

this book will not save you

excerpt of poetry collection
by nat raum

this book will not save you

this book will not pry the claws of former lovers out of your grey matter. this book will not pluck the hairs from the places you still can't bear to see them. this book will not hold your hand in the night. it will not keep you steady in the crook of a lover's tattooed musculature. it will not stop you from your listless roaming, rabidmouthed and eyes bleary. this book will show you the crater of your prefrontal cortex and all the ways it's split at the seams. this book will blindfold you, reveal you nose-to-nose with yourself, and whisper *good luck* before it skitters into the abyss. this book will change you for reasons you never so much as sighed at. but this book will not strip you from yourself, your sinew contracting from twenty-seven years of chronic tension. this book will not attempt to baptize you—and thank god, because superstition means you'll never let fontwater drip down your temples. this book will not show you alternate realities. this book will not birth you again. it will lay you bare as bedside skin at far too young. it will drive forceps into your ribcage in search of truth. it will shed a layer of skin and awaken you, impart that the act of salvation sits in your hands alone.

hospital mashed potatoes

For Sandy

sometime between noon and one, i am spooning
potatoes out of a waxed paper bowl. i don't know
what day it is—i have just driven halfway over yonder,

through suburban maryland and back every weekday, all month
to be here, performing emergency maintenance on my brain.
and unfortunately, a paper packet of iodized salt

is not enough for these potatoes to taste like anything
i actually want for lunch right now. a pat of butter
meant for frozen dinner rolls does not sate, but i do chuckle

remembering what my mother once said about
my grandmother at the end of her life, when she lived alone—
that for dinner, she'd microwave herself a baked potato

when her body said cooking wasn't on the agenda.
through mealy bites, i store this moment away,
this heartstring that felt no strain until now but has dragged

since i waved a last goodbye through a rehab window.
six months ago. i will not write yet, but when i do, she will
still be there, days of golden breakfast potatoes

after sleepovers long behind us both. she will show up
on a day like this, remind me not just of our similarity,
but our tenacity—what an act of defiance survival can be.

imagine, if you will, that i am dissociating

this is disjointed this is fragmented this is coded this is unclear this is called dissociation and if you think i can explain it while caught in the troughs of its relentless swell, then honey you've got a big storm coming. i am a dripping wound of a human right now. i am a body of shame. i am a genderless ghost seeking revenge. i am a ball of angst and apathy. i perspire in my sleep even with the air conditioning on and all the blankets thrown off in fury or fear. i consider my brain still under refurbishment. this is listless. this is the tangled mass my favorite gauze-pop singer spoke of. this is *i am not dead just floating* this is *but i wish i was sometimes* this is all i've known for half a year now. this is a mist finer than fog and i am adrift without lanterns. without maps. without the whole motor for fuck's sake. i am waiting out the weather because this is an *all summer in a day* type situation: if i do not see the sun soon, i will die here in an overcast twilight.

this is not what they mean by “copywriting with emotion”

today i wrote *it's almost fall, y'all*
in a newsletter and i was not ready for how
soon my body would recoil

upon rereading it. i was surprised
i broke a sweat today, forehead kissed like some
bivalve in the stale cupcake air.

last week i realized i only
have one kind of dream now, the kind where i
can never tell it's a questline until

it is, and it's obvious, and then
there is almost always water. i am driving
over the bay bridge and

the floods overtake us all.
i am in a beach house and the house is as tall
as the waves. i am on a boat

and the surface of the lake
skims my toes and swallows me by my ankles
into oily murk. it is almost

october again and where am i
now, besides my nightmares? sometimes i want
to peel back my skin and say

damn bitch, you live like this?
mostly i want to sleep through the night. mostly
i wish it was not october,

or maybe that this cluster
of thirty-one days held something besides
a flesh memory of blurred

boundaries and thoughtless
boys. besides a longing i couldn't explain

until my chart read *borderline*

personality disorder.

this time may very well be different, but still
each october, i speckle

sheets with saline
from eyes, then fall silent into sleep. i only have
one kind of dream now.

