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## **Statement of Purpose**

I write because I have my mother's eyes, and because others have their mother's eyes. I write because I have my father's Samson hair, and because others have their father's hair. I write because I want to communicate with others. By affirming the emotions of the people around me, I can affirm my own. I want to share my experiences with people: maybe find someone who has lost a mother to match my dead father, connect my father's alcoholism with that of someone else's father, and match my loneliness with theirs.

My poem "The Numb Acre" describes the yearning for physical intimacy and the ensuing, gummy awkwardness while "Has Passed" is its poetic counterpart, depicting my relationship with my mother and her battle with depression. I didn't know it at the time, but she was also fighting my father's alcoholism and heroin dependency. These vices eventually led to his death. "She Has Five Names" is the slow deterioration of my grandmother after my father's death and how it has affected my entire family, including my uncle and his desperation, depicted in "My Uncle's House." The poem, "My Favorite Places for Your Hands," also concerns physical intimacy, though it contains a dose of unfulfilled need.

I write to convey to everyone in the world, whether they relate to my poetry or now, that they are never alone in their suffering.

## **The numb acre**

### **I.**

I never noticed your stubble  
or the pebbled groove of your spine,

But I saw your arm hairs stand up,  
Soft sentinels moved by the October wind,

my fingers protecting a few of them  
as the breeze spun through us, to the harbor.

### **II.**

Water hisses and screams in the kettle.  
We mistake it for passion

and imagine ourselves origami:  
I crane, you tiger, folding together.

### **III.**

A weight fills the numb acre  
between my breasts and my sex,

the erotic slide of your solid language  
suddenly absent from my ears.

## Has Passed

Once, I took raw bacon and made myself a picnic  
by the alligator pond, my pink blanket  
edged up against the chain-link fence  
that separated me from the swampy musk.  
I fed the alligator the meat through the fence,  
my fingers slimy, but not shivering.  
I had dealt with apprehension before,  
when I had to clean up the house before my birthday party,  
and there were beer bottles stuffed under  
the living room chairs and couch cushions.  
I felt the cold on my mother's knuckles  
as she inhaled and exhaled her past and present,  
until I pointed out that only the filter was left.

My mother scared me, cross-legged in front of the TV,  
an ashtray dressed with dead cigarettes to the left,  
the coffee cup turned over by the cat to the right;  
her expression as blank and internal  
as the backward pirouette of the moon.

I get up in the middle of the night to creep  
toward the bathroom, where nicotine smoke  
curls under the door and around the bars  
of the birdcage standing outside the bathroom,  
uncovered because someone forgot.  
She smokes more when her blood flows and is caught.  
Her memories surge forward, sway back,  
creak fatigue, shed rust flakes in windowsills.  
When my father worked the day shift,  
when my mother refused to go in at all,  
and she slept until my brother and I ran out of things  
to tell the women who kept calling, asking  
“May I speak to your mother, please?”

“She's in the shower.” “She's gone to get the mail.”

“Will you tell her I called?”

“Yes.” No. She would worry and tear  
at each of her fingernails.  
She would rip the cuticles with her teeth clumsily,  
clumsy so that you could always see my father's  
needled tracks -at first I thought of railroads, now  
all I see is a stopped heart, red and raw like a torn pomegranate-

and clumsy so that my mother wiped her tear-wet fingers  
on our walls, and my brother and I told people  
that our ceiling leaked.

**She has five names**

*for Geraldine Zelma Braxton Workman Pfaehler*

She palms me a photograph, still in a frame.

-my grandmother: flat brown curls  
like a press against the gray of her skull-

The decorative flowers are black with age, silver  
in the depths of the petals and on the sleek line of the pistil.  
She levels her eyes with mine

-my grandmother: eyes blue and quavering,  
faces a tide against her crimped eyelashes-

*And says to take it and put it in your purse,  
it's small enough after all, I can zip it up,  
lord knows I have enough on my hands.*

-my grandmother: weak-veined, a sleeve pulled on  
too swiftly leading to a bloody bruise-

Each year she gathers smaller piles of leaves  
in her arms, leaning on her grandchildren as they drag  
huge black bags across the autumn yard.

