A Catalogue of Stones

by

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For my grandmother,
who taught me that dirt and saltwater can cure anything.

A special thank you to Danielle Vogel, for her invaluable mentorship
these past four years.
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My earliest memory is of an injury. I’m two-years-old, at the park with the dark blue and teal slides in the early evening. I see my dad approaching and run to him. But my little legs misjudge my strides, and I fall hard on the black asphalt. Later that night, I sit in the bathtub as my mom tries to wash out the scrape. The wound—a flat circle of red, speckled with dirt and gravel.

Other childhood mishaps: falling down the steps by the lilac tree in my yard, running too fast down my driveway to greet a friend, or the time I burned my hand seven times in the same place in the toaster oven.

I’m not sure why these are the memories that stick. Perhaps it’s that most of these injuries resulted in scars—imprinting themselves in a permanent, external fashion. Or perhaps the reason is that pain, in all its various forms, is the sensation we feel most viscerally—a rupturing of the norm.

* 

As I began writing the pieces in this collection, I had many goals and plans: to give voice to my trauma, to utilize etymology and academia to contrast emotions and lyricism, to reappropriate and redefine my history. I set out to talk about my body, centered on the experiences I’ve held within my own physical being.
Yet as I embarked on this attempt at reclamation, I quickly stumbled. I don’t know if it’s because I was so young, or because the first time I was raped was the first time I had sex, or that all of these experiences went on for so long – spilling over two years into the formative period of my adolescence – but I struggle to decipher my body apart from the injuries it endured.

When psychologists discuss healing from traumatic events, they often use these verbs: reclaim, reappropriate. But how do I take back a self that was only just beginning to take shape – or honor, and heal from, a wound I cannot see? I am not aware of being robbed of something. It is hard for me to talk about my body because I don’t know that I’ve ever known it. It has carried me senseless.

*

One of my favorite books is *The Red Parts* by Maggie Nelson. The memoir centers around her aunt’s murder many years prior (before Nelson was alive), and the resulting trial. There’s a chapter in the middle that serves as a stand-alone piece – chronicling Nelson’s own personal unraveling. It’s a sliver of writing that resonates with me deeply: bearing witness to rupture, without melodrama but also without rushing to resolution. She sits with the suffering. In the final passage, after a harrowing moment in the shower (“curled up in a wet ball on the tile floor
I will hear myself say, *Something in me is dying*”), Nelson returns to her Aunt’s body. She describes the way the blood rushed to her Aunt’s neck where she was strangled, pronounced streaks of blue. “It shows that the body hurries to heal itself, even as it’s dying,” Nelson writes.

I latched onto this image: the body simultaneously breaking and healing. The way a person can be broken but mending, healing but still reeling.

With this in mind, I found myself turning to language of the land – my connection to which had offered me respite and a way back to feeling present in my body in the years following my abuse. I started reading my grandmother’s encyclopedias of wildflowers and gorging on gardening manuals. I traced my steps – not back to the pain, but to these moments of embodiment. I paid attention to my fixation with shedding skin and was led back to the desert; I recalled fruitlessly trying to salvage tomato plants, and applied the idea of botanical infection to my own body; I wrote myself into eroded coastlines, and projected my injuries onto flaws in a rock.

The other place I turned was to the manuals themselves – to the technical definitions – hard text, etymology and translation. Framing my writing around a word (and focusing on its specific language) gave structure and center, and provided an analytical relief to the emotion. It also allowed me to name my
trauma, or some aspect of it – giving tangible language to experiences that often felt outside my grasp.

*

When I first began writing these poems three years ago, I felt both a ghost and an open wound. I wanted to name and externalize my pain, to separate it from myself like a physical injury, and to watch it scab and heal. I wanted to resurrect my adolescent self and heal her so that I could heal myself. I wanted to move on.

Instead, I have spent countless hours learning about geology and the patterns of erosion, scouring the Oxford English Dictionary for creative definitions to words like “clot” and “canker.” I have made a mess. I have not found conclusions. And I am still, eight years later at 22, vulnerable to the shards of wounding memories.