in which you are the world's oyster

my calling was to be shucked, shell
discarded like a skinny dipper, porous shield
pried apart for meat, never pearls—

never was there freshwater pure enough
for grit to taste like sugar, for precious stones
to fall like teeth in the same kind of nightmare

where i've practiced drowning for the last year.

pantoum for not drinking at home

After MNJames

i declare *i don't drink at home*,
never pour the rye in my corner cabinet,
but i close out bars every night.
i'm saving myself for more attention.

don't pour the rye in the corner cabinet
because i'm saving it for company.
i'm saving myself for more attention.
i am obsessed with my perceived glamour.

because i'm saving it for company,
i collect bottle after bottle to display.
i am obsessed with my perceived glamour,
right alongside not being *the problem*.

i collect bottle after bottle to display,
but not empty. that means i don't drink much,
right? alongside not being the problem,
a manhattan or three never hurt me.

i am not empty. that means i don't drink much.
but i close out bars every night.
a manhattan or three never hurt me.
i still declare *i don't drink at home*.

follow me into a swarm of bees

After Phantogram

i forget who told me it's supposed to be
rare to dream in color and i don't know
if it's true but i am still one rare bird because
i don't think it's supposed to be so vivid
all the time, don't think night terrors are
supposed to transpose into day visions so
strong i foam at the corners of chapped lips,
i swallow every word i don't believe, and i
believe the worst—logic stings like paper-
cuts in the late april breeze and i yell and i
curse and i cry until someone grabs both
flailing arms and, when i protest, explains
we don't want people to think you're crazy
and i could say this is my first panic attack
but it's not and besides, there's more to it
than panic, more like flashbacks and not
knowing how to be touch-starved at thirteen,
how to let yourself be rejected when you have
abandonment issues and no one knows
why you can't control your emotions
and no one will know for over a decade but
anyway, my nightmares are still in color
and they still take the shape of a shadow
that says *i will never love you without limits.*

praise you

After Fatboy Slim

i have to celebrate you, baby, body of mine
i've never much cared for but lately feel
hell-bent on cradling in the supple sublime

of trans joy. our first two decades were written
by the world that reared you, by the grasp
every jack-rogers-vineyard-vines classmate

had on your baby brainstem. it would be easy
enough to say you're not woman after all that
but twice as hard to admit there is any ounce

of the masculine in your bloodstream after every
man you knew was elated to enlarge you like
a projection, circle each spot that made you less

than flawless femme. how lucky we are now
to settle for and into nothing, dive headlong
into the void where gender goes to dissolve.

i chose joy based on the alternative,
a sorrow sutured to my soft tissue,

and when i unstitched sutures to face sorrow,
for a while, i steeped in it. i saw myself

steep a while in the way i saw myself,
maelstrom of doubt spun by self-hatred.

hated and doubted by most, i spun out,
hoping to be the right girl for the outside world.

as a little girl, the world seems all right,
but too many lovers tore me down and i

pushed myself down, too torn apart to love.
i won't let them shape me anymore,

won't change my shape so they'll allow me.
joy comes easy when i've seen the alternative.

something shimmering

After The Church

indeed, despite my destination, i have been led
to this precipice, this limit of language
and maybe perception, this edge of a valley

where queers like me are free to bask
in moonlight. my therapist said *reaching*
a limit is a catalyst for change and i took a battering

ram to the barrier, the one i'd never seen
through a haze of my want to belong, my chain
of actions that made me *girl* but kept me

cradled in comfort. it should have killed me. but
once i could no longer stomach my version
of feminine, i leapt at different. i glided

into the valley a mourning dove and stayed
to become a peacock. the destination had always
seemed bleak, back when i thought i'd

seen everything. despite the path of chaos
i've trod across galaxies, i've been led to a quiet
sort of ecstasy, embraced a selfhood i never saw

coming. on the other side of a curtain of stars,
i trace nebulae with shaky fingers. i don't need
to wander any longer; i have the map now.