

The background of the entire image is a dark, starry night sky. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of several evergreen trees are visible, their branches reaching upwards. In the distance, the faint outlines of mountains can be seen against the horizon. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

THE
TYRANNY
OF
HEIR LOOMS

ERIKA ECKART

The Tyranny of Heirlooms

Erika Eckart

*For my husband Mark, without whose love and support these
poems might be crumpled pages in a wastebasket.*

And for my darlings Ella and Archer.

Table of Contents

I. A cast of characters and their regrets

Barren	06
Hiroshima	07
Dinosaurs	08
Cicada Man	09
An imagined history of inoculations	11
Hope Chest	12
Knuckles	13
If they find him encased in ice they might mistake him with Adam	14
A Mother Is Only as Happy as Her Happiest Child	15
Daedalus	16
Noah	17
The End of Flight	19

II. The Tyranny of Heirlooms

The Illustrated Bible	22
Skin	23
Boogie Man	24
Monopoly	25
Birds	27
Housekeeping	28
Eugenics	30
Creation Stories	31
The Tyranny of Heirlooms	33
Lawn	34

The River	35
The Hole	36
Whale Songs	37

I. A cast of characters and their regrets

Barren

Tell me the story again, about her ovaries like dried cereal. Useless rocks in sacks. She tried so hard: hormones, extraction, prayer, but she remained as barren as the desert. She lied very still while they injected her with her husband's semen, and then that of a stranger, after she'd been abandoned for a wide-hipped woman. She even had a phantom of all the wished-for babies, missed real periods, swelled, but it was just air and want, and the doctors said it would retreat in time. I heard she took to her basement, making porcelain and gray clay figurines which she put on display in the curio cabinet where her children's photos and bronzed booties should have been. She painted overalls on elephants, pigtails on small girls with heart lips, eyelashes on baby cubs, made an intentional mistake on each, so as to not outshine God. Well what's the difference, she'd said to no one in particular, I made them with my own two hands? Once in a magazine, she saw three crocheted old women unraveling yarn from their own legs to create crocheted babies and thought, that is the motherhood I've always wanted: to be subsumed, to create something new and beautiful from my old parts before they turn to dust.

Hiroshima

You can imagine she feels terrible now, half a century later, about what happened. They taught school children not to give water to burn victims; that their insatiable thirst was deadly. That somehow it would drown them, even though they appeared leaky. So when those that were closest to the blast, white with char, the ghost people, came begging for water she said no, no, no. She was expecting help, an emergency crew, nurses to make the men stop moaning and glue their skin back on. They put the remains of their hands together and pleaded. Please, please, please little miss. They used their last breaths asking. She is still murmuring to herself around the house while doing the dishes or in the shower, "If I had known they would die anyway, I would have given them the water." And the same dream comes to her still: she is surrounded by men that start with melted eyes and begin to dissolve further, their skin coming off in sheaths, everything collecting in a pool at her feet, the men keep complaining about their sight and each time she says it will be ok, they erode further and the pool rises, approaching her neck.

Dinosaurs

When she learned they were gone she mourned them as no one had or maybe every child does when they discover they are all dead, have been for ages. So long that we hardly know their skin color or if they had a spoken language or if they were befeathered, because all humans have is their remains to rifle through and conjecture. So she watched the video at the museum through three cycles and started heaving tears harder each time it took the viewer through all possible theories of extinction: 1. a flash of light and heat annihilated computer animated dinosaurs instantly 2. they pushed their weight through a sudden-sideways snow collapsing as they walk, 3. emaciated, xylophone-ribbed and drawn-cheeked, a lone herbivore reached for a distant berry one last time, the last left anywhere as the camera pans back and we see decaying dinosaur bodies beginning to blend with the earth. Maybe she thought like the other animals in her books they were far off, in a sanctuary a distant continent but still living on the same earth as her. And, you can't blame her: in the cartoons they show no signs of flagging; instead they have complex inner lives, jealousies, ambitions, cliques. There is no hint at instant and total death, at them being too big and unadaptable to weather change. I try to rationalize it was long time ago, but she will not be calmed. How can you be so happy, she asks, if you knew all this time?