But through writing these poems, I have found a way back to my body. Not my body as it was before, but a new form of corporeality – wrought with wounds and words and dirt and stones. I have not found reclamation or built a successful shrine, but rather a scrapbook. Poems and essays of healing and undoing.

I cannot decipher myself apart from my injuries. But maybe that’s the point.
part 1:

root
influence of invisible origin,

suddenly blasts, nips, or
   arrests their growth, or

prevents their blossom from ‘setting.’
I don’t remember when the rot began.

*Tomato blights come in two forms: early and late.*

Burgled – how do I miss
a thing not yet
a something?

*Early blight causes splotches on the leaves, a yellow “halo” around each one.*

Fourteen-years-old –
firstkiss crush period breasts still
awkward, clumsy and prone to bruising.
A body changing
of its own odd accord.

*The disease starts on the lowest leaves, works its way up. If the weather remains dry the plants usually survive, though*

I was born bent
neck crooked in my shoulder.
First year of my life spent
unlearning.

yields may be reduced.

uncoiled/reshaped.

*In wet weather, disease can consume the plant*

They tell me I don’t have a warning system.
backseatbloodsex shattered
self preservation.

the fruit can rot before it ripens.
I still sleep tilted.

_Late blight causes discoloration all over the plant. It is more aggressive, often destroying the crop, instantly._

Did it begin at the beginning?

_Wilt, meanwhile, starts at the top works its way down._

Sunken limbed history imprudent joints, protruding veins.

_Because the leaves remain green at first, wilt is often mistaken as a sign that the plant needs water._

*However*

If I count my pavement scrapes, indent ed skin and shaving scars, that burn from the toaster oven – will it make this body real?

*no amount of irrigation can cause it to recover.*

In dreams I am buried my pores overwhelmed by dirt and I let myself be fed.

There is no cure, per se, for any of the diseases listed here.

Hospital hands adolescent plum stain in the bathroom mirror.
Six years a scab shed and flushed down the drain.
There are ways to prevent their spread, though:

I don’t remember if I’ve ever been unblighted.

thin the stems of unwieldy plants, water
at ground level, never on the leaves.

I am clinging to phantom flowers, and filling my lungs with soil.
Aching, long-term-seasonally depressed

Sometimes,
blight can be headed off simply by removing the infected leaves.

if I walk backwards long enough –
I dig my toes in the damp dark earth
water my bones catch sunlight pray
I still have time to root.
[exfoliate]

to cast off, shed in the form of leaves.
When I was eighteen I went to the desert. 
Pale June sun burned my skin to paper, red fronds peeling off for weeks.

That was the first spring I stopped eating

In the desert, life crept
up from bare
hard surface, and I wondered how strong
a plant must be to bloom
out of vacancy.

full
from the kind of fear that makes a home
in you. A gnawing that nestles
deep in the caverns of your belly –
parasitic. Unnameable.

Thick wind rattled
rustling the sand verbena and the poppies
the whole landscape howling with color.
Flowers parched still
electrified and

My throat filled up
with spit and stones, and for once
language could not save me.

large.
The nothingscape was bursting
abundant with beings that could flourish on the moon.
When I was eighteen I relearned

The desert was whole

the girlchild I thought I had shed and I started believing

and I could be small.
Let my thin bones go molten,
the wind fill my mouth like
seawater in too big gulps but I wasn’t scared
of drowning now.

in ghosts.
in dreams i tear off my skin
and watch the already-mottled pieces shrink and
burn on the concrete.
Joshua Tree sun stuck to my skin and scarred it –
aubergine wounds that maimed my complexion.
Monstrous, it marred my prom pictures. But

each layer I tore was a history
a membrane washed down the sink that he could not touch
anymore

each blister a swollen victory.

It would be months before I could keep food down,
more till I could speak freely without choking on the haunting
that clung to my bones.

But sand heat and bathroom mirrors practiced me
in molting, scrubbing away the stained
skin

and dust, human
ash down the drain, rubble stuck,
this is how I began:

exfoliation.

