
Did you get beat up in the water and left for dead?
Did you get a flat? Did you have a spare?
Did you listen to Rumours on repeat?
Did you elaborate?
Did you think about stealing a horse?
How long did you stand by the barbed-wire fence
picking out the one you’d take?
Did you strip the bed? Did you tip the maid?
Did you imagine remembering a birthday
would be like an old kiss?
Did you measure twice and cut once?
Did you trespass like you used to?
Did you carry the cassette for years?
Have you quit sleeping in other people’s clothes?
Did you go blind, just for a moment, in the floodlight?
Did you stop to taste the gravel in my driveway?
Can you smell the silence on my breath?
ORANGE GROVE AND A VIEW OF THE PACIFIC

Wings inside a window frame.
The dishtowel that held a bird
humming in my hands, Lily
keeping the chair steady.

Lily in a belly shirt before
one of us took it off.
This used to be a dress,
she said, I made it.

Lily’s hair falls in the way
famous people move
their bodies.

From the guestroom I
can hear the ocean
gasp. Sunscreen and salt
smell. My name sounds like
yes, sounds like a lost dog.
WHAT IF THE DROUGHT STAYED

what if the drought stayed  
and smudged us into smoke marks  
licking white walls hungry

in some dirty daytime eden  
beer was anyway cheaper than water

we kissed our books, unfolded them in our laps

what if I stayed and droughted you

became left handed  
inscribed distance on what is not strange

smaller and smaller mysteries  
deft utensil jasmine bites, sips
leave the wisteria, eat the air around it

when the rain comes it will be nothing

like the cold morning wait  
wind shutting the door
ambivalent alarms set early

da tremor loud enough  
to see the bay bridge ripple
IN THE PAINT

i.

I have called it “don’t respond”
  wanted the part that walks through the desert still
a waver in the air each step

cactus like a hot stove
  out of reach pocket knife and tylenol
wanted to lie on the coal train tracks in January thaw
  or the pipeline trucks

   you know

I’m taking a different girl to basketball games this year
  it’s like that

like the undead space jam website
  and that mythical space jordan
    fool on the poster on my closed closet door til way too old

way too long to be trying to fuck with don’t respond

difference between a bull and a steer
how the power steering went out
  and it can’t  waver can’t be fixed  so stiff
upper lips two of us
ii.

Each close call totemic  
a very evil eye worn a worn away button  
on yarn on a neck that is  
these wanders made it through protected

clever matchbook a little burning bush for a good time  
called cheaters never win quitters never prosper

stay close to this trigger as it’s pulled white hat  
slow with unwavering draw

ghost of no remorse sketched in cloud shadow like cow hide

hindsight hubris  
hindsight hardball years

come back and go to sleep white hat and where your undershirt unravels  
we will mend it
Nothing looks nice on this couch.

Even uncles sodden in the ubiquity of always almost getting divorced.

But the nice thing about bringing the fruit salad is that you can put mango in it and leave out all the shitty fruits.

Fantasizing through an hour of names for a future DJ self leaves me where it always has—Drugdealer Boyfriend.

I’m told they are very very upper middle class, or maybe lower upper class.

One of everything on a doubled paper plate is really the last thing anyone has ever wanted.

More is more of the melted coleslaw that “still in love with Carl” sounds like.

I miss the petulant teenage apathy and resentment of being told to put on the pastel sweater and get in the car, we’ll be outside.

Someone’s not-wife (mine) is swept off her feet by someone else’s father.

Evidently there will be skeet shooting tomorrow for those interested.

If only you, they, all watched more porn.

My own rented window is decorated from outside the house with the dried pointillist blood of a self-jealous robin.

The flashiest part of me gets off on guilt.
What can’t be monogrammed?

Honestly, who?
A DEER MISTAKEN FOR A STATUE OF A DEER

There are deer in the suburbs
who know they don’t belong there
and know they can’t leave

After the time for flight
(and deer aren’t fighters to begin with)
we get still and wait for
a change or an end—

I keep thinking that
I will die with my eyes open

And how in the city I am afraid
to leave the laundromat and how
I don’t remember if I ever
put your black bra in the dryer—

When I was a hunter
I was never even a hunter then—
The coroner’s children are fat
in a happy way.

Not in a KwikMart way,
where my entourage is a bench
in the sun and more than one man
tells me the bus doesn’t run
here anymore.

But the one who stops and squints with me says,

I watched Boom Boom Mancini
kill a man in the ring
watched it live, on TV, TV-live.

Saw the punch that laid him into the ropes,
put him in a coma,
put him in the ground.

