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Young Fruit

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Abstract

Young Fruit By Nora Sullivan

Young Fruit is a collection of poems, following a speaker as she places herself in her surroundings. Using free verse, persona, and ekphrasis, the poems explore implications of femininity, motherhood, and landscape. The book looks outward to display an interior. Incorporating the social backdrop of the opioid epidemic, the collection questions who and what it takes to build an identity.

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I Want

To be a nice heavy watch.
To tell the wrist's stories.
To be a stone. To be quiet
knowing the sun-bleached
rib and jawbone fit together.
To be, in my spare time,
toothless America. Its gum flapping
in empty space. To be thought
clever, which is close enough
to being thought beautiful.
To be a boat for my mother,
who likes to move fast.
To be the sea, the sea, new
and untouched. To be a kitchen fire.
To be an oiled pot. To feed somebody.

The Orange

The orange is hard
to peel. Nothing wants
to lose its skin.
I only care to take
its sweetness. The ripe ones
peel easiest. This one is not ripe.
It is white. The inside too, white and dry
unripened as winter. Januarys,
my mother carried a carton of oranges
home from the store. I'd sit at the counter
and pick the flesh, heavy with juice, worried
I would push too hard and break the tenderness.
She told me to spit the seeds
or an orange tree would bloom in my stomach.
Sometimes I bit into the seeds
to see what beginning tastes like.

Photograph of My Mother

standing near trees with mourning doves.

Back bent, stomach waxed into

its fullness, which grew like a note from Gabriel's trumpet

drawn out with time or like the space under the bird's wings,

or like the bird. She's thinking of me. She's been outside

walking for days with dogs and honey to think of me.

How to tell her, one day I will find a cockroach in the grass, only for her?

On the Cut Flowers

My mother cuts hydrangeas. She bundles them
in a glass vase, sets them on an inside table
and they are beautiful, half budded and clean.
She cut them because they were too heavy on the stalk.
Their heads bowed down. Reaching
toward the house was not easy.
They seemed to know if they stretched far enough
my mother would walk down with shears and bring them closer to her.

lim f(x)

The limit as x approaches infinity.
 A breached cloud, the empty window,
 a crying cicada. There is a known limit, my mother

teaches it every year. I am close.
 I am closer. I am near
 still. I always picture her at the front

of her classroom. In the corner
 her curved graph. In the seats, her bent students
 and our glassy eyes. Have I ever touched anything? There's water between

the eye and lid. We blink
 a Fibonacci sequence. One,
 one moment, two, three beats, now five.

Time spirals forward in a shell. As I approach my mother
 she seems to go on forever.

It is her boned hand,
 her voice calling here, here. I am close. Still, curved

into her neck,
 my arms loose around her frame,
 I am not touching. There is a known limit

of how close my skin can get to hers,
 she taught me well. She holds me
 too long and I feel

far away. I see the limit as I approach
 my mother looking at our arms
 stretched out before me. The eye, the lid, an open eye blinks.

Domesticated

Before the mountains, my mother told us to drink
water until our piss was clear. She didn't want us to grow

weak or for the altitude to send us rolling
toward a dehydrated intoxication. Penitent tongues

hung from our mouths. Everything I wanted open and lying
on the ground. That night, I dreamed I was four-legged.

We trusted her like dogs. We were hair and paw
and leash. Private and selfish,

we dug holes, dropped in our baby dolls. A first collar. A chew toy.
We killed all the small things in ourselves, thinking of our mother.

Bullshit Blues

My mother loves me like a raging bull.
My mother loves me until the crowd lulls.
She wears a red cape and calls it her heart.

Mimetismo (1960)

Remedios Varo, oil on masonite

Light falls on the papered walls
of a dining room and breaks apart
in the polished arm of a cherry wood chair.
A woman watches this as she circles
the room, setting silverware,
her glossy neck bending
to the table. Pausing,
she sits. Her lace covered legs
cross. After the party,
the plates will be cleared away,
the linen laundered.
Outside, the flowers are folding
cheek upon cheek.
She straightens, back clothed
in yellow brocade. She smooths napkins,
a table skirt, her skirt. Everything
looks perfect. In the shadows
of the long-backed chair
the woman's arm pales.
She touches her pillowed chest
and thinks about tables
with bloodless feet. She likes
what she's become. Remote.
Reckless. Outside,
the wind stops.
The cherry tree hums,
singing for its lost arm.

Obitus

In the thunderstorm a tree broke and knelt
before my house. I still think of my grandfather
as nobility. He built a doorway in the back fence
and walked through it. I cannot reach its handle—
that is how big he was.

Rhea's Burden

Lately, I have been thinking about gates, writes Hofmann,
and I see a short one with flowers and a strong latch, my garden
inside. I sit in the middle on a stone bench.
I see its latch broken, a stone lion now in the center.
I remember the swallowed children. I never decide
what to forgive. My lips on the mane of the stone lion. A maternal kiss
that tastes of salt. Even now I feel the weight of swaddled stone
in my hands. I am to blame for the fallen leaves and full stomach.
The gated world shrinks. There's a map on the ground.
I walk on it. To the end, I cannot imagine him better.
Like a man at a desk trying to find the words by the window,
I climb onto the lion's back. I cling to its neck.