A carcass on my aunt’s pristine tile floor and
rawredbareshiny flesh.

Shed the surface down to the bone –
clean.
[reclamation]

recalling or bringing back of a person

or

an echoing shout.
1.

When I was little

I left the garden

my grandmother taught me to build
fairy houses.

fourteen. He ripped
out the peonies
seeded me with an errant love instead.

We’d gather barkgrasstwigs and wine cork caps
create these homes in the ground.

I clung to concrete,
emptied parks where I could smoke in the dark.

She sang floral hymns
traced the bodies overwhelming her garden
*Sweet William Lamb’s Ear Queen Anne’s Lace*
botanical encyclopedia echoed.

I rejected my education,
forgot the magic
fairies and the exuberant Oriole at the feeder.

I spent summer nights sprawled in the space between blooms
toes black, mosquito bitten.
Weeds curled around my dreams.

Two years spent
dirt in my lungs, dug
so deep I could not see.
2.

he left

me / raped by another boy / stopped making sense and sores
lacerated
my mouth and throat

My grandmother led me
back to loam.
I relearned

let the weeds and aphids consume
no space unplanted –

the weight of soil
basked in exhaustion, contented filth.

obsessive

My bones

thought if i rooted my feet deep
enough, worked my limbs hard enough,

ached;

i would not remember

I smelled of
tomato vines
milk.

why i could only bear my body when it was buried

in dirt
3.

In my earliest recollections my grandmother is

skinnydipping

shedding her jeans baring
her bones to the water.

She told me the sea could cure anything.

Last October took
my grandmother with the leaves.
Stage four lung
cancer metastasized in her brain –
frailbonesbedriddengarden left
unwatered till it wilted.

In her wake, I adopt
this ritual –
douse the soil in
wet salt
limbs inescapably clear in the blue.

Maybe this is not salvation

but
an echoing shout, a
reclamation: body
lost seedlings trampled childhood
forgotten and the gape she left behind.

I go back
to her garden. Trellis the tomatoes water
the roses hold
my salty limbs to the light –
unburied.
part 2:

er o d e
chewing at rock earth sand can mangle
the shape

I bit

of whole coastlines waves pound
rocks into pebbles pebbles into
sand Sometimes

to through his lip till it

currents dislodge the sand and push
the coastline

split

inward

bled.
that which is left or surviving.
liquid:

rain rivers floods lakes and

in the shower dark but his

ocean strip

hands

scraps of soil sand slowly

away.
erosion can bore

how do i fill a cavity that –

holes.
habitual pounding of waves can cause a structure to fall leaving nothing but

how do i recall what i looked

felt

sounded

laughed

dreamed

was like before?
I was a

in which rushing

child

streams rivers gnaw

what is left

away at their banks hollowing larger

now for me

and larger valleys

to salvage?
where would i go to reap my
bones? walk back
wars collect my molars rotting in earth and
to build a girl like a house you need a
sturdy foundation timber cement but tell me where
did the canker start how do i keep the mold from ever seeping
in
sometimes,

you must amputate the infected parts to save the whole but

what if
[lacerate]

to cut (esp. flesh or tissue) with deep irregular incisions; slice; tear

apart, to

rip up.
Ice chews at the earth
I want him
biting slowly down
out of my
hill and
skin
sweeping
out out out out out
out out
everything in its
out can I chant him
wake
into oblivion or
from grains of sand to
am I
boulders

keeping the ghost
alive?
how do i
against
exorcise
eroding
a parasite without –
both.
grind up and
   how do i resurrect
scrape away the
   without –
soil.
Sometimes ice sheets teach me how to dig under

can be more my skin locate that blighted place and extract
than a mile thick making it hard for it tooth and bloody nail stop
scientists to measure the spread.

the speed

show me where it was a bruise

and patterns not a body.