I was a kid and it ruined me,
I still see it.

Even the ref
killed himself after
he didn’t stop the fight.
PURPOSE IS THE BODY AND THE UN-BODY

My war could be a silent one
dressed in hooded vestments,
violent only in a quick vow
of refusal:

My rage will be my own and held
warm against my chest. Will not be
spoken for. Will be chanted hand
in hand with joy.

Fight strips the delicate sacredness
from ending. Paints you in colors.
Leaves you half-dead.

Let light cut a hole in the roof,
stillness dig a tunnel to the safe house.
Silence holds you like two boxers
in love, swinging at each other.
   It won’t desert you when you need a war.
ASTEROID RECOVERY

At the moment of impact, my brother said he felt nothing, he felt himself to be nothing, a curl of smoke from some extinguishment, the last of the species of himself, caught in the very moment of extinction. The cupboards of his clapboard chest shook enough to shatter their earthenware to the floor, and then the shards shook more. He is still quaking. He says there is no awake. At the moment of impact, a seismic shift split the sea, tide after tide so high his rupture. Whitecaps to batter the firmament, their fists to the punching bag sky, his fist blotting the sea from his eye. And nothing of himself, and everything taken away. At the moment of impact, his eclipse stayed dark. Leaning all his weight against a sun that strains to rise for him, like trapping torment shame behind a closet door though it pounds to be let out. The buoyant wisp of you, the unsettled dust of your body, that last wandering animal, typhoon beating and beating a nameless shore that is your every regret, you, pinprick light years away, shelves stripped bare, darkness blanket around shoulders. What of your dominion does not grieve with you?
MUSEUM FEAR:

this body of howling same | same desert silent darkness language
of symbol & object & logic
I tried to hollow it out
until the absence flooded

I want to taste the fruits I’ve read about
I want to kiss the part of you that speaks
I want not to draw so near to anger
I want the guard to hold my hand
as we gather the pieces of a broken thing

that I will be asked
to stand in the corner
with my pockets turned out

that I have touched
something irreplaceable and fractured it

that what I never stole
will still be found on me unexplained
ELYSIAN / ECHO

the park in Echo Park
is called Elysian

with steps so steep
we couldn’t speak

pebbles before becoming
a rockslide

half of me
holding out a hand

to keep you
my own cold plum

I would buy you
things I can’t afford

an orchard emptied
from the storm

the tail of a meteor
you thought you saw

someone like me
but more true

I watched you
even after you said

don’t watch me
while I fall
UPLAND HONEST

Every time we hike this hill
I end up ravenous, but gradually.

The pitch picks up as you describe
the ugly daylight moon
and the ring one of your friends
has given to another.
I tell you my new secretary
broke off her engagement for a woman
and, without breaking stride, you ask if it was me.

There are tacit ways we talk
about why we are not together
when we are together—
  We go into nature without other company,
  without a map or jacket, so that when
  I am cold I have to say that I am cold.
  We survey an entire town in miniature
  until house becomes a game the rest are playing.
  We call the in-between season profane,
  when half the trees are summer
  and half the trees play dead.

In single file, one of us is only a voice,
the other a pillar of salt.

My sock works hard at a blister.
The tamaracks haven’t gone yellow,
though they threaten it like a pop quiz,
like something we’ve studied and forgotten.
We splay out on the bald hilltop, 
close our eyes to the roiling sky.
My belly hunger-moans when 
you lean your head against it—
ferocious, even the softest part of me.
ALMANAC TRACTION

The end of this year is a congealing cold gravy in every kitchen I know. A mountain pass you can’t legally cross without chains. And I can’t help dwelling on the unenforcement of this and the cost of chains, the daymare of rolling over.

And then who would water the plants.

I am not funny at parties, but I’m good with the leftovers. I have a sense for lids and their jars wearing label-glue residue. When I am in love I am good with the laundry, bad about eyes on the road.

But December is not an accident waiting to happen, it is the ditch. We have already rolled.

I am trying to show there is nothing outcast about you. I will armpit your hands for warmth. I will flare the dark, I will splint and carry you through when you need it.
SOME DAYS

Some days I want to use muggle as a slur. I want “you are not magic” to hold in it the kind of sting that burns all morning.

There’s a way someone who’s never been in a fistfight kinda wants that.

But what the city is good for: remembering the one climbable willow still mermaiding through the park in dusk.

The lifetime membership can be such a rip off but it just really depends.

And at some point that sucker of a stormtrooper must’ve realized those were the droids he was looking for. And then what?