Cicada Man

“Can you eat them?” *Wait until they shed, and their soft meat is exposed.* “Will they hurt me?” *No, but one man approached by a swarm abandoned his tractor, hid in the cellar and refused to come out until he was assured they had returned to the ground.* “Are they a sign of the apocalypse?” *That’s what I’m trying to figure out* he chuckled. This is the instinctive human understanding of insects: fear and hunger, programmed deep inside. He remembers his first emergence. He was seven. It was the hottest summer he had ever lived through. The hum like audible electricity. Terrifying. The noise inside your ears when you are hit upside the head. Constant. The morning their week was up, he found their carcasses, crunched their black shells under his feet. The sea of bodies coated the ground like empty beer bottles and broken lawn chairs after a party. It wasn’t just that first encounter, of course, that determined his course of study. There were a number of attractive aspects: they have the narrowest existence of all, spending seven years suckling on roots in preparation for a few days that determine the fate of their species. Like monks copying sacred texts, they have only one chance to get it right. They rise from the earth blind, unfamiliar and make an incredible noise. They’re in the bible. They come in swarms. They are beautiful and tragic, like an opera—the beautiful girl’s cheeks blush, the music becomes light and airy, she dances into his arms, but we know where this is going, and fast. Practically, however, there are many drawbacks: It is a lonely life. No one wants to be around a bug man long. It is difficult to study invisible phenomena. It is slow work. He lives in seven year cycles, hoping his body can hold out long enough to see the next emergence. Lately, his health has been fragile, so

he's bound up his research, and boxed and catalogued his specimens. They sit in crates by the door with a note regarding burial instructions and some account numbers, an attempt to transmit the information to unborn members of his species.

An imagined history of inoculations

Picture a woman standing over her beloved. He is naked except for the linen covering his genitals. His body is perforated with hills of disease, white-flaky mounds, vellum windows over liver-colored lesions. The woman delicately slices away the wounds with a sharpened stick. Perhaps, she thought the removal itself might be a cure. Or, maybe it was the grooming instinct; they do kind of look like little insects. Or, maybe she wanted to look at him clean again or, at least, planar. After the scab collecting failed to cure him, and his body was taken away, thrust on a burn pile or thrown with lye into a communal grave, she kept the scabs in a jar on a shelf. One night the sickness that overcame the village became too much, the empty space behind her where he had slept too blank. She woke hopefully only to discover the phantom weight of his sleep-dead arm on her side was only a ghost. Desperate, she brought the glass jar of wounds over her mouth, closed her eyes and tried to breathe him in. When the townspeople demanded to know how she had survived, (was she a witch as they had suspected?) she described what had become a nightly ritual: inhaling the fumes from the jar which contained what appeared to be hundreds of blood-stained insect wings, feather light and milky translucent. The struggle as they pried the the container of scabs from the screaming woman's hands turned the contents into a salt-and-pepper powder. Then, in the ensuing dispute over who would keep it, the vessel of salvation, a fury of hands and unwashed bodies pressed into each other, the glass crashed to the floor, and a cloud covered them all, charred ash spread on a spent field.

Hope Chest

When she was little, her mother gradually filled it with layers like flesh, ice, rings in a tree—tablecloths and hand-crocheted doilies. Simultaneously, they monitored the size of her nose, the ratio between her hips and thighs, the nasally nature of her voice, her shins—were they disproportionately large? How she eyed the boys at church, how they eyed her back, and worse, what if they didn't eye her at all? Did they whisper when she wasn't looking—better yet, did the girls whisper and in what tone—they're always a better judge of their own. And the layers of linen continued to accrue, aggregate, accumulate slowly like layers of puff pastry, whisper-thin sheets of an ancient bible, until it was finally full and waiting. The chest had a central place in the home next to the phonograph, and at night while her mother sewed, her father read the paper and she, the hopeful, devoured library-lent novels (her father wondered what good this would do her, but since she turned twenty he made his opposition less known)—there was no avoiding it. Her mother stared at the glossy cedar box and wondered if her girl would be lucky enough to wear her hands to waterlogged sandpaper washing and pressing her handiwork back into respectability. Would the girl get to see her linens grow threadbare, boiled gray, thrust here and there concealing the worn spots on the varnish? She shook her head. She had to remind herself, the real horror is that they remain folded, untouched by sunlight.