of

[ ]

where I was a body

(Was I?)
[eviscerate]

to come out of the belly
Topography or

some mornings I wake and

shape

for a second I

can inform

can’t recall

the impact of –

his face.
gnawing, earthen floodplains
but (what if)
of river valleys are more prone to
i
rot
am just a husk what if
than rocky flood channels which
losing him is a lobotomy what if i
may take centuries to
extract him from my guts and
erode (soft rock like chalk
realize these stained bits built me what if i
am just as
decays faster)
scared to forget?
Tectonic activity shapes trace your hands across the landscape itself and the way it erodes.

my scabs and tell me:

In roughly 5 million years,
do my wounds ripple like lesions of uplift forced the river to
feldspar, mica? I wish I knew how to cut deeper and deeper
water myself

into the land

salt tides lapping

we now call

over me, like fingernail

and eventually carved more than

seed bathed in dark earth

1,600 meters (1 mile) deep and

wai ti n g –

29 kilometers (18 miles) wide

maybe my body is

in some places.

a map not a building.
wind-blown, eroded

sediment.

loess blown into and

suspended

If I could dig it all back up

water.

around the river among the most

fertile

for thousands of years.

would I?
to fall together as the sides of a hollow body, or

the body itself
Snow began

i fill

falling over

the pit in his

center

wall in dreams

of earth’s largest island. It did not

wait for paint to dry

melt, up and scab.
and in the years that followed,

i bury

snow piled

him all

up and up century after

him all all of

after.

and

Eventually, became a frozen clot

lesions left

stretching 650,000

sunk

miles and 10,000 feet deep

a nd the way i loved –

in places
now losing more

    i didn’t

ice every year than gained

    notice i didn’t

loss is evident

    notice i didn’t not ice didn’t no

rushing melt

    i

water rivers, blue gashes

    did not could not would not so i

traverse the ice skin

    buried my head

drain the mass

    in your chest you

by billions of –

    held me tighter.
No

scientist believes that all
thought i could shroud him in
that ice

and make my
skin forget body re
bloom but

will slide into the oceans

what if the ground is

soon.

rotten?
part 3:

moraine
clasts

composed of fragments

grains broken

fragments

of geological detritus
i write to air my

the work you’ve done and the progress you’ve made even if you are feeling worth
less right now protect the woman you want to become urges will pass nothing is
forever. make sure you can wake up tomorrow and

i don’t want to write a love story.

now and you’re not gonna hear anything i’m saying. but that was out of
hope

chest less color hotter it can be wash jeans cold seascape final shot as though she’s

watching now ephemeral and ev ery he r e constant like ghosts.
decaf librarian blend you will always be my sweetest autobiography of a
face double-front dungaree – 2 easy when characters are unaware of a truth
that the audience mom
– pill dandelions on page 6 months~185 days
it was never –

(8/7/15) (11/27/17) (6/1/18)
(5/6/16) (4/30/15)
(4/22/15)
(5/17/15) (2/22/16)
(8/13/15)

(8/8/18)
tuesday 2:45
(12/27/18)
i am

(5/6/19)      (3/4/19)      (10/10/18)      (10/21/18)
residue whirlpool of forget-me-nots menocylcin l. tick et punch

(3/19/19)
stable relationship $15
remember use
me listerine skin vitamins
mirror pillow maybe right on haight

turn left hours emptying seemingly empty moments
had a strange, secret beauty.
why does everyone I love fall asleep?
I.

In 5th grade my mom took me out of school.

The other kids in Chorus were going to Rye Playland,

but I hated roller coasters.

We went to the Emily Dickinson exhibit at the Botanical Gardens instead.

It still remains my favorite day.

I’m waiting in line for breakfast with my boyfriend – a year
and change later I’ll forget he existed, or at least find it
impossible to remember the way I felt about him and why. But
today I think I’m falling in love. “With Or Without You” by U2
is playing. I remark to myself that this feels a strange song
choice for the soft morning rush at a bakery.*

The first time I go to Venice, California I am 11. I fall in love
with Los Angeles – the beginning of daydreams that fuel me
for 11 years since. I’m in love with/I romanticize everything
about the place.