Myth of Myself

I walk slow
in the high grass,
booted, eating
young fruit.
Is this the part
where you come to me,

dipping into soil
with a stolen spade,
as if I am a frontier,
wide and free,
mouth open, waiting?

Is this belief
in an American
myth of myself?
Blue-eyed beautiful
and loved.

Bloody Mary at Hatfield House

The chicken stalks in its coop. He acts
brave. He sweet talks the blade,
and still I behead him, which reminds me
of my father and an unmade pie.
He makes me wait on my sister
while ants eat apples and stem.
Nutmeg, cloves, yes, that sounds nice
with apples, hanging fruit,
hanging nooses, but I stay the path.
Watching is like running with scissors,
which is to say as sensational
as a lit fire, as a knave in a fire
of paper kindling. When I sign
the act's charred edge,
I am no longer an heir. Let's trade.
Elizabeth will be the bad idea, I'll be the show.
Performance of how to cause pain.
One woman play in two parts—body and blood,
queen and bastard. Alone, I say *climb higher. Let's be god.*
Tonight, I look for a bough in the bushes. A crucifix.
Like the one that hangs in my room,
given by my mother, mailed
like a love note.

Wintergreen

In the wet sucking ground, a hedgerow grows
at the mouth of the stream. Near the edge
we sat as children on the sleeves of our fleeces,
picking pine needles from our hair. Our childhood
of blunt bangs and frozen mud. We searched
for wintergreen in the brush and crushed its leaves
in our palms. The oil smelled like chewing gum
gone tough with time. Trying to tell my sister
who we both are, I say we came from the same place.
A harvest window in snow. A budding fear of ourselves.

Leto

I no longer regret
carrying them,
letting them lie
against my chest
and drink from me.

I had room
in my body then
for the delicate,
the curved.

The little ones
do as I ask
and will be home soon,
will slam the door
open, hitting the wall
like a dog or a man.

It will be nice
to have their souls
back where I can touch
them. Stretch
them apart
to find all
the good parts,
trim back the fat.

Beckoned

Because I cannot return. Because the water is still
in the evening and drags light to shore
and the crabs come out to taste salt water.

Because the child I imagine between us
sits in the evening too. I am a voice without shape.

In a few moments, I will shrink from your hand.

Because I cannot hold your eyes. I will spill
perfume on the clean counter.

Because I cannot open a box of conversation
and pick out my favorite lines. Because I cannot
stand this near to you in a metaphor. All the light
dims. Because I cannot coat my longing for a place
that's not this, I leave through the dark door.

Drink

A finger
of darkness
in daybreak.
Two fingers
on the rocks.

The current
laps at the mouth.
River Works
by the harbor
has quiet

engines and empty
docks. How
many bodies
are in the channel?
Who threw
them there?
The fishermen catch
human hands
in their nets.
The good men
drink.

Selkie

I want to be a bellied tuna. Their stomachs are heavy and dark
and then sometimes not. The undersides can shine like mica
and are big compared to the spiked bass or herring.

Calloused men guide a fishing boat in. The sky is dark now like their tuna's skin.
It reflects the dock's light. It takes three men
to hoist the body from the boat. They cup the gill kindly, like a lover's embrace.

I know what they do next—slide a knife over the bones
of my bellied tuna, weigh it for market price. They hold the pieces up,
savor their beauty. They even take the belly. See the darkness. It is metal and heavy.

Naumkeag Landscape

Shoulder to rib, I can draw a line
from Naumkeag to Agawam
on your body. Your back,
a curve of the eastern coast
slopes to a hip. Freckle and shore.
Arms thrown back to the dunes of your hair.
I am land at your feet, the woman in your arms.
I drag my hand against your fortified edge,
flank and razor clam.
A man parts the glade. He thinks our hold perverse.
I'm sure it's not. He wants to know how we came
to be here next to one another,
why we are not his little wild women.
He likes our neck of land,
plants his feet and settles
his palm at the sand of your nape.

Curtains

If curtains, then silk swag. If an arrow
Is to be shot, aim at my left thigh
So the scar will mirror my right.
If the ground, then dense ground

With low green foliage so you cannot see
The dirt and the mud and the red ivy
I land in. If this land is to open to you
It will be like an upended tree,

The roots pulled and reaching from the ground
Like empty hands. From your window
I can light a votive candle
On a close branch. Saints are like

Lesser gods. If gods, then Aeolus
And his bag of wind, or Eris with her son Strife.
If curtains, then green, so when I wake
Empty of the day I can walk to the ledge
And be neither inside nor out.