Knuckles

When her daughter called and said the horse was shaking and his short, sable hair was foamy and iridescent, the mother spoke very deliberately: “Get him out of the stall, honey. Whatever you do, get him out of the stall.” She didn’t tell her why—that if she didn’t and he died in there, rigor mortis would set in and the renderer would have to break all the bones in the horse’s legs to fit him through the door. And that then, like her mother, whenever she heard her father in bed at night idly bending his toes or someone at the grocery store nervously pulling each finger, or her mother crack the backbone of a chicken with the weight of her body and a cleaver, she would hear it again: giant glass knuckles, amplified and repeated and repeated and repeated and, finally, the noise of the broken body, a thousand-pound bag of still-warm lumps, being pulled by three men over the worn earth.

If they find him encased in ice they might mistake him with Adam.

After the last hernia surgery they decided not to reconstruct his belly-button. It's only a cosmetic concern they said, a tiny depression and now it's just a smooth plane, but likely, if he is found he will just be bones and some future culture will look at the nicks and depressions on his hands and arms, the inside of his fingers like the teeth of broken zippers, and think that we practiced torture or that we evolved small indentations for holding pens or saws. If there was any skin left they could see so much more. That's the real prize, when there is still skin. They could see the black residue draping each otherwise pink finger from a lifetime of gloveless handling of dirt, lubricants, turpentine, the flesh shrunk, cracked and taught, pulling away from the nails, in desperate retreat. The permanent darkness under his nails chronicles time like rings in a tree stump: a house, a failed marriage, a bottle hidden under a chair, and then two, and then no house, and then building master bedrooms for others and then returning to a small trailer at night, then his body collapsing, going soft in places like rotting fruit and finally unable to build anything his muscles sagging in atrophy. They would see how like Adam he was cursed to toil to eat.

A Mother Is Only as Happy as Her Happiest Child

The first time he left, his mother found him wearing a soiled pair of briefs in a single room equipped with only a toaster oven in the part of town that made her cringe every time she set her heel down. He thought he'd had her then, she would never let him suffer again. But things did not go well when she brought him home. There was something he needed on the outside, and he would thrash his head against the wall, claw the floor. He took to making his clothes out of bark and clay, and in the end she had no choice but to set him out at night like a cat fiending for its mate. And again when sunlight met his face in the garden, she left the door ajar. Later, she applied a face of surprise when she found him again at the table, and her husband would look in disgust from the daily fatted calf to the weathered face of the now grown boy, not weathered so much like a sea captain but more like the surface of a collapsing gourd on the verge of mold and dehydration, the seeds exchanging their ability to reproduce for the potential to make music. He started to roam further at night, and after awhile she could hardly tell him apart from the garden. In the end it was her husband that made her seal the door (she was in no shape to argue anymore). Occasionally he would come to the door and press his face to it in hopes that she would be unable to resist, but eventually that stopped too. For years she worried about how her boy would survive without claws or hair or hooves, until one day while tending the vegetable patch, she found human feces and thought, with great relief, at least he's eating.

Daedalus

The thing to consider now is not Icarus. He is dead, in glory, having spent his last moments breathing the sun. No one ever considers how Daedalus felt, how when he watched his son disappear into the Aegean Sea was the last moment of his life as a free man. After that, wandering the white stone-walled Sicily was a new prison, worse than the Minotaur's, one you can't fly out of. There was always with him the gnawing thought, the shadow of a boy out of the corner of his eye. Imagine if it was you, you installed the pool that your baby chased his reflection into, where his lungs became saturated with water weight. You bought the car that your son errantly collapsed into an oak, the same one his disfigured head dangled from. You left the loaded gun loosely-cloaked in an afghan, where your boy found it. But this is worse. Imagine you handed him the gun and advised caution, and you were right there, so close, the feathers (his), brushed the ends of your own, sent you spinning, you could hardly recover. Each night you imagine the relief of the wave if only he had taken you down with him.