-my grandmother: sweet scarecrow in polyester  
and kitten heels leaving dents in the church carpet-

People told us, the family, it would stop hurting soon,  
but they don't realize that my father's death  
keeps my grandparents suspended.

## **For You**

In my mind, I see him wearing the mask  
of glass-blowers and riveters,  
dark thick gloves holding tongs  
and a fierce bright thing: iron.

My step-father is not superstitious.  
He follows the breaths coming over the marsh,  
sets his alarm by gull call and dog howl,  
uses as a compass the stretch of the sun  
and the lowing of the moon.

But he believes that in our old Tomcat  
resides my father's spirit: watching from behind  
green and gold eyes, whiskers attuned  
to our footfalls.

## **Infected**

There are spiders on the peaches,  
lazy in the warm bowl-womb

(it acts as a ballast on your forearm),  
snapping their legs and chelicerae

like tiny rubber bands. The peaches  
are ripe, flouting their obstreperous blush

in the spiders' eyes, which can only  
see in black and white.

## **My favorite places for your hands**

### **I.**

The bone belt of my waist  
knows your hands by heart;

Your lifelines fit my veins.  
My iliac crest rises for your skin,

is jolted even against your gloves  
covered in oil and juice.

### **II.**

*Orbicularis oris*, the muscle  
that makes lips pucker and close,

another ring of soft pink  
for you to rest your fingers on.

## Living here

He gestures to the salt and the mud and the gulls,  
fish on docks with their gills ripped out,  
sniffed by big dogs with sloppy tongues.  
This man gestures to the not-land around us.

His tongue is spent. His teeth are gone,  
the gold one sold, the rest fallen out.  
He gestures and I expect his skin to fly,  
for his nerves to gather themselves on the marsh wind,  
for his whole self to just take to the sky.

“Uh wu’k ‘tell uh agonize me bone,”<sup>1</sup> he says,  
the words gliding out of his mouth  
like a white heron bleeding river water,  
trailing reeds and salty refuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Geraty, Virginia M. Gullah Fuh Oonuh (Gullah For You). Orangeburg, SC: Sandlapper Co., Inc., 1997. 3.

## My Uncle's House

All of the tables in my uncle's house are glass-topped.  
I would peer through and think of Snow White,  
her lips like the ups and downs of shoelaces bows  
I didn't know how to tie yet.  
Tissue boxes overtook many of the end tables.  
In the absence of picture frames, my fingers  
traced the grime the Windex left behind;  
on every surface, I stared back at myself through  
swipes of index and pointer, and the syringe-thin pinkie streaks.

For a few years, I kept an aunt. She wore flower print dresses  
that my grandmother disapproved of –because they were from Sears  
and because it was her first son, the one with the dead father.  
I kept a cousin, blonde and baby-faced, who didn't look at all  
imprisoning a twinkle only the size of a pill.  
Then, I didn't know where Canada was,  
but my mother said my aunt and cousin went there.  
Gone is a very long word for any five-year-old girl  
or any uncle to fathom.

Except when I visited, and saw on the brown carpet,  
Watching black and white Westerns  
-my uncle let me see them because they didn't show blood  
and for all his loose religion and long hair,  
he didn't want to be the one to corrupt anybody-  
and eating freezer burnt peach sherbet,  
nobody lived in my uncle's house.

There were no glasses lined with lip prints  
gathered in or around the sink.  
I never stayed long and my uncle didn't like  
to come to an empty bed and no picture frames,  
to come home to toilet paper rolls that never needed changing,  
to come home to only his reflection in a coffee table.  
The burden of those things was, and is, too much for him.  
My uncle is no Atlas because he refuses to leave.