

WAVELAND

ÖSEL JESSICA PLANTE



for my Mother
for my Father

CONTENTS

One: The Navy Wife

Assembling the Navy Wife	5
Pistol of Bones	6
The Navy Wife Talks in Her Sleep	7
The Navy Wife's Alphabet	8
She Contemplates Autumn	9
Instructions on Becoming a French Prostitute	10
She & Wolf	11
When the Mississippi Speaks with its Wet, Pretty Mouth	13
Slow Parting	16
Her Notes on Keeping Silent	17
Poem with a Mouse & a Line by Larry Levis	18
The Navy Husband Digs a Pool	19
Naked in Cowboy Boots with Lasso, I Challenge God	21
The Navy Wife's Plan for Her Wedding Dress	22
Disassembling the Navy Wife	23
We Forget Our Always	24
Unfuckable Poem	25
After Joining OkCupid	26
Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle	28
The Goddess of Confusion	30
Go to the Edge of Giving Then Break Yourself	32
Peaches	33
Waveland Mississippi, an Elegy	34

Two: Crow & Bone

Eleven	41
Blue Eyed Crow	42
It's Not an Apocalypse if the Horses are Mortal	44
The Difference between a Raven & a Crow	47
Self Portrait as a Delicate Fly	48
The Ant & the Our Father	49
Lying on a Bench in Dorothy B Oven Park	
I'm Mistaken for a Homeless Woman	51
Gospel According to the Second Person	52
Frederick the Pigeon & Why I'm a Student of the	
School of Misery	54
In Praise of Being Lazy	57
Rockstar	59
Elegy for Two Former Lovers & One Ex-Husband	61
Anti-Ode to Tallahassee, Florida	66
The Drive-thru at Rosa's	69
Self Portrait as Daughter Stuffed with a Sack	
of Pomegranates	70
Last December	73
The Lying Field	74
She Wonders if She is Still in Love	75
When I Saw You at the Party Friday Night	76
Her Notes on Texas Wind	77
She Addresses Her Unborn Children	79
When I Come Back from the Dead	81

One: The Navy Wife

“You will hear thunder and
remember me and think:
she wanted storms.”

~Anna Akhmatova~

Assembling the Navy Wife

Fragile, hollow—I make a new woman
from these animal bones, a ghost that will disregard
roof and walls. Cardinals come to collect
her marginalia, drift in and out
of her ribs. If these birds had names, she would
call them *Daughter I Do Not Have*, *Mother
of Pearl*, *Herring Bone*. They button their past
tense into her body as they swoop in cursive.
She is not held together by muscle
or tendon, but brittle memory,
the sinew and gut used to sew flesh
to animal hide; my fingers grow stiff
around my needle. This is not a contract,
these stitches, yet here I am trapping myself
inside her. She'll never know
that I talk to a piece of red linen
as if it is her soul. Leave your dead by
the roadside, leave your wells covered, there are
so many ways to die yet every day
she'll live as if by habit. Breathe in, breathe out.
But, it's I who might blow out the lights, drop
her hand, extinguish an entire town
with the waves gathered beneath her gown.

Pistol of Bones

I live in a green house on First Street
like a figment passing through rooms,

almost less than plaster and lathe, horse
-hair smoothed into walls, pine trees felled

a hundred years before I drank the sun
and rain, rooted deep in silence and sleep

married to a man who flooded our
bedroom each night, never sat at the table

to eat, nor took his pleasure in me. Listen
to the way *oh* is the surprise we know

with our mouths—my moon, my cottage,
my storms that blew acorns onto the tin

roof. I measure and sew my days
together—floral and nothing I would

buy again or hang myself in a new life,
the one without a man, the one where I

understand the marrow of words tastes
nothing like the marrow of bones.

The Navy Wife Talks in Her Sleep

You are a deer, my Dear, and not quite here, so I am alone and braid this green season into our empty house which in me is like a singed piece of silver thread being stitched through my center as all new homes are, and unfamiliar. Marriage is not salvation; it is waking with horses in a field, an apple resting in dirt, a deer with its belly slashed open, iron leaves of blood. My husband does not draw the knots out of my tongue. Somewhere the redbud trees are blooming the way bodies bloom beneath the earth, full of what they've left undone, and *oh*, tell me I'm not the only one who fears having her center plundered and known. I set out a bowl of red plums and study their skins from the other side of the room until my skin too is drenched. I'm red as a bowl full of cardinals clustered together before they break away. I've watched a female flit in and out of the chain link fence and see the male follow her to gulp down her dusk. Isn't he bright, the way he takes her everything? These are the mornings of black snakes looking for warmth on rocks, and the blood smell thick and heady drawing mosquitoes, the moan of the trees protesting the wind, and the harmless distance of the stars' light we cannot see by day. This is not to say one of us is the deer and the other is night, or earth, or the green of a summer evening, but that we are the dark with antlers by the roadside and spring grass grown high, the cricket chirp and gravel dirt crunch-scuffed beneath boots, the headlight beams into a slice of country and a fence, yes, the way fences pretend to hold back fields which can never be held.

The Navy Wife's Alphabet

Night grows beneath the skin of my wrists
and I'm tilted on my axis, looking out the window

at a black cat climbing through the branches
of a cottonwood tree. This world

with no edges, and another midnight I've promised
to someone dear and lost, the slow drag

down to nothing that makes me
believe in the truth of the church

sign which reads: *Are you a figment
of someone else's imagination?* Like trying

to train horses to gallop on leashes.
Love, I am alone with an entire alphabet

carved into the gnarled bark of trees, four initials
at a time and all those signs—plus, plus, plus.

She Contemplates Autumn

It was the year we'd replanted
the old garden—the rhubarb still sturdy
and bitter, the compost pile full of oyster shells.