Noah

He can't forget the screams when the waves swept over everything. His mother was in there somewhere, part of a short-lived chorus, a great exhalation, like the air coming out of a just slain animal. Somewhere in the great scream was his pious sister and the motherless boy who sold wood in the square. It was hard to think of anything else, especially with the smell: a sulphury belch, a soup of flesh left in the sun, for weeks, constant. As he stood on the deck staring at the newborn sea he wondered why him? Had god told 10 or 20 people to build an ark? Was he special only in his obedience? Did god know when he chose him how impure he was? He couldn't help himself; the thoughts came to him sometimes, the girl playing house once in the gangway who sat on his lap and rubbed against him and the burning and her closed eyes and how he had thought *I have never wanted anything this bad*. He shook his head and tried to make soft the erection under his robe, before his wife or god saw him. But he couldn't stop, his brain made paths to return to that spot, finding empty moments and worming its way in. Can you kill sin? Yes, all the fornicators and thieves are waterlogged forms he tries to ignore as they bob to the surface and thunk against the sides or the arc, but is sin an unkillable ether, something that outlasts our bodies? He worried about ruining god's plan carrying a dirty seed that would spread in the wind. He contemplated suicide, taking her and his children out too. Couldn't god just start fresh all the way from scratch? But, he couldn't do it. He tried, watched her sleep with the twine poised in his hand, but her face was too tender and slack. Shouldn't God know the man he picked was flawed? Couldn't he see in? And if he wasn't an all-knowing god, if he was flawed too, then the

water that made the scream and the smell was a miscalculation, a false fresh start. And a few more corpses wouldn't change that. Later, once the ark had beached itself and they walked hand in hand on the still damp ground he thought that there is a cleansing everything needs. Like her womb without its expected bounty has a great release, the partly decomposed bodies left by the receding water will eventually be washed away by the rains.

The End of Flight

It started with one a week and then one a day and then ten a day, and it didn't make it any higher before people just stopped flying all together. The wreckage was terrifying: bags of limbs and heads collected and sorted into people puzzles on white sheets; one mother, defying physics, was still clutching her baby when found, at least her torso was, her legs and head were elsewhere. No one was safe: people on the ground were impaled by tray tables, wings tore through houses, a just-fueled plane felled in Colorado started a conflagration which swallowed a town and park of a national forest. But that wasn't the worst of it. At least with downed planes there was something tangible to be afraid of. Half the planes just disappeared (sometimes over the ocean, sometimes not), went off the radar, no gnarled husk to be found in the jungle. As if they were lifted into the heavens, or disintegrated in midair, or entered another dimension. Who knew? Scientists and governments tried to investigate, but they didn't find anything—at least nothing they could reveal to us. There was much conjecture: aliens, the apocalypse, climate change conspiracy (in which the government sabotaged the planes to reduce fuel use and prepare us for the imminent crisis), god, the earth's tilt. The quieted skies had many unforeseen consequences: the return of sea travel, the emergence of sky watching cults, small wars unchecked, economic collapse in Hawaii, but by far the most interesting was the airport colonies. First, nature reclaimed the airports: trees grew through lookout tours, runways buckled with the force of weeds, animals made dens out of runway baggage carts. Then as the great migration created a housing crisis groups started co-opting the abandoned places, growing crops on the long roofs, converting terminals to

efficiency apartments, the food courts became the town center, with small libraries, meeting spaces, bartering centers. Finally, as the populations grew the runways became tent cities and then of course there was the social designation of insider vs. outsider. Already fenced, they were easy to patrol when resource scarcity brought more settlers than the colonies could sustain. Everyone took a shift at the perimeter, the off-duty colonists in the center mill about and worry, watch the skies for a sign, scavenge for something to burn.