How cold and how blue the ocean gets;
the smell of warm air;
the seeping, buttery light on the West side;
the expensive and elegant grocery stores I might frequent when
I make something of myself;
the writing of Joan Didion and her Santa Ana winds.

But when I think back on that first, foundational trip, I
remember only this:
sitting in the driveway of my dad’s friends’ house eating
caramel yogurt and watching *Gilmore Girls* on my DVD
player, reading *Twilight* for the first time, and leaving the
airport to be greeted by the smell of rain on the hot pavement.

I have a lot of bad memories about J. Treatment didn’t make me
forget them, but acknowledging the hurt made me knit them into a
story – a narrative to repeat, words on a page… apart from myself.
The memories that pervade and push themselves to the surface in
moments of stillness are lovelier, more ordinary ones. We are
walking home from school on the street where I walk my dog, but
on the opposite sidewalk, navigating this mundane activity
(walking beside each other) that we have never participated in
before. I’m receiving a text from him (“hey”) on a Sunday
evening, elated but bothered I can no longer focus on watching *The
Graduate. His bizarrely turquoise backpack. Watching him play piano over facetime and telling him for the first time that I love him. Listening to “Open Your Eyes” by Snow Patrol the next day as I aimlessly walk, overjoyed in an importantly new way and entirely unable to sit still.

*(That afternoon, we’ll break up in his car.)*

The last time I saw my grandmother we were at the beach. We went swimming before my aunt drove her to a doctor’s appointment. In my mind, though, the last time I see her we are in her prized and bountiful garden. I’ve been working at a farm, and she’s asking me for help in tending to her tomato plants. I re-trellis the floppy ones and show her how to pluck the leaves, which bits of green to discard so the plant will grow in a directed line. Following only one leader. Nudging the plant to place its energy into its crucial task: fruiting.
In my freshman year of high school, my dad and I attend a premier of *Palo Alto* (directed by Gia Coppola, the hipper, Urban-Outfitters-approved niece of Sophia) at the Sunshine Cinema on the Lower East Side. The theater becomes my favorite due to this screening. My first arthouse moviegoing experience that feels like my choice and not a chore or disguise (and plus, someone mistakes me for Emma Roberts). When the Sunshine announces its closing in 2018, it feels like a personal loss. As if that theater had been the origin of my love of film, or of being a *cool New York girl*-type who works in film or watches Blood Orange soundtracked indies for fun (and could be confused with Emma Roberts). Easy to forget that I’d go that night, with my dad, because I have no friends to go with. Easy to write over the uncomfortable bits and say they are foundational. Or maybe it’s just that so many favorite memories feel like respites – favorite because they are distinctly unlike the present.

My best friend tells me that he finds it sickening (or naive? wrong?) when people say their pain was worth it because of where they are now. That any implication of pain being *worth it*, being valuable, feels unjust and misguided. He grows upset while he says this (it's in
response to a comment I made), like I’m clinging to hurting or
declaring myself a masochist. I fumble to explain that no one is – I am
not – saying I like to hurt, but that for people with painful pasts, there’s
a comfort in finding a reason for it. I doubt I’m getting through, so I
swallow it and rephrase the point entirely. How do I explain that
without a reason I don’t know how to accept the hand I’ve been dealt
and not just be angry? That I need to believe I’m special, that my pain
was inflicted so I could be made special and strong and achieve
particular greatness? How do I explain that as a middle class white girl
from a good family with a college education, with wounds I can
conceal and step out of – that I feel I am owed something?

When I went to Los Angeles for the second time, I kept a “coffee
diary.” The last entry reads:

stumptown iced cold brew with half and half; downtown
la arts district; sat on curb, beating sun, dad bitching
about my phone, jutting my chin; woman in glasses on
Segway/rollerblade/idk asking for a lighter; graffiti.

I was 16. When we returned to the house that day, I impulsively
wrote a poem. It would get me into Breadloaf.
I think my trauma has made me start believing in God.

A god. Something. Anything.