Wing in Parts

I. Apex

The birds return to what bore them. The thighs of mountains.
August, the low growing plants on the face give berries
in the short flaxen brush. A ripened sun and the fruit
is sweet. Higher up, pines and a kind sap, carpenter ants
and sawflies. I'll balance it perfectly for you, this breath.

II. Outer Margin

I heard myself say yes. In the dark
a small open window. The perfumed city
encroaches. Is that how love is?
I saw him undress. When I say he was pure,
I mean his body was clean.
When I say his body was clean, it was not clean but bare
when I touched his mothered neck.
The windowed air—thin and transparent—was another thing once,
before my lungs, before lungs, it existed apart, subatomic
in an unknown early. At first there was nothing,
my hips in my own hands, gracious and quiet.

III. Inner Angle

Pressing on the edge of the split red grapefruit,
I spoon out its flesh. Tart
On my lips, its thin juice
Attracts flies.

Prelude

Falling down a flight of stairs,
I dragged my hand across the wall's wooden siding.
For days afterward, long splinters poked from under my nails
like claws. I soaked my fingers in soapy water.
Hands in the glass bowl, I tried to relax my knuckles
and not hit the edge. But I have stood at a precipice before.
I once balanced at the bow of a stolen boat,
lifting with the hull. A cliff rose up before me like a living thing.
It ate the sky as I rode faster. Because God was a human once,
He is vengeful. The doctor, later, lifted my nails from their beds
and pulled out the wood with tweezers. So many, he said.

Evening

Standing by the kitchen window,
you tell me the boy next door died.
I stopped liking needles

when I saw how slowly
they pierced the skin.
At Easter, we poked holes in chicken eggs

and blew the insides out. They dried
next to the sink overnight.
Heroin looks a lot like heron.

I think that's what my addiction looks like,
a sure footed heron
in the marsh.

Pardo Venus

Titian, oil on canvas

I haven't had the courage to ask where your mother found your body,
if she checked your heart first or your breathing.
I thought that was how I was going to die,
alone, maybe, but not with the pills.
I never imagined that passion
of loss and more loss circling us like flies on sugar.
Let's say sugar is the only crushed powder
we know. I'll pretend she found you laid across silk
like some renaissance painting
and that was why your skin was white
and your breasts were out. If I looked at you now
from afar and saw your half-clothed body, I'd surround you
with hunting dogs and trees and ask you to stay
still for the portrait. I like stories of women who don't die.

Beekeeper

A woman climbs into the Gila forests of New Mexico with a net.
She waits in pear and violet flowers for bees. She catches them
in her net and pins their wings to paper.

Paper crushed in her back pocket. She is living. Unfolded
as she wades through open country and bugs.

A walking laboratory. Bottles of bees and cyanide
thrash beside her. She once told me drunk on wine
that she doesn't like spearing their bodies.

That sometimes they stay alive,
flailing against the pin. When the bee struggles
she drops it back into the killing jar
and waits for it to stop moving.

Public Gardens

I stop at the message from my sister
Telling me she is scared of helicopters.
O lazy fly. O long winter. O the boat
They found him in. As I get near the park, taking off my sweater
I remember how cool it was.
I pass a statue in the park of ducklings
Lined up behind their mother. Someone has shot the bees out of my hair.
I know what a bomb in a crowd sounds like. Yellow buzzing
And the eiderdown against the boom. O the boat
They found him in. O the helicopter's lazy fly.
O the full backpack. O the sugared blood.
Here is the new death, a goose
Beneath the wheel on the car ride back.

Hay Fire

It was like watching the moon wane, her child crawling toward me,
like watching a field go up at night in hay fire, small tufts
embering and fast moving toward the forest, humid smoke dimming the clogged sky.
This lack of oxygen, a gasp, unbreathing.
If the child had stopped, I would not have leaned
down and picked her body up. If the girl's small frame
was less red, less milk fed, less whole
I would not have rested her against my shoulder, curved
against my breast in an imitation of nourishment.
My task was to hold her head, support
the neck, to not upset—my instinct
was to coo. I know nothing
of how to pacify fearsome creatures. One hand out,
one at the base of her gossamer spine. Cobwebs,
paddocks, bales. The tongue peeked out
from the mouth. Smoke, pointed warmth,
the body's heat matched mine even in its smallness.
Holding another woman's child was like spanning an underworld,
a foreign atmosphere, no breath, yet some sweet
moment of vapor and heat,
and a suffocating end like water.

Thawed Ground

Above the oak
the old woman has trouble
sleeping. A sorrow caught in trees.
Shades drawn. Something begs for hearth
in the bowed house. She waits
for the neighbor's children to remind her
of me, of someone like me. I am dying
as she is dying, struggling
to bring face to mind—gray hair,
soft skin, yellowed eyes. I see her blurred,
hand stretched on the table, dipping into a bowl.
She soaks her nails in olive oil.
How healthy they were, how strong and long.
When the trees were weak and chastened
the city came and cut them down. We came too
to plant tulips in the thawed ground.
She remembers that day with an unseen clarity.
It was sunny. We ate cake, she says.