II. The Tyranny of Heirlooms

The Illustrated Bible

When I was little and I saw him get high it looked like the light of god in the illustrated bible when it shines on Mary's face, at the moment she knows she is carrying god's child. Her eyes are closed, because it is too great, the streaks of pumpkin and yellowcake watercolor streaming from the upper right cloud. Her smile is sly and tiny and her whole face is relaxed, the muscles anesthetized by light. He would stay like Mary for a while, sometimes in a chair with his head arced back, a reverse swan. It wasn't until later, when he'd taken off all his clothes, pulled up the carpet he imagined was infested, asked me if I also see it, *the thing*, that it looked like the fear in the faces of the Old Testament water-colored townspeople after they learn the flood is coming. They are cloud-shadowed and soot-streaked, running from the current with visible brushstrokes creating cavernous cheeks and a sense that even running as fast as they can, they'll never make it.

Skin

I wish we could go back to those lunches of Wonder Bread and canned tuna or the times when we would line saltines with a transparent layer of butter. Repeat the afternoon when mom was in the shower and you brought your hand to the electric burner. I was supposed to watch you. I was six, you were four. You've said you don't remember. This time I'd shove and kick you into submission and your skin wouldn't have to be removed from the formica later that day after we returned from the hospital. I even looked away when mom scoured it with the green side of the sponge. We learned about the body's skin making technique in my class today. It takes seven hours to make one layer. By the time each surfaces it's already dead. I didn't see the stratified graph detailing the layers of tissue when it was pointed out by the instructor. Instead, the image of your hand, chaffing away in leaves, each turning to ash before the next begins to peel, a cycling glowing rim pulling back and, eventually, the red, raw strings underneath.

Boogie Man

I remember the cadaver-colored yellow-green linoleumed hallway, the day I sat a step below her. My mother was enormous, on fire, with strawberry blonde hair swinging out from her center part, Jordache jeans painted on her thighs, and snapping mint gum. She came to warn me about the Boogie Man. It was on the news each half-hour, a man picking off little girls. I hadn't seen her in weeks. Her voice boomed, rose and fell: "and then, boo." Stranger Danger she explained, when he inevitably arrived, would be middle-aged and mustached, with dirty fingernails, a van door sliding open, glistening candy wrappers, an optional clown suit and lit cigarette. He would likely ask me to "come here little girl." Suddenly her voice changed. "Are you getting this?" she begged while she grabbed me at the thick of my upper arm with both hands, each finger leaving a mark. She taught me a secret password and when she left an hour later, I whispered it like a mantra: "Cadillac, Cadillac, Cadillac." The words filled the air of the lizard-lit house otherwise still and quiet, now empty except for me and grandma, all the windows and doors double-locked because you never know what's out there.

Monopoly

Once she had all the pieces to McDonald's Monopoly. She knew she had them, knew that million dollars was hers and she'd be able to move to a nice place where her boy and girl could have their own rooms and the baby a nursery, where she could feed them meat everyday again. The trouble was somehow the piece, the rare one, Boardwalk, was missing. She tore the house apart trying to find it, and when the children returned from school they saw the destruction: the studio apartment looked like a stuffed toy attacked by a dog, empty of its innards, which somehow were much more than anyone thought could ever fit inside. And she was inconsolable, her face swollen, glossy, stippled red and yellow, and every time she tried to talk it started again the stream of regrets and the inaudible cry punctuated deep heaving breaths. The baby had screamed itself hoarse trying to get attention. The children would do anything to help to make it stop. Maybe someone threw it out by mistake, one of the children suggested. Suddenly becoming lucid, the mother gave the baby a bottle and walked with the other two children to the dumpster and hoisted them in.