Between the ages of 7 and 10, I wake up most nights in the middle of the night. It feels less prompted by a nightmare but planned. I lie awake, collecting the bad things in the world as I learn of their existence (house fires, cancer, car accidents). And I try to figure out how I can keep my parents from ever finding out about these very bad things, too. I think that if I can catalogue and shield this knowledge, I can absorb these catastrophes alone, and protect my parents.

I'll assume that this is perfectly normal behavior, and refrain from speaking openly about this until I’ve been through years of therapy for more explicitly painful, scary things. And even then, I’ll hold on.

When I meet my best friend, I’ll learn that he has sleep paralysis, and that he too believed this was normal until he got to college. And that for years demons sat on his chest while he watched his loved ones die,
and he never spoke of it – because it felt too commonplace, too ordinary to admit to being scared of this.
II.

I’ve been obsessed with my skin since I was fifteen.

It started with pimples.

I’d stand in front of the bathroom mirror for hours,

spaced-out, watching

the pus seep and the red rush around

the wound I’d dug. I moved

from my face to my arms, legs – picking even goosebumps

till they turned to pocks. I adopted chemicals

(hydrocortisone, benzoyl peroxide, hyaluronic acid, adapalene gel),

piling my pores with acids and creams till I’d thinned

my skin to a shell.

In June of my senior year of high school,

I went out to Joshua Tree

with one of those medicines painted on my face.

The resulting burn was so severe that my skin

scraped off in sheets for weeks –

paper-bits flaking down

the drain, complexion maimed. (My friend peeled

loose layers off my back

in the bathroom during prom.)
It was around this age
(eighteen) that my epidermal fixation morphed
from teenage insecurity into
something more troubling.

That November, I was sexually assaulted by a friend at college.

While the incident would have been harrowing enough, it was merely
a catalyst:
in its wake, an adolescence of trauma I’d fought
to forget
came crashing through. The next two
years were a maelstrom of PTSD: panic attacks, self-destructing, throwing up all
my food, severing myself from my limbs, disassociating.

I was overcome by
the desire to tear off my skin. I longed to
shed, rip, scorch off the layers
like that spring in the desert. I wanted
to watch it shrivel
on the pavement and disintegrate. Any
trace of those boys
smoldering with the dead skin.

Turned to ash.
I poured over images of marred rocks whittled
by waves and ice, cavities and cankers
and caves, blistered surfaces.
I was obsessed with the sunken curves,
the tide-worn crystals. I knew
I needed to write about
my body, about wounds
and veins and anatomy
that wasn’t pretty. And I felt
an affinity to stone. There was something so physical,
visceral, about those eroded rocks.
I could see my body in them.
A corporeal, formidable thing – wounds worn,
not buried. Through the beating and pounding
of waves, the gnawing of ice at stones,
I saw an image of my trauma
represented in earth. These rocks eaten away at,
just like my skin.
Erosion gnaws at the earth, but
it also heals it. Earth is built
to be degraded and mended, and broken again.
The cycle is inherent, not tragic. Worn divots
in rocks form a new, even more beautiful structure,
and their cavities sometimes fill up with crystals.
In nature, healing is hardwired.
It is accepted, expected,
that rocks will take a beating.
That when lesions form they will scab
and fade. Unlike the conscious,
cognitive process of healing I’ve been fed,
there is no belief
that there will be one salvation – and thus
no utter devastation when wounds resurface.

From writing my body into
these landscapes, I have learned this:
even when I feel as though
something inside of me is dying,
that I’m rotten, broken, fractured beyond repair, my body
is rushing to keep me alive –
like quartz clotting in a stone cavity.

There is no permanent redemption –

I know this now. I cannot erase

my injuries or my past.

I cannot undo eight years or wash

my slate clean.

I cannot

rip off my skin. No matter how hard

I try to destroy myself, my body

is fighting harder.
[weather]

to become

worn, disintegrated, or discolored to become

prominent or isolated by the decay or disintegration of the surrounding rock

to pass through and survive.
acknowledgements


In addition, the following poems repurpose language from the sources noted below:

**[blight]** pages 12-14

**[eviscerate]** pages 42-44

**[collapse]** pages 46-49