A gaslight purpling the path.

The swim-up bartender calls it a Miami Vice—half piña colada / half daiquiri swirl.

The heroic part is that inside out underwear still works. This is no embarrassment.

The Morse code click of the burner before it lights. Whole milk hot chocolate, not for an occasion, just to drink.

It turns out the 40 degree river of alpine runoff is pleasure incarnate and she doesn’t care if you strip down or not, if you put your face in, she’s gonna keep running.

Get someone to touch your nerve endings.

With better eyes you can see the loose balloons even longer.
FORWARD FALLING DAYTIME

at sunrise I say light shut up
reset the dashboard clock while swerving
a travel mug rolling in the passenger footwell
that was not, it turns out, spill-proof

boulders in the rearview, like some molecular rushing
outran its invasive historic wearing away
pitted weed against parasite and hollowed out
my placeless worry

left my initials on a tabletop in Bozeman
scratched a rude mountain from a borrowed knife
sunrise road so steep the car curses me rhythmically

don’t return my mother’s calls in full
just that I am with my two friends at the edge of a mine
don’t name them because I am far away from generosity
in general things are fine, the pit says hi

gas is still cheap and I’m afraid I won’t be famous
cheesy cracker aftertaste stuck in my molars
what if I am known for nothing but forgetting to floss

we talk through a script about the end of humanity
reclamation and prairie grasses nine feet tall

possibility and integrity both a lessness
like towns called Phosphate, Racetrack, Anaconda, Opportunity
I want us to disappear, but all together so we won’t be alone
THE MOST ELEGANT WAY TO WIN WAS TO QUIT

The most elegant way to win was to quit.

She asked will you meet me in the tunnel? I answered, nothing and yes.

•

If stones began so wide we had no sight of their beginnings—

The name for an always shrinking absence.

[Parabolic, Asymptotic]

I don’t know;

[Walking at the bottom of a canyon—]

The thing that I know is the absence will keep shrinking.

•

I spent the night in a cave. I watched a man accidentally catch a manta ray. None of this is metaphor.

•
Later a cop pulled me over
and let me go
saying no one is ever honest.

You know there is seclusion in truth-telling.
And such restraint.
HAWK LIKE A STEEPLE

Sitting at the crest of Waterworks Hill we decided we’d never get married. I spread my arms to say just this. You’d already left every home for me.

It was the most Quaker wedding, simple, you and me in our coats looking south over a new April stranger town. Held a branch behind your back like a bone, ate strands of each other’s hair—no ring or witness. Rainless sky.

Our mothers want us to be mothers and your father, who has been so dead, is not dead to me. I tell him quietly that I won’t have you be anyone’s wife. Silence can’t help but sing the coal trains in their couplings through the valley.
WHAT I LOATHE IN OTHERS I LIKE IN YOU

on the bedroom floor of fondness
facedown like a boyskin rug if I was one
carpet parted by my face bones in bad rough tufts
this is an adult moment in ways prostrate

you in the nosebleeds can’t see, but trust that
this breath against the earthpull moves just enough
to feel the un-undone alloy button of my jeans
against what bone is there

the adult part would’ve been sleep-hungry
or having not sent the text about tequila
doing modified pushups on Sunday afternoon
knowing how none of this is worth mention

instead immodestly seeking some homely
cause for a clap on the back or towel snap
cut nails just skimming where I cannot reach
until under my shirt is everywhere electric

and then lying turned to standing
when I wanted to stop saying I so much
I thought so cleverly of the seeing parts
how I break every gaze that tries to hold me
where my nose breaks the surface of Narcissus Pond

you who put your feet to our friendship
or strip your clothes to the floor of it solitary
you have accounted for my failing and
drawn mustaches on my self-serious sleep
forgiven and forgiven about me
OPEN THE BOX THAT HOLDS A FIRE

I made the rug my friend by looking at it so long
weaving and unweaving it with my eyes

the theologian says
your doubt is divine also
a door in the mountain

how it’s easier to talk with my head bowed
orthodox for a religion that doesn’t exist
have I come a long way

not progress nor distance, but it is both
bringing my chest close to another’s chest
breathing and beating against it

a series of shut and unshut doors
trust turning with hinging tides

I have pilgrimmed
filled chambers with smoke in asking

quiet quiet night bell kneels on the floor
sleeping towards devotion
ALICIA MOUNTAIN is the author the collection *High Ground Coward* (University of Iowa Press), which won the 2017 Iowa Poetry Prize. She is a queer poet, scholar, and teacher.