The two will never forget the smell. As adults in big city alleys in the summer their nostrils flare when they close their eyes and remember the smells: the vinegar and metal of Old Milwaukee beer cans, the mold and wet foliage of food pieces maggots already wormed through. Each time you lifted a bag and disturbed the pile entire new worlds of smell were revealed. The ammonia piss of cat litter, the sesame and MSG of takeout Chinese, the dusty saltpeter of dumped ashtrays. At least she'd given them gloves. And they hadn't complained at the time

either because she'd told them about the rooms they'd have to themselves, and the pool and the new car and the nightly meals at McDonald's. People walked past, trying not to look. "Don't be embarrassed. They won't be laughing when we move outta this dump." In their heads their over-washed and mended clothes had already been replaced and they were decorating those rooms, picking out comforters and posters for the wall. And they felt it, her enthusiasm, and they were happy to be part of this scheme, it seemed so grown-up and productive. But after a few hours of her directing them to each of the week's bags of garbage, after tearing them apart and running their fingers through the diapers and used tissues and acrid empty milk containers, they began to tire and to fear there really was no secret stamp-sized paper. And the sun started to set and it was harder to distinguish between bags and scraps of paper. They waited a long time before they asked to quit. But their mother said no. Tomorrow was garbage day. She brought them flashlights. The neighbors could hear them out there well into the night, like mice scratching at the wall.

Birds

Once they returned from a long trip and found dozens of dead birds. They flew in the chimney, and, after inspecting the house, none could remember how they'd come in. There was a gigantic picture window in the living room facing the front yard that my grandmother kept so clean it could easily be confused with a hole in the wall. The birds lunged one at a time, likely repeatedly, until they'd all bludgeoned themselves to death. Judging by the decay they'd probably been dead for weeks when they were found. Of the four children only one was noticeably affected by the situation, avoiding birds for decades afterward, refusing to come out of her car when they hovered above, re-routing her own children twenty years later at the zoo. I don't think it was the tactile violence of it that upset her so much, despite the blood soaked feathers hardened in all directions, the smashed beaks, the smell of their rotting little bodies trapped in the house for weeks, like a mausoleum without the benefit of formaldehyde. Instead, I think it was the illusion of escape, the notion of the birds charging forward each time hoping to make it to the evergreen only a few feet away, watching their cohorts plummet, and again flying full speed into the glass.

Housekeeping

“Don't let me see those little motherfuckers.” He measured out a 1-cup portion for the boy child and the girl child and locked the rest of the cornflakes in the car, took the toilet paper to work, locked their momma in his room and made her beg for the key. He made sure they could hear everything. He picked them up by their chins and told them he could make them and their slut mother disappear. So, that summer they hid in the forest behind the house until midday when he went to work at the paint factory. There, they built a fort of rotted logs and wooden pallets stolen from behind the 7-11. They filled their home with furniture picked from the garbage, hung mobiles of perfectly-cleaned bird bones, stapled flannels from the thrift store donation bins as wallpaper, put out vases of weeds in empty beer bottles. Then, once everything was settled the way they liked it, they passed the days tidying their home with brooms fashioned from branches and reading comics. At mealtimes they ate generic ho-ho's and drank the colored juices that come in tiny plastic barrels with wispy foil tops. They made conversation and asked to be excused from the table. Once, they found their home destroyed: their pallet walls covered in spray painted remarks and broken in places, their beer-bottle vases filled with urine and on their furniture three little plastic sleeves that held shiny fluid like the iridescent film that collected in the still spaces on the creek. It took them a week to roam the alleys and campsite remains to find materials to rebuild. They took turns standing guard at the fort. When it was her turn, the girl child remembered a housewife waiting eagerly for her husband to return in a black-and-white sitcom. She stood at the entrance way in an apron fashioned from an old shopping bag, hummed

an ancient song, and swayed back and forth, waiting for the boy child to return.

Eugenics

My dad put Drano in cream cheese and tried to eat it. After they had taken away all the guns and knives that could cut more than butter away. After he had been removed and replaced. After the failure both to live and to die. The notes always started “now that I’m gone” and finished with “I’m sorry.” The mailbox filled with them three days after the ambulance came. I was nine that year and my mom made me edit them for spelling. The poisoned cream cheese was a mint green color. It didn’t look poisonous; it looked like a genderless baby’s bedroom. He asked me to help him get it to his lips. The sedatives already kicked in. Palsied and pink they tried to hold it in as I pulled the clean spoon back. My younger brother was in the next room watching *Kids in the Hall*. When the mixture emerged again it looked much the same but (less?) viscous. Thinner. The chemo-receptors that lined his tongue rejected it, then his esophagus. He pushed me out of his room with the bowl of poison and a spoon in my hands.