Leaning out our window at night I'd memorize
each feral sound, the animals that would keep me,
how the stars represented love as a series

of distances. I knew that an inexact heart could
build its own wilderness. Whether or not I wanted,
black snakes lived near the tuberoses, & the blueberry

shrubs grew laden with tart indigo suns. I'd lie
awake at night beside him feeling nothing
but their blue skins, and instead of smoothing

them, in the morning, I'd begin by tossing
the comforter over the rumpled sheets. Already
I had learned how to live on what I alone could

gather. What I imagined marriage gave me was
no more than the maple flaming at the end of our
driveway, which would someday soften into to ash.

Instructions on Becoming a French Prostitute

Move to Paris. Practice rolling your tongue past words like *Les Fleurs du Mal*, your lips as they grip every *vous*. Do this while brushing your hair in the nude, never naked, always nude. Acquaint yourself with lingerie, the exquisite hand-tatted lace, rough-edged where the silk threads end between your legs. Your legs, your bangs soft trimmed straight, eyelashes coated with thick charcoal dust. By now you've studied the soft lamb-skin wallets in hotel bars, the blends of silk and wool suits, scarlet linings. Change your name to Scarlet, your number on speed dial, elevators and keycard access, your white leather bag filled with tight jeans, dark glasses (for after). His silver hair recedes, and a firm careless hand moves through you. Diamond-mouthed you take him, leaving nothing of yourself.

She & Wolf

Outside my house there are men heating up
the newly paved road with a blow torch. Their fire

sounds like an airplane engine. In orange
and yellow vests they make me think of what needs

protection, not the fruit of the fig tree from
wasps which will burrow deep inside, not the tadpoles

birthed into the brackish shallows that will
nibble an outstretched palm, but the piece of me still

circling into my husband's ear, his mouth,
measuring herself against his bones as I sit aching

at my desk, bent and white as a swan, hollow
as honeysuckle wrists. The wind blowing outside ruffles

the men's hair. They parade back and forth
to their truck like peacocks, their words dissolve before

I can hear. My husband's words have found
the shady edges like snow in early spring, they glint

from the sunless rims like amber holds a frozen
sun. Look and there's the curve of a beetle's wing, a tiny

continent of stillness, dust. Any warmth now
and my scars flare. The life below the one that shows,

wriggling to come, to know itself black as tar
and indistinguishable after the men are done. I get up,

head for the kitchen to dive into lunch. The coral
mouth of a torch goes out, there are small fires sutured

to me tight as a blush. I wish for a dozen birds,
for sunlight to strike my throat ruby, bare—a woman,

a bell, a magnolia bloom, the same uninvited
wolf sitting in my dining room chair.

When the Mississippi Speaks with its Wet, Pretty Mouth

A string of vowels comes out, silty tongue
curling under and around the dark outside

the Highlife Bar that backs up to this brackish
curl of coast. You need a passport to come

this far South, where men with flashlights
wade knee-deep with spears, flick them into

dark so their small beacons appear to nod
like drunken heads. I watch for silhouettes,

men gigging for flounder that lie flat in mud
they've burrowed under with one eye facing

up to stars. Out beyond the naked bay, Pass
Christian in the grip of old growth pines once

felled for floors now in turn-of-century homes
full of double-hung windows the Preservation

Society adores. I'm with my husband, who's
ordered another Michelob Ultra as I finger

a fried pickle out of the plastic basket lined
with waxed paper now translucent with

grease. He asks if I want another, if I want
to dance upstairs then stares at the lights

of a distant gulf shrimp boat where the hearts
of a few men bob, they're trawling for someone

else's dinner, throwing back rusted cans and gar
fish, while upstairs the bartender calls me

"Little Lady" and I am still when my husband grabs
and flings the ring toss game on its string, I am

remembering the antique fan I'd brought from
Boston which he carried to the attic because it

was too rustic, the bicycle I rode through Nova
Scotia with my father he put out with the trash

when I went home to visit my mother. Just a ring
on a dingy string, we watch its elliptical flight how

it seeks the clink of collision. I think about how
my name is no longer my name and how I am full

of the same old dumb luck that sent me up
the aisle at twenty-eight, though he did not know

how I was afraid to be alone. Another quarter
dropped into the juke box slot, the air along

the Gulf is stagnant, hot. My hair pinned up
off my nape and he's not touched me in several

nights, not a wrist or hip but I am all right
with how we shift in bed after the lights go out,

listen as a distant train approaches the trestle
over the bay & soon we'll walk out to our car,

I'll take the keys but only after we've chugged
another each, listen as records shift and drop,

Etta James begins to sing, her voice moving east
then south like a knife through me, like I'm some

small town with the word pearl in it, then Slidell,
over denim-colored Lake Pontchartrain, its palms

open, how it rises each time it rains, and there,
once, how a woman flashed a gun at me on

I-10 after I'd merged, speeding into her lane.

Slow Parting

I lie down in the dry grass before each winter
and rise to meet the rain. Together we begin

to skirt the cedar trees, drive the red-winged
blackbirds out of the cattails where they've crazed

in pairs and threes all fall. Long ago I'd heard
the sycamores marring their own bark,

again. From the inside they tore themselves
into gray childish shapes, as if in need of the kind

of touch that follows a scar. As the rivulets
of evening grew colder between us you kept

forgetting to shut the doors. I'd watch you retreat
to your office, or go out for a run past the houses—

identical on that flat square of earth we called home.
I'd wash dishes, then listen to you take a shower.

Some days I'd ask you to pick me up and carry me
in buckets and bowlfuls to the bedroom. At least

a husband should be able to drown inside his wife.
I was a pond swelled past its meager banks.