Creation Stories

When they cut flesh again and again sometimes the muscle buckles, like how metal can only be soldered so many times before it's just solder fused to itself, and like over-chewed gum it will crumble in your hands. That was how it was with this mother. On her abdomen for an inch in each direction she had no real skin, just scar tissue, cross-shaped, taut and the iridescent pink of a new baby's soaped flesh. Each of her children had a story she could illustrate by lifting her shirt and sliding her finger 10 inches on her belly: horizontal, vertical, horizontal, vertical, and, finally, a fat fist of knot where they sliced the third time in the same direction. When this, the final child, heard her story she knew she knew she was especially responsible for her mother's troubles. For weeks after the baby's birth her mother seized up when she stood, but after a time grew used to it. The lump just sat there mostly, a flexed bicep without an arm, obscuring what was left of her belly button. You could see it through the mother's shirt like an unskilled shoplifter. The girl who made the lump had trouble seeing her mother's face, so instead she talked to the lump. She would tell the lump good night and the lump would murmur in response "you did this to me." Now the child is nearly an adult, and the fist has woven itself into the mother's torso. It was a classic villain, appearing harmless at first, lulling her into inaction, while it slowly ruined her, by the time she knew what was happening, it was too late: the lump spawned cilia, finger-like that massaged their way into her stomach, intestines, one sat malignant choking a kidney. The mother and doctors agreed this was total surprise but the girl knew there was some warning. She just didn't know how to tell

anyone that lately the lump had been getting louder and louder when she kissed it goodnight.

The Tyranny of Heirlooms

She sent the box of silver and all my baby pictures with no explanation. It runs in the family; her grandmother used to take me to the plot she bought 40 years before she died: “This is where you will sit and miss me.” My step-father says it's hysteria, an illness can do this, with his clavicle peeking from under a stained t-shirt, an overburdened clothes line holding an off-white sheet. It bothers him when she picks up her dead hand and poses it like a stuffed bear having tea. The good hand she uses to operate one wheel of the chair she carries her bones in, with the slow resignation of General Lee after half the south was already picked clean. The two of them together is like a photograph left in the elements: a couple on a bench, the color bleeding out, pieces of celluloid flecking away, orange beginning to predominate. When I was a little girl she told me not to fear death. She taught me to believe to in Nostradamus, the presence of spirits, and Christ reborn, only without the church to set me straight I saw him like a movie zombie—his face peeling away, empty eye sockets and 3 crooked fingers emerging from the dirt.

Lawn

After I think it, I scold myself. It is so clichéd, like a flower emerging from a recent battlefield, the final frame in a student film begging the viewer to recognize the underlying theme, something etched into the desk of a despondent 14-year old, death equals life. But I can't help myself. Her grass does look healthier than ever—lush, constant, even. Where before it had been anemic, the kind that leaves patterns in your shins if you dare to sit on it, now it is every suburbanite's dream and it's only March; imagine its glory in early summer. Then I think, it's probably just sod and was delivered and laid in this condition, having been crafted in a nursery, its tangled roots fed worm feces and enzymes until they became thick and felted like an Irish sailor's sweater: impenetrable, and thus, it's likely the fire that consumed her house, her husband, her dog, melted the ice and left the earth charred and hot for days and the resulting nutrient-dense ash that rained on the yard had nothing to do with it.

The River

A tumor like melted taffy has soaked into her brain. Little niblets of steel-colored cottage cheese, the hardened ends of old gray play dough. At first her syntax remains, but all the nouns have been replaced by more magical material. Planet and alien replace house and car. "Did you push the red on the map, for the lemon aliens?" We sit and interpret, trying to gather whatever bits of information we already know. Cancer is river. "Can't they get this river out of me?" she begs. When close to a river she tries to jump. At night she moans "don't let it take me." "Who?" "The river," she says as her fists grip our nightclothes. We lie and tell her we will protect her, but there is nothing we can do. The river's current is carrying her away in the anonymous way it can even extinguish the beings bound to it. Some of them lay thousands of eggs just to have a few survive to pass on their traits: silvery flesh, bulgy hazel eyes. We can only watch as the weight of the river's body pulls away first proper nouns, then memories, then chewing, then control of her bladder. Finally, it steals her breath too and makes her hands hard, but we hold them anyway, until the current carries even the body away.

The Hole

In the dream, when I wake up the bed has become a woman-eating vortex which activates when I put myself near it. I try to trick by throwing objects that aren't me into the center: Kleenex, a ball, finally a dresser, but it will not be satisfied with any sundry sacrifice. I use science to outwit it somehow (make it swallow it self, maybe? I forget) and it becomes other objects, a dresser which demands I get in its drawers, a cloak trying to swallow me, an old chest into which I am to fold myself and be moth-eaten. I throw them, the objects, out the window. They crash into a million pieces, but then like the liquid-metal second terminator they morph together and reform and project themselves back into my hands. The message is: there is no escape. I know it's coming, the end. I clutch my friend by both sides of her face and beg "Please promise you will raise my children." Because that's what scares me the most now: not dying, but the fate of the world after I'm gone. What happens to motherless children? Who asks their teammates politely to be their friends, who covers them at night, who says "I am someone who loves you best of all" again and again and again until magically they are assured they deserve to live and be happy and not be swallowed by the inevitable black hole at the center of the bed.

Whale Songs

When you left, you left me with decades of national geographic. This said to me: these will take over from here. So I studied them. But when I read about aboriginal cultures, children with deformities in Soviet cities, and endangered species, I worried all these could be gone—that I was only looking at their signature on the page, like the light of the long dead stars still reaching us. But there was something in the whale stories. At eight I knew there were still whales; that they had not vanished. One issue came with a deep-water blue flexi-disk, and while the needle discovered the slow, low moan I felt I was listening for a secret message. The first to hear these sounds were seamen who felt the vibrations humming through their hulls and thought they were the moans of drowned sailors because they sound like the waterlogged cries of the dead. All the blue whales in a region sing the same song. The song takes five years to change completely. It evolves slowly, like a folktale with details added and subtracted each season. They have no vocal chords and use no air creating music; how the sounds are made is a mystery. What everyone really wants to know is why they sing. Because only the males sing some suggest it is a means of comforting the females. Others say that because the music can be heard far away in a different ocean they're sending a message to distant relatives. Still others think that there is no particular message in the song, it is like an overplayed ballad one hums in the shower or while cutting vegetables, it only serves to tell the far off listener: I am still here and we have music.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the journals where pieces from this collection have previously appeared:

Double Room: “Birds”

Ghost Ocean Magazine: “Housekeeping,” “if they find him
encased in ice they might mistake him with Adam,”
“Hiroshima,”

Hayden’s Ferry Review: “Knuckles”

nano fiction: “Creation Stories” “Heirlooms”

Quarter After Eight: “Whale Songs”

Quick Fiction: “A mother is only as happy as her happiest child.”

Quidditty: “The illustrated bible”

Paragraphitti: “the river”

Women’s Studies Quarterly: “Barren”

About the Author

Erika Eckart's work has appeared in *Double Room*, *Quick Fiction*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Quiddity*, *nano fiction*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Ghost Ocean* and *Women's Studies Quarterly*. She has an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and English from Loyola University Chicago and an M.Ed. in Language, Literacy and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. When not writing, she teaches high school English in a suburb of Chicago and makes vegan baked goods for her husband, Mark Donahue, and their two children, Ella and Archer. She is currently writing a yet untitled novel about a cult leader, an energy megacorporation and a popular high school girl found dead in a river.

Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

Copyright © 2018 by Erika Eckart
ISBN: 978-1-939675-73-6
Published by Sundress Publications

Editor: Heather Knox
knox@sundresspublications.com
www.sundresspublications.com

Colophon: This book is set in Adobe Gurmukhi.

Cover Design: Mariana Sierra

Book Design: Erin Elizabeth Smith

Special Thanks To: Tierney Bailey, Laura Villareal, and Emme